# Findings from the 2016 Arab Opinion Index Announced

Monday, March 13, 2017

The 2016 Arab Opinion Index is the fifth in a series of yearly public opinion surveys across the Arab world. The first survey was conducted in 2011, with following surveys in 2012/2013 and 2014. The 2016 Arab Opinion Index is based on face-to-face interviews conducted with 18,310 individual respondents in 12 separate Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania. Sampling followed a randomized, stratified, multi-stage, self-weighted clustered approach, giving an overall margin of error between +/- 2 % and 3% for the individual country samples. The overall samples guarantee probability-proportional-to-size (PPS), ensuring fairness in the representation of various population segments. With an aggregate sample size of 18,310 respondents (50% of whom were men and 50% women). The Arab Opinion Index remains the largest public opinion survey covering the Middle East and North Africa. The fieldwork was carried out by an overall team of 840 individuals (half of whom were women), who conducted 45,000 hours of face-to-face interviews, covering a total of 760,000 kilometers across the population clusters sampled.

Results from the 2016 survey show an overwhelming majority (89%) of Arabs in opposition to the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; only 2% of respondents expressed having "Very positive" views of ISIL while another 3% expressed views which were "Positive to some extent".

Attitudes towards ISIL are not correlated with religiosity: positive and negative views are found equally frequently between those respondents who identify themselves as "Very religious", "Religious" and "Not religious". Equally, positive attitudes towards ISIL are not correlated with attitudes towards the role of religion in the public sphere or with beliefs on the use of religion to regulate the economy. The lack of such correlations illustrates the idea that attitudes towards ISIL are defined by political considerations and not by religious beliefs. This is further corroborated by the fact that when asked to explain ISIL's popularity among its support base, only around 20% of respondents attribute this popularity to religious factors.
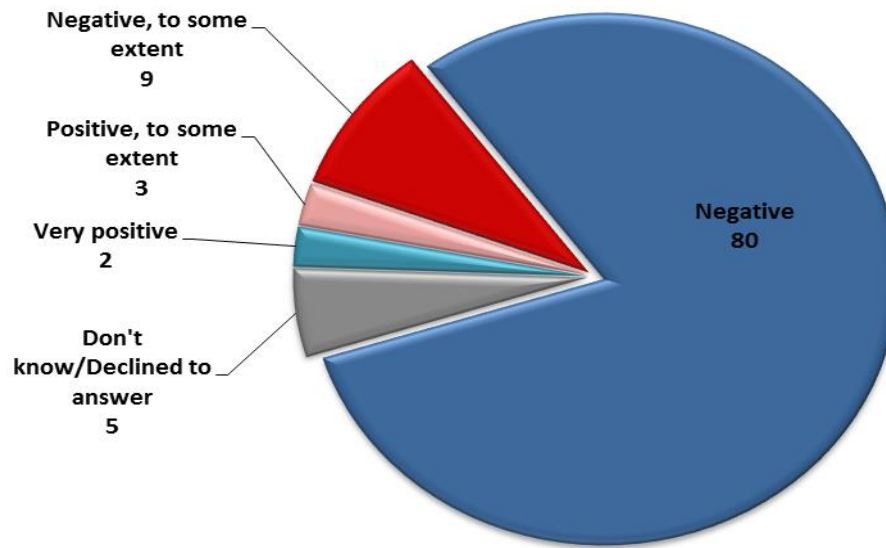
**Figure 1** An overwhelming majority of Arabs has negative views of ISIL.

Attitudes towards ISIL	Self-defined religiosity		
	Very religious	Religious, to some extent	Not religious
Very positive	4	2	3
Positive, to some extent	4	2	3
Negative, to some extent	11	9	11
Negative	81	87	83
	To keep up with modern economy, banks should be allowed to charge interest		
	Agree		Disagree
Positive/varying extents	6		5
Negative/varying extents	94		95
	Would be better for my home country if religion was separated from politics		
	Agree		Disagree
Positive/varying extents	5		6
Negative/varying extents	95		94

The Arab public offers a diverse set of remedies when asked to suggest the best means by which to combat ISIL and other terrorist groups, when given the chance to name the two best means to do so. A full 17% suggested the intensification of military efforts against ISIL and terrorist groups as their first choice; 15% gave "ending foreign intervention" as their first choice for the best means to defeat such groups; 14% proposed "resolving the Palestinian Cause" as their first preferred method to defeat ISIL and similar terrorist bodies. Finally, 12% suggested that ending the Syrian conflict in a manner which meets the aspirations of the Syrian people as the best means to defeat terrorist groups such as ISIL. In broad terms, the Arab public supports taking a comprehensive set of political, economic, social and military measures to confront terrorism.

Remedies offered to defeat ISIL	First most significant	Second most significant	Averaged score
Intensify military efforts	17	14	15
End foreign intervention	15	18	17
Resolve the Palestinian Cause	14	8	11
Support the Arab democratic transition	14	6	10
Resolve the Syrian conflict in a manner which responds to the aspirations of the Syrian people	12	8	10
Resolving economic questions: unemployment, poverty and price inflation	7	14	10
Purging extremist interpretations of Islam	6	12	9
Ending the sectarian policies of some Arab states	4	8	6
Spreading a culture of religious tolerance	2	5	4
Ending the Libyan crisis in a manner which meets the aspirations of the Libyan people	1	3	2
Do not know/declined to answer	7	--	4
No second answer given	--	5	2

In 2016, a majority of Arabs regard the peaceful protests which formed the Arab Spring of 2011 positively. There is a consensus among respondents which believes that the original uprisings were directed against dictatorial regimes, as popular movements aimed at supporting the transition to democracy and in protest at financial and administrative corruption. Only 3% of respondents expressed views which were in-principle opposed to the Arab Spring, for example suggesting that the uprisings were the result of a foreign intervention or some sort of conspiracy.

The Arab public is neatly divided, too, over the present state of the Arab Spring and its future outcomes: fully 45% agreed with the statement that the Arab Spring "will achieve its aims", despite acknowledging present setbacks, compared to 39% who agreed with the opposing statement, that "the Arab Spring has come to an end", and that the old regimes have returned to power.
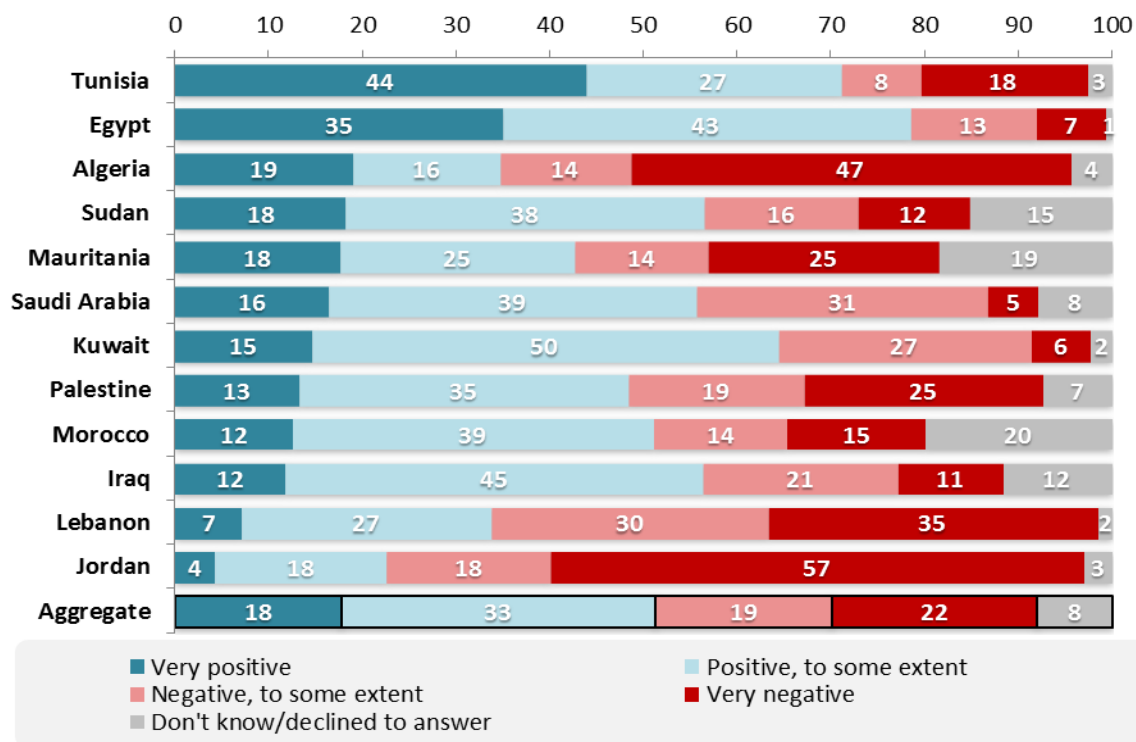
Figure 2 A narrow majority continues to have positive views of the original peaceful, popular uprisings of 2011 which gave rise to the Arab Spring.

Explanations given for the outbreak of the uprisings of the Arab Spring	Most important	Second-most important	Averaged
Against corruption	25	6	16
Opposition to dictatorship	20	9	15
Response to economic circumstances	18	14	16
For the sake of political freedoms	10	7	9
To end injustice	5	15	10
To demand dignity	4	9	7
To demand democracy	4	9	7
To achieve equality and justice	3	11	7
Other reasons	3	1	2
Don't know/declined to answer	7	0	4
No second choice provided	0	19	9

Which of the following two statements do you agree with most?

- The Arab Spring is presently facing obstacles but will eventually achieve its aims
- The Arab Spring has come to an end and the old regimes are returning to power
- Neither of the two statements
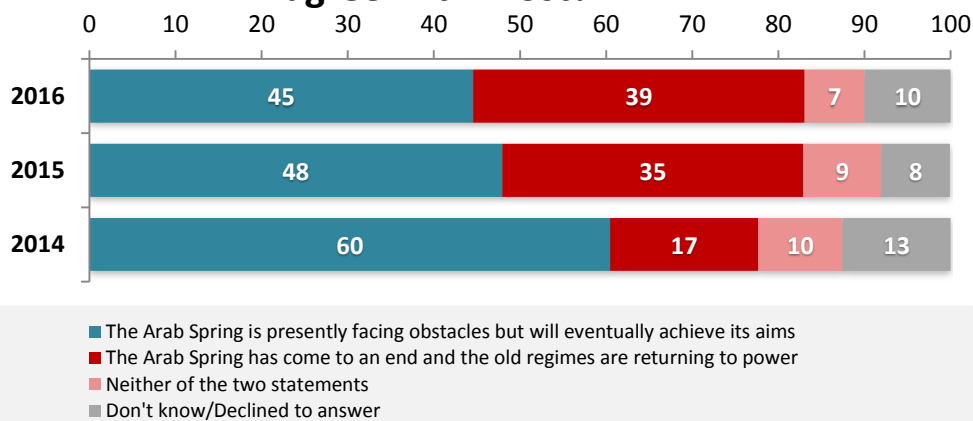- Don't know/Declined to answer

Figure 3 The Arab public remains divided over the fate of the Arab Spring.

Looking specifically at the ascendancy of Islamist political movements which may arise from the Arab Spring, 52% of respondents stated that they were worried, to varying extents, about the rise to power of such groups, compared to 42% who stated that they were not worried about Islamists coming to power. By comparison, 59% of respondents expressed their concerns/worries of the rise to power of non-religious/secular groups, while 33% stated they had no worries of secularists coming to power. These two large blocs understate the sharp sense of disarray in Arab public opinion, with political groups on both sides of a polarized divide eliciting the anxieties of Arab citizens in roughly equal measure. The public worries which surround the rise to power of such groups could be a potential obstacle to a wider democratic transition in the Arab region, paving the way for authoritarian institutions to exploit public fears and regain power.
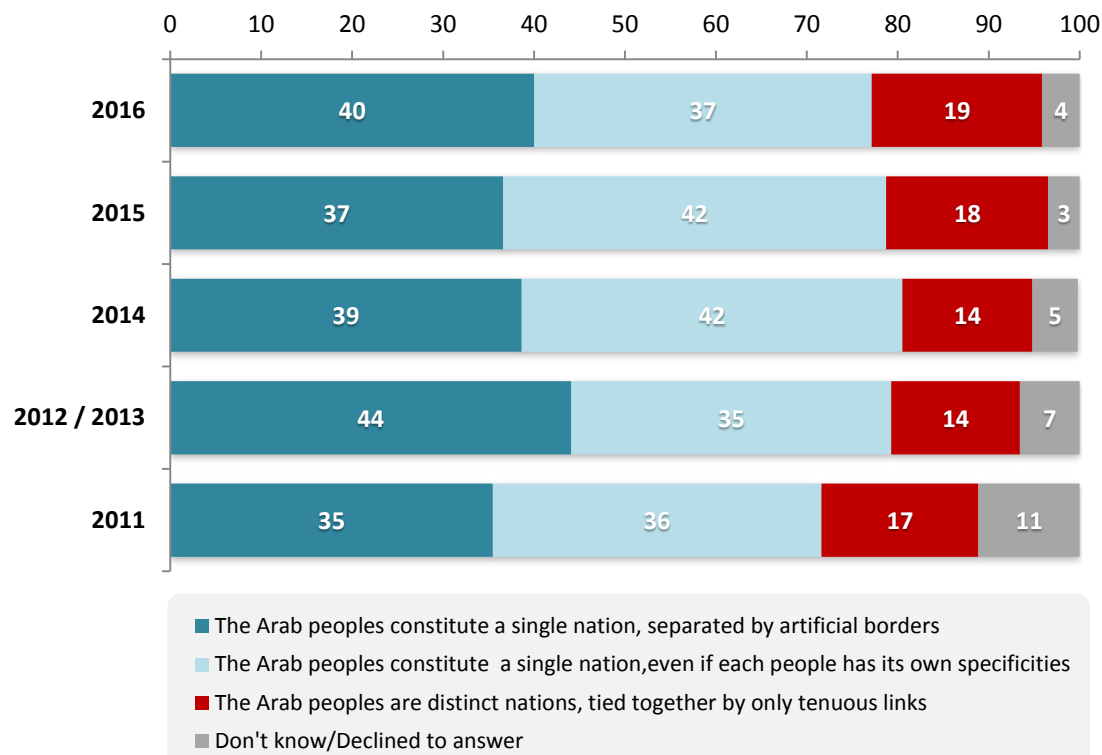
Fears/worries of Islamist and/or secular parties coming to power
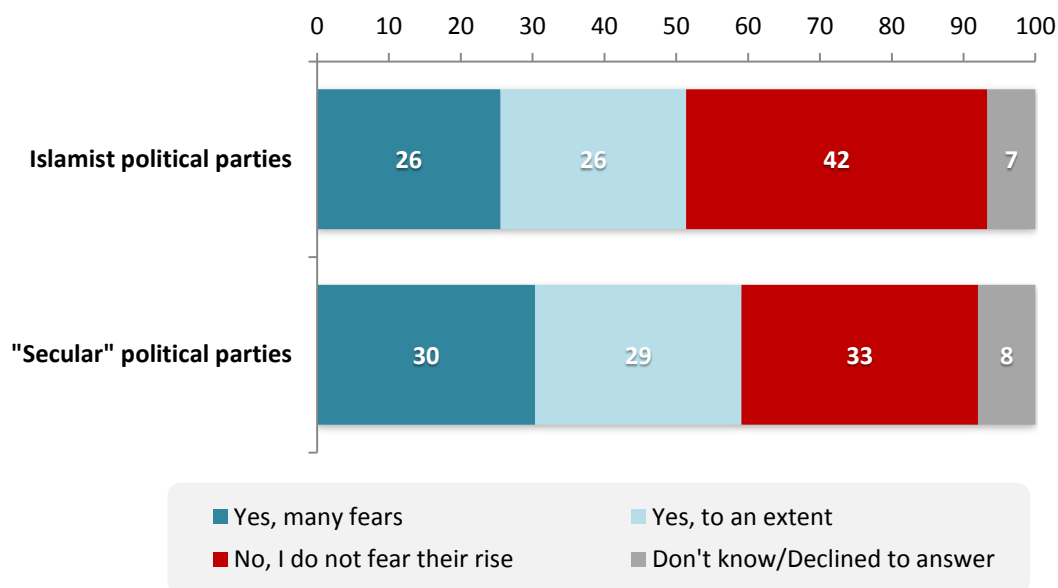
Figure 4 The political ascendancy of both secular and Islamist political groups gives rise to worries among the Arab public.

Overall, a strong majority (77%) of Arabs believe that the various peoples of the Arab region constitute a "single nation", even if some respondents qualify this belief. Only 19% maintain that the different Arab peoples are distinct nations tied by only tenuous bonds.

Public Perceptions of Intra-Arab Bonds

Legend:
- ■ The Arab peoples constitute a single nation, separated by artificial borders
- ■ The Arab peoples constitute a single nation, even if each people has its own specificities
- ■ The Arab peoples are distinct nations, tied together by only tenuous links
- ■ Don't know/Declined to answer

Results from the 2016 poll show increasing public disenchantment with the policies of a number of foreign countries, both regional and global powers, in comparison with previous years. The Arab public generally has a negative view of the Arab regional policies of a number of international powers: strong majorities have negative views of the foreign policies of Russia, Iran and the United States towards the Arab states.

In specific terms, 75% of the Arab public has negative views of the foreign policy of the United States towards Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. Similarly, around 66% of Arabs view negatively the policies of both Russia and Iran towards the same set of Arab countries.
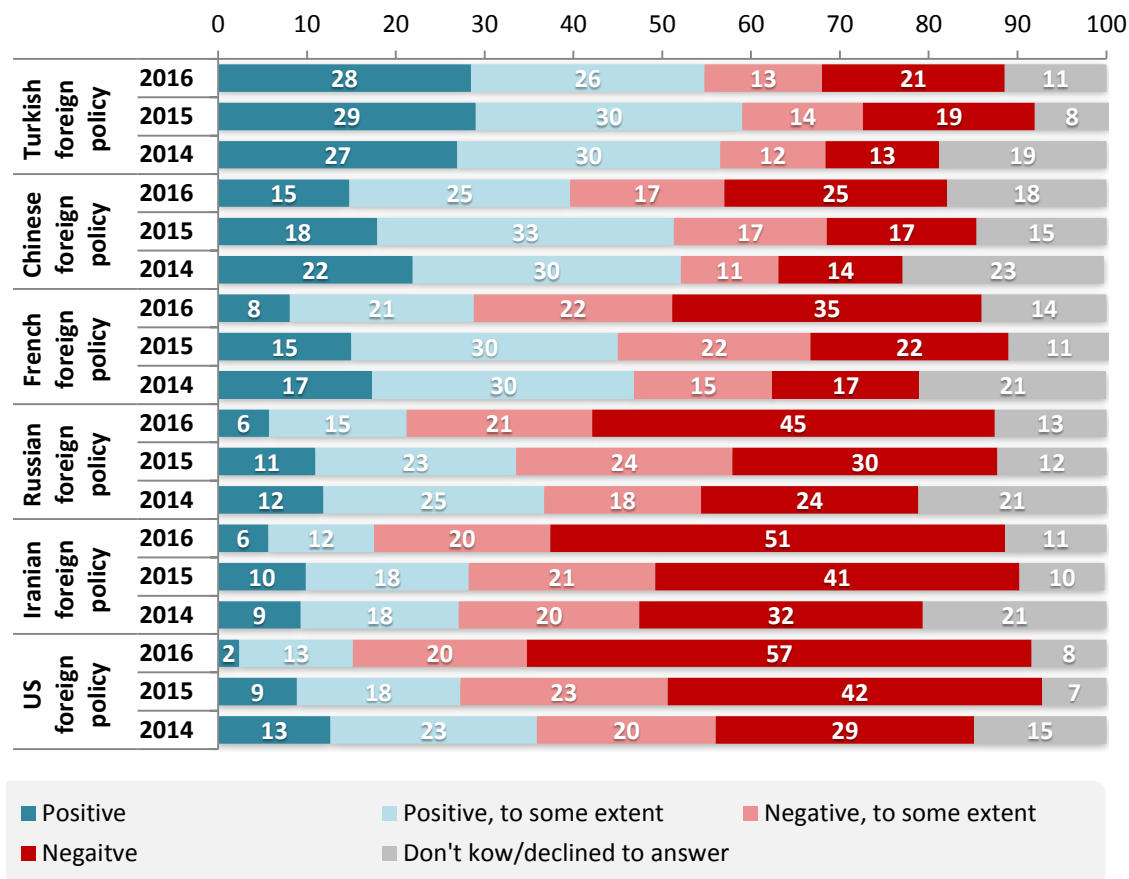
Figure 5 Changes in public perceptions of the Arab regional policies of a number of foreign powers.

The United States in particular was also identified as the greatest single threat to collective Arab security: 67% of Arabs named both the US or Israel as the country which posed the greatest threat to collective Arab security, and 10% of respondents designated Iran in this way. In a similar question, 89% of Arabs agreed that Israel is a threat to the stability of the Arab region; 81% agreed that US policies destabilized the region; and 73% regarded Iranian policies as destabilizing. The comparative figures for Russian and French policies were 69% and 59%, respectively. In sum, there is a firmly entrenched public view which regards Israeli policies as destabilizing to the region.

Do the following countries pose a threat to the stability of the Arab region?
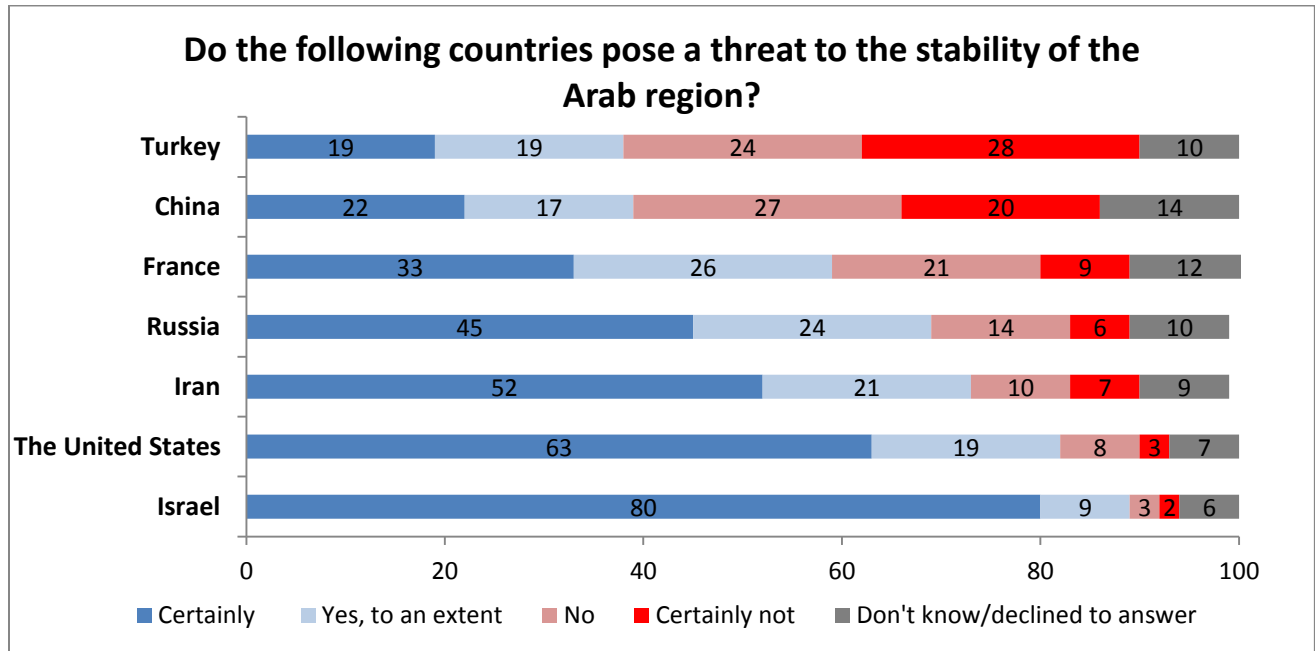
Figure 6 There is a widespread view which regards the regional policies of a number of countries as threatening Arab stability.

This was in line with a widespread negative view of Israel, with the overwhelming majority (86%) of Arabs renouncing official recognition of Israel by their home countries. Respondents who disavowed official recognition of Israel by their governments gave a number of reasons for their positions. Almost universally, these were framed in political terms and focused on the colonialist policies of Israel towards the Palestinians as well as its expansionism with regards to other Arab countries. As explained by Dr. Mohammad Almasri, Coordinator of the Arab Opinion Index, during the press conference, Arab animosity towards was not framed in cultural or religious terms.

Respondents offered a variety of answers when asked to define the single most pressing problem facing their country. The largest group, 44%, described their countries' most pressing problems as economic, while 20% offered priorities related to governmental performance, the stalled democratic transition, deficiencies in public services and the spread of financial and administrative corruption. Compared to 2014 and 2015, findings from the 2016 survey show a decline in the proportion of respondents who gave safety and security concerns as the most pressing problems for their governments to resolve.

Respondents' evaluations of the general political circumstances in their home countries.

Year	Very good	Good	Poor	Very poor	Do not know/Declined to answer
2016	10	30	29	26	5
2015	12	31	26	26	4
2014	9	27	31	28	5
2012 / 2013	7	32	32	21	8

■ Very good ■ Good ■ Poor ■ Very poor ■ Do not know/Declined to answer
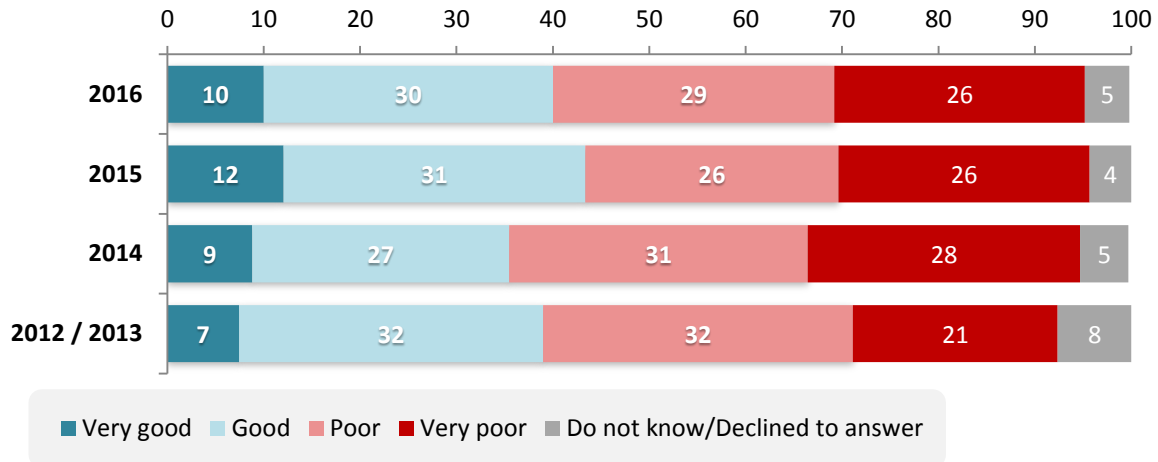
The results of the 2016 Arab Opinion reveal a widespread, and total, lack of satisfaction with their own financial circumstances. A full 49% of respondents reported that while their household incomes were sufficient to cover necessary expenditures, they could not make any savings (these families are designated as those living "in hardship"). Another 29% of citizens in the Arab region live "in need", in that their household incomes do not cover their necessary expenditures.

Respondents' self-reported income: successive polls.

Year	Covers and allows to save	Covers but no save	Not sufficient	Do not know/Declined
2016	20	49	29	2
2015	20	48	29	3
2014	21	42	32	5
2012 / 2013	18	40	37	5
2011	15	42	41	2

■ My household's income covers expenditures sufficiently and allows us to save
■ My household's income covers our expenditures but does not allow us to save
■ My household's income is not sufficient for necessary expenditures and we face difficulties.
■ Do not know/Declined to answer

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In the face of generally negative evaluations of the political orders of their home countries, a large majority of Arabs (72%) expressed views supportive of democracy, compared to 22% who could be said to oppose democracy. Similarly, 77% agreed that a multi-party democracy was a good form of government for their home countries. In contrast, majorities varying in size from 61% to 75% expressed their opposition to a set of other forms of government, including one restricted to Islamic Sharia, free of elections and of political parties; an electoral system where competition was restricted to Islamists; or an electoral system where competition was restricted to secular parties.

Democracy: better than the alternatives?

Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know/Declined to answer
2016	29	43	16	6	6
2015	30	42	15	7	6
2014	31	41	12	5	11
2012 / 2013	23	45	14	4	14
2011	31	36	10	5	18

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know/Declined to answer
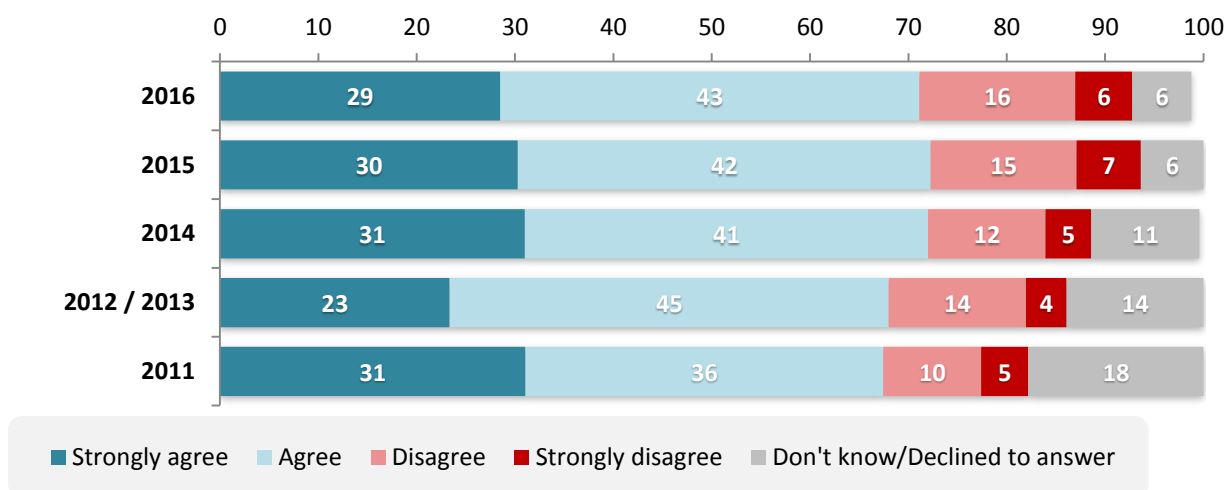
Figure 7 Agreement/disagreement with the statement that democracy remains better than other forms of government, despite its shortcomings?

Chart data (Figure 8):

Type of government	Very appropriate	Appropriate	Inappropriate, to some extent	(dark red)	(grey)
Democratic system	47	30	12	6	5
A government based on Islamic Sharia	15	19	26	33	7
Electoral system with competition limited to Islamist parties	8	21	32	32	7
Electoral system with competition limited to non-religious/secular parties	7	14	30	42	7
An undemocratic/authoritarian system of government	6	12	30	45	7

Legend: ■ Very appropriate ■ Appropriate ■ Inappropriate, to some extent

Figure 8 Respondents' perceptions of the appropriateness of various types of government for their home countries.

Would you support diplomatic recognition of Israel by your country?

Year	Support	Oppose	Don't know/Declined to answer
2016	9	86	5
2015	9	85	6
2014	6	87	7
2012 / 2013	6	87	6
2011	9	84	7

Legend: ■ Support ■ Oppose ■ Don't know/Declined to answer
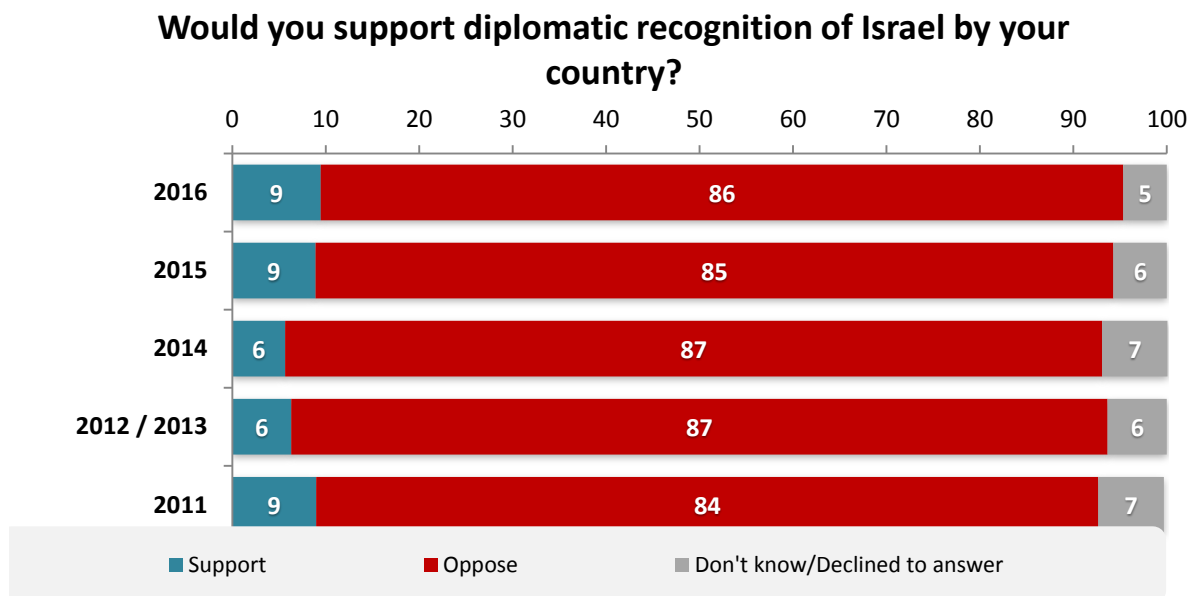
Figure9 The Arab public has consistently opposed recognition of Israel by their governments.

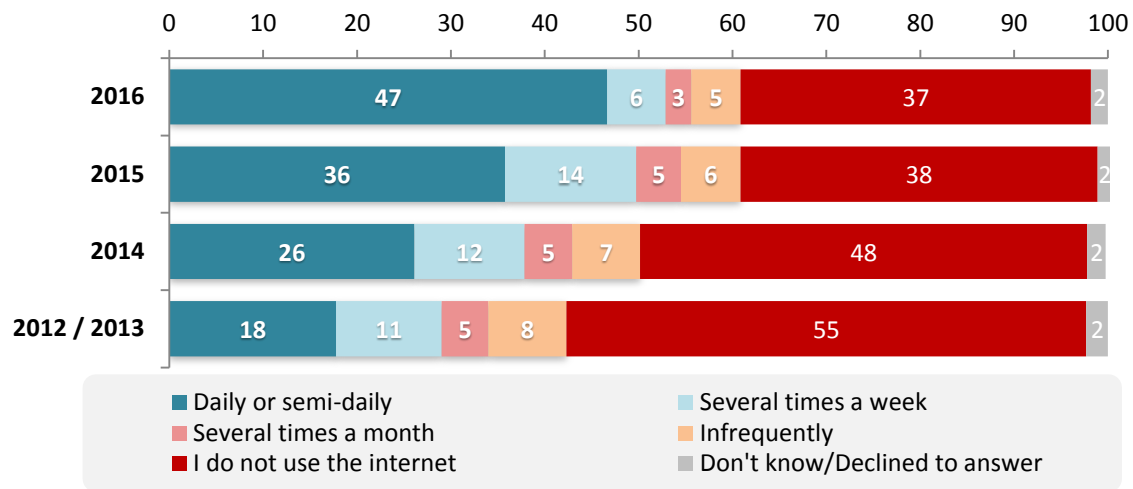| Reasons cited to oppose diplomatic recognition of Israel/year of survey	2016	2015	2014
Colonialist occupying power in Palestine	27.0	24.5	23.4
Expansionist state set on controlling more Arab territory	13.0	13.0	2.4
A terrorist state/supports terrorism	7.6	10.4	1.2
(Israel) is racist towards Arabs	8.2	10.3	12.2
Israeli dispossession of the Palestinians; continued oppression of the Palestinians	8.1	6.9	5.5
Recognizing Israel negates the Palestinian people	5.8	5.6	7.5
Israel is an enemy of my people/the Arabs in general	3.3	4.7	11.5
Israel threatens regional security	3.2	3.4	2.5
Religious reasons to oppose Israel	5.2	3.3	4.9
Israel violates agreements and treaties	2.1	2.4	2.3
Israel does not exist	0.4	0.3	--
Other reasons	0.2	0.0	3.4
Do not know/declined to answer	6.4	6.4	18.4
Approve of the recognition of Israel	9.5	8.9	6.0

Internet penetration has increased markedly over the years of the Arab Opinion Index, with 61% of respondents to the 2016 survey being regular internet users, compared to 37% who do not use the internet. Amongst internet users, 82% have accounts on Facebook and a separate 33% have accounts on Twitter while another 32% of Arab internet users have accounts on Instagram. One-third (33%) of internet users are online at least daily. Meanwhile, 70% of social media users reported using their social media accounts to obtain political news and information while 68% use their social media accounts to express their views on political events, and 51% use their social media accounts to "engage with" political affairs. Only 19% of social media users report using their accounts at least once daily.

How often do you use the internet?

	Daily or semi-daily	Several times a week	Several times a month	Infrequently	I do not use the internet	Don't know/Declined to answer
2016	47	6	3	5	37	2
2015	36	14	5	6	38	2
2014	26	12	5	7	48	2
2012 / 2013	18	11	5	8	55	2

- ■ Daily or semi-daily
- ■ Several times a week
- ■ Several times a month
- ■ Infrequently
- ■ I do not use the internet
- ■ Don't know/Declined to answer

Popularity of specific social media channels.

	Yes	No	Declined to answer
facebook	82	18	0.4
Twitter	33	67	
Instagram	32	67	1
YouTube	28	71	1
Snapchat	23	77	0.5
Telegram	8	92	0

- ■ Yes
- ■ No
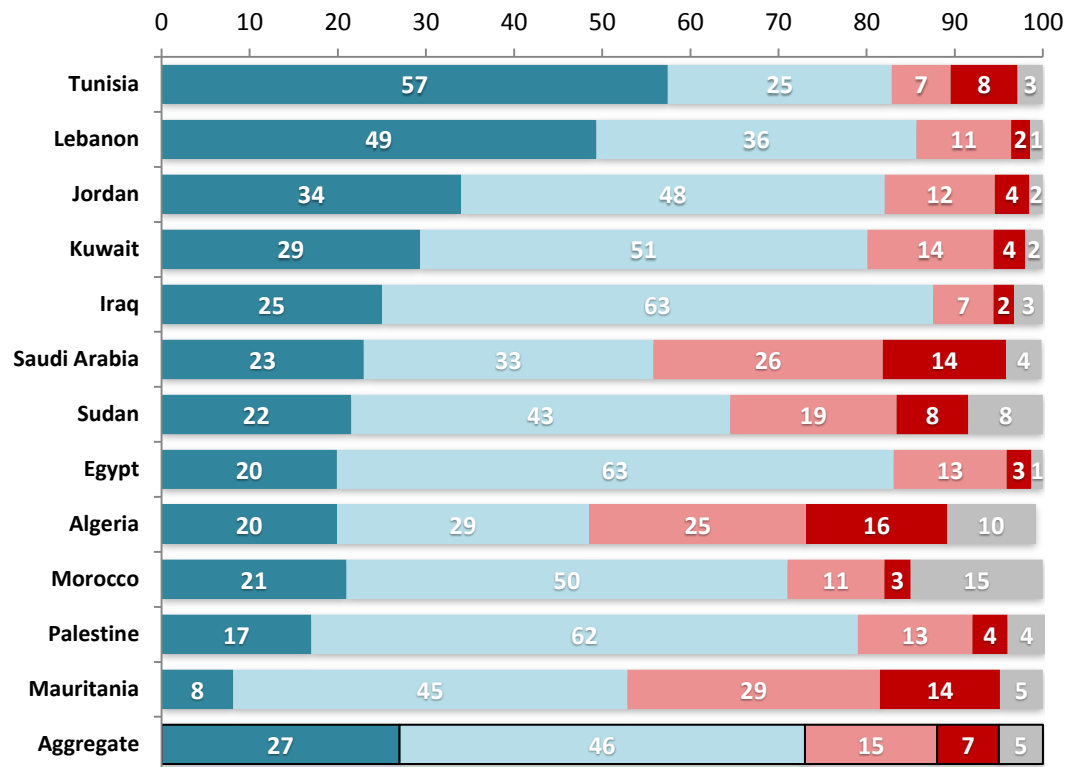- ■ Declined to answer

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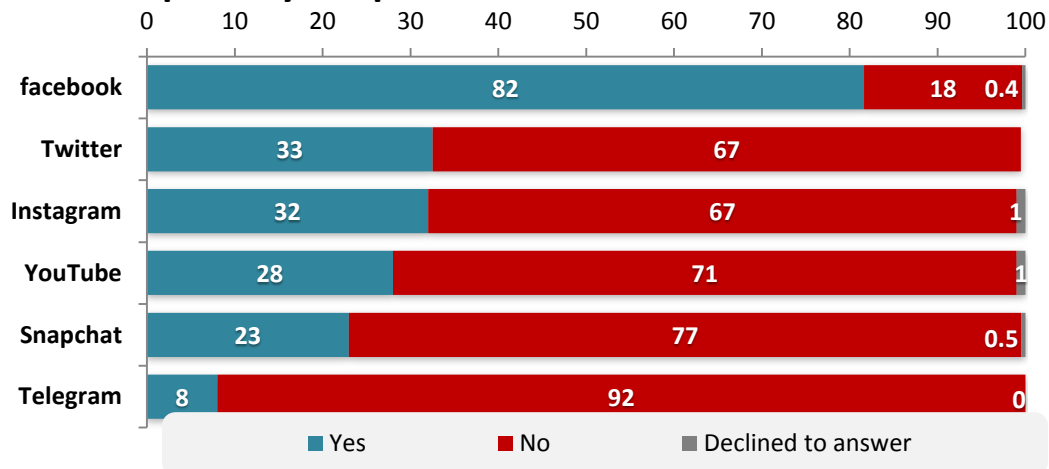
Most Arabs define their own religious in one of three ways: "Religious to some extent" (65%) or "Very religious" (20%), only 11% of Arabs defined themselves as "Not religious".

Self-reported religiosity of respondents, successive polls.

	Very religious	Religious, to some extent	Not religious	Non-believer	Don't know/Declined to answer
2016	20	65	11	1	3
2015	24	63	9	1	4
2014	24	64	8	0.4	4
2012 / 2013	21	67	8	0.4	4
2011	19	66	11	0.4	4
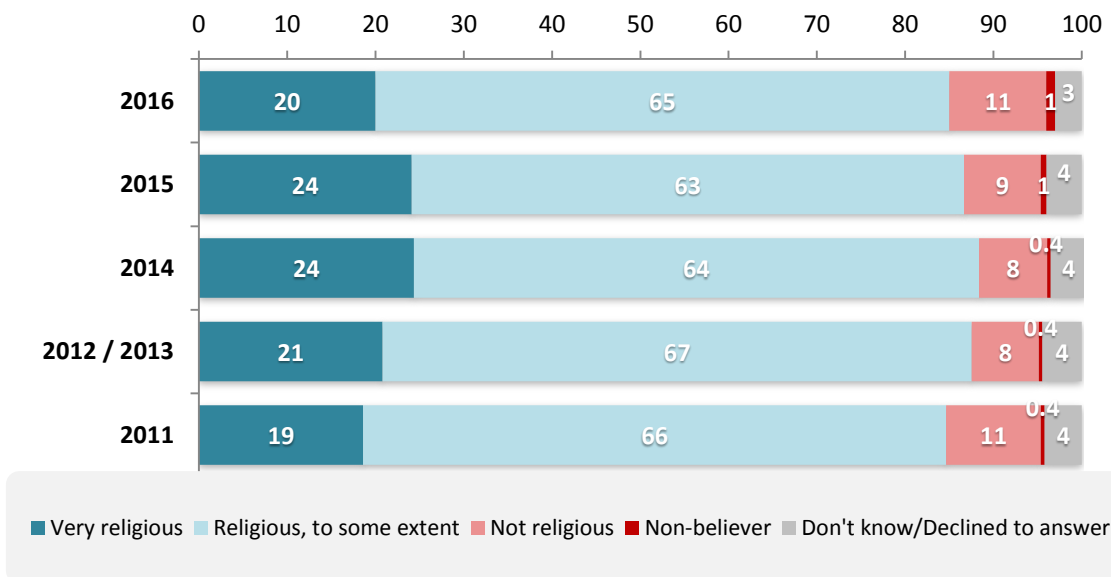
While a majority of Arabs are religious, to varying extents, this does not preclude widespread religious tolerance: vast majorities of respondents believe that no religious authorities have the right to denounce followers of variant interpretations of their own religion, or to declare followers of other religions to be apostates. Additionally, a majority of Arabs show no real preferences for other religious individuals in their personal, day-to-day dealings, nor do they believe that irreligious people are generally worse individuals than they are. Majorities of respondents believe that clerics should influence neither government decisions nor voting behavior at the elections. This remains true despite the fact that no majority of Arabs exists which is in-principle opposed to a separation of religion from public life.

"No religious authority is entitled to declare followers of other religions to be infidels."

Country	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know/declined to answer
Tunisia	57	25	7	8	3
Lebanon	49	36	11	2	1
Jordan	34	48	12	4	2
Kuwait	29	51	14	4	2
Iraq	25	63	7	2	3
Saudi Arabia	23	33	26	14	4
Sudan	22	43	19	8	8
Egypt	20	63	13	3	1
Algeria	20	29	25	16	10
Morocco	21	50	11	3	15
Palestine	17	62	13	4	4
Mauritania	8	45	29	14	5
Aggregate	27	46	15	7	5

Legend: ■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know/declined to answer

"In your day-to-day life, do you prefer to deal with religious individuals?"
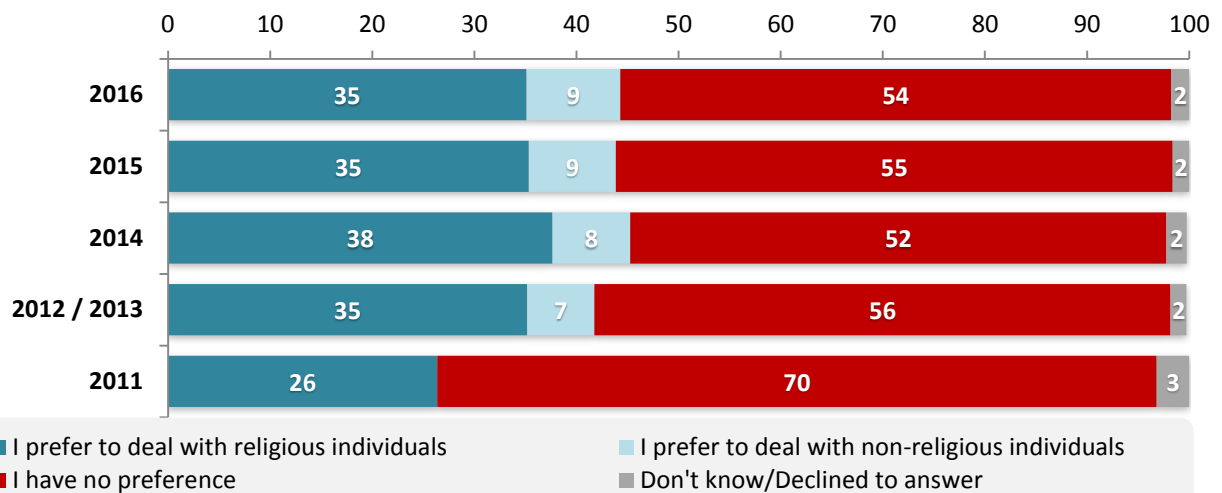
Year	I prefer to deal with religious individuals	I prefer to deal with non-religious individuals	I have no preference	Don't know/Declined to answer
2016	35	9	54	2
2015	35	9	55	2
2014	38	8	52	2
2012 / 2013	35	7	56	2
2011	26		70	3

Legend: ■ I prefer to deal with religious individuals ■ I prefer to deal with non-religious individuals ■ I have no preference ■ Don't know/Declined to answer

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"The government has no right to use religion to win support for its policies."

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know/Declined to answer
2016	29	45	16	6	4
2015	33	44	15	5	4
2014	33	40	14	5	8
2012 / 2013	29	41	16	4	11

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know/Declined to answer
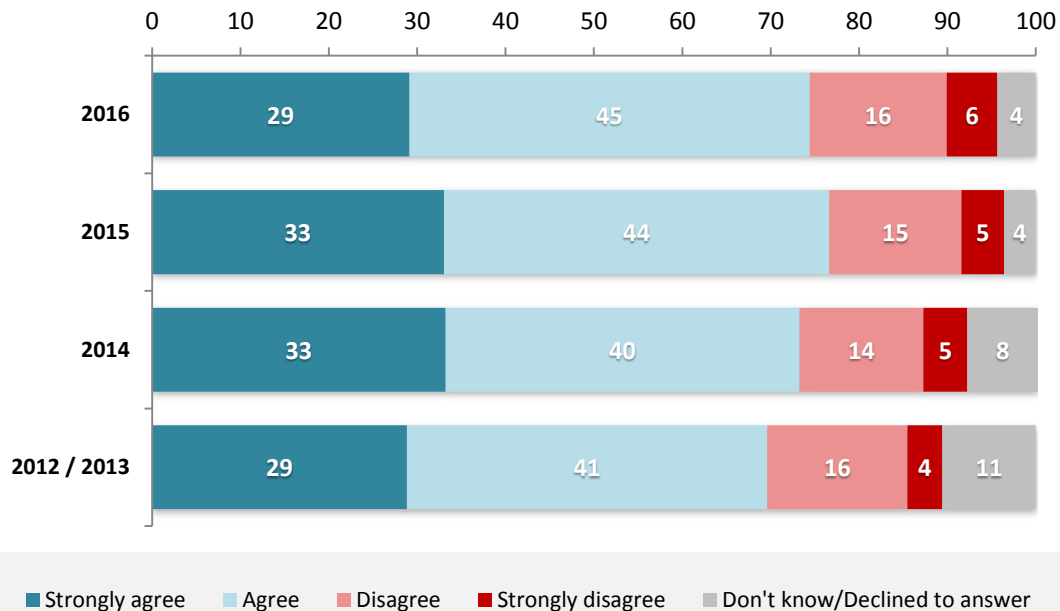
"It would be better for my home country if religion were separated from politics."

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know/Declined to answer
2016	23	30	25	16	6
2015	22	30	27	16	5
2014	24	27	25	15	9
2012 / 2013	19	27	27	14	13
2011	26	17	16	26	16

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know/Declined to answer