

Arab News led poll shows Arab world at a 'major turning point'

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Opinion Plus

A ground-breaking Arab News-led poll shows reshaping of mosque and state is transforming the region. Andrew Boff looks at what is driving this change.



Arab Strategy Forum where the poll was launched | Photo Credit: Arab News

As turmoil accelerates across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), underlying trends in the Arab world underscore the risks and opportunities for the future.

Had world-leaders properly understood these transformations, they would have long shifted their foreign policy to align with these developments. New polling by Arab News and YouGov suggests that the region is at a major turning point.

Perhaps the most intriguing finding from the poll is the strong and growing consensus of

dissatisfaction with extremism and those that used religion for political gain.

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A significant proportion of respondents across the Arab world strongly disagreed with "the use of religion for political gain." And the two nationalities who held the strongest views on this topic were Iraqis (75 percent) and Lebanese (63 percent).

When asked if they felt religion played a part in political decisions in their country, 75 percent of Iraqi respondents said it did. In Lebanon 57 percent of respondents felt similarly, which was higher than the average of 45 percent for the other countries.

People across the Arab world are increasingly aware of the damage inflicted by those who use religion to acquire political power. Suggesting that, in the near future, those who use religion for political purposes will face more difficulty in convincing Arab citizens to support them.

But this does not translate into a backlash against religion. Interestingly, religiosity remains strong across the Arab World, with 72 percent saying their country was deeply religious or somewhat religious, and 66 percent classing themselves as actively practicing their religion.

Yet religiosity, equally, does not mean extremism. Far from it - over the next decade, respondents across the Arab world believe extremist groups will continue to decline in popularity, with Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS/Daesh, Al Qaeda, the Taliban and Hezbollah all facing big drops in support.

A majority of respondents across the Gulf region, Levant and North Africa, believe that over the next 10 years, fewer political parties will be motivated by extremism. Meanwhile, they expect moderate Islam to rise over this period.

"If Arab leaders fail to pursue reforms that address these economic problems that have only worsened since the 2011 'Arab Spring', we can expect more regional upheaval - and at worst, a resurgence of fringe, extremist groups"

Despite the good news, caution would be prudent. The poll shows that world leaders need to pay much closer attention to efforts to address (or failures to address) corruption and economic matters.

When asked to list the biggest challenges facing their countries, respondents from every region of the Arab world overwhelmingly put corruption at the top of the list, with a combined average of 57 percent for the Gulf, the Levant and North Africa.

Unemployment was the second biggest concern for the Arab world, with a combined average of 42

percent of respondents indicating that they are worried about their ability to earn a wage.

The data reinforces the argument that recent uprisings across the region are rooted in longstanding economic grievances.

If Arab leaders fail to pursue reforms that address these economic problems that have only worsened since the 2011 'Arab Spring', we can expect more regional upheaval - and at worst, a resurgence of fringe, extremist groups.

In any case, it's undeniable that the transformation of the Arab world is occurring at a rapid rate. World leaders should seek to forge new regional alliances to capitalise on the most exciting opportunities - and, of course, head off potential risks. Doing so could help usher in a more stable and prosperous era for all of us.

About the author

Andrew Boff is a British politician and a Member of the London Assembly (MLA).

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