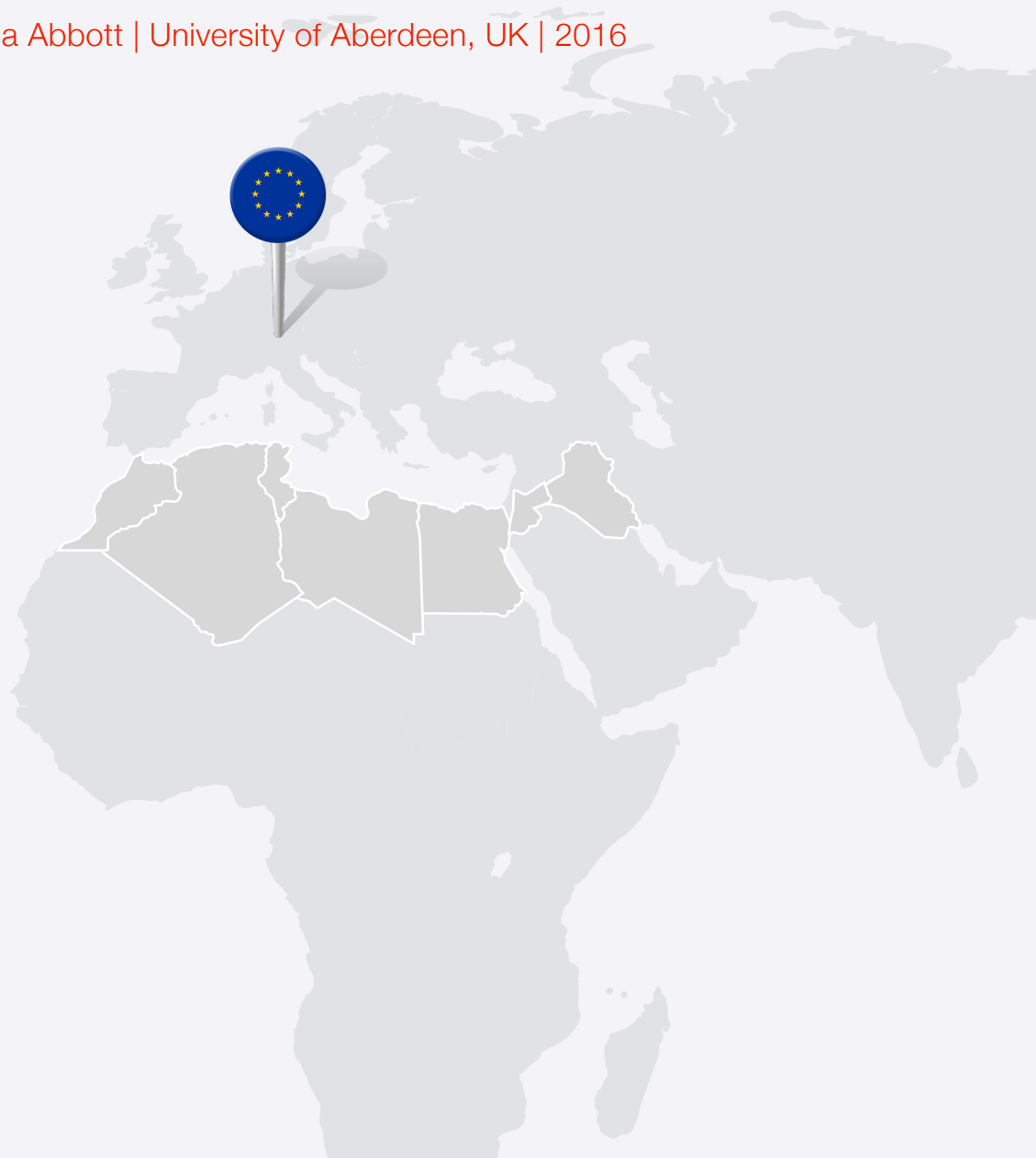


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After the Arab Uprisings: Popular Expectations and the  
EU's Response

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## **Introduction**

The Arab Uprisings moved the EU to learn lessons from past mistakes and re-define its approach to development, democracy, and security. Reality, however, has fallen short of this aim. Analysis of the revised Neighbourhood Policy suggests it changed little, falling back on pre-Uprisings conceptions and discarding approaches which were more inclusive, organic, and better suited to long-term EU interests. Conversely, ArabTrans survey data shows MENA populations display precisely the more substantive and holistic approaches to democracy which EU policy discarded. It also shows supporters of the Uprisings were driven by dissatisfaction with the provision of satisfactory socio-economic conditions and tackling corruption, and that their expectations of improvements remain largely frustrated. This mis-match between policy and popular expectations leaves existing difficulties unaddressed.

## **Democracy and the EU Policy Response to the Uprisings**

The EU's commitment to an 'ever closer union' of European peoples has been understood under the rubric of democracy. Seeing itself partly as a 'normative power', the EU claims these values inform its strategic posture, including towards its 'Southern Neighbourhood.' In practice, policies often fell short of principle, and with the Arab Uprisings many welcomed the EU's recognition that not challenging dictatorships meant strengthening them.

The EU's path to a reformed ENP is contained in six documents published between 2011 and 2014. However, despite the unprecedented number and frequency of strategy documents produced, the EU has not achieved its sought-after 'qualitative step forward'. The Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity (PDSP) epitomises both the greatest policy innovation and the greatest shortcomings in EU efforts, remaining ultimately within the pre-Uprisings paradigm. One of these is that while socio-economic factors are treated as relevant, their connection to democracy is considered secondary compared to civil and political rights. PDSP recognises the connection between social justice, economic growth, and democratisation, but focuses on privatisation and free markets, the cornerstones of failed pre-Uprisings policy. Labour groups are ignored despite being crucial forces calling for democracy (e.g. Tunisia). And while civil-political rights are always presented as crucial to democracy, socio-economic issues are always treated as matters of economic policy, but not as rights. For example, they are absent from definitions of 'deep democracy'. Strikingly, the word 'democracy' itself is always associated with civil and political rights, but never with social and economic rights.

In sum, while in these documents' preambles accept a holistic conception of democracy, these principles are fleshed out so selectively as to become neutered, returning EU policy squarely within a narrow conception of democracy which alongside support for dictatorships, was the hallmark of failed pre-Uprisings stance. This selectivity means that the question of social justice is sidelined despite being crucial in mobilising the 2010-11 protests and being central to MENA populations' conception of democracy, as ArabTrans survey data (below) shows.

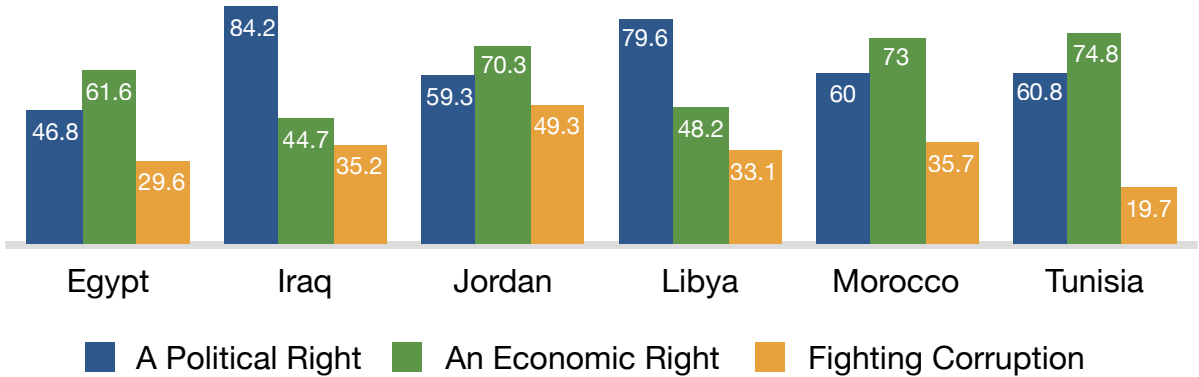
Subsequent documents retreat further from PDSP's progressive elements, prioritising security over democracy, and invoking domestic constraints, geopolitical rationales,

and the need for ‘stabilisation’. These documents also suggest a lack of demand for democracy in MENA societies. For example, WtSP claims that ‘Only if the whole societies, not just the political elites or certain parts of the political spectrum, makes this choice and adheres to the universal values referred to above, will the process be sustainable and ultimately successful.’ However, survey data show MENA societies demand more democracy and in a more progressive version than their political elites.

**Conceptions of Democracy in MENA Populations**

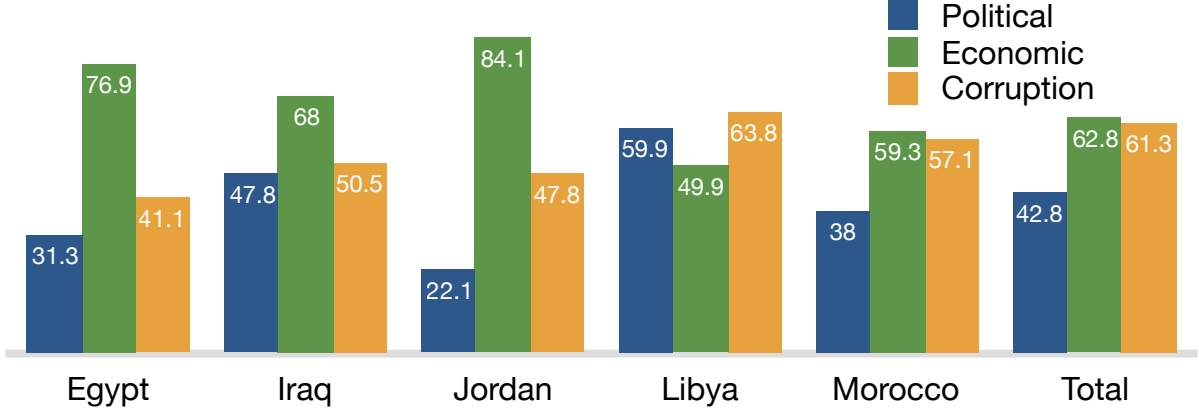
ArabTrans survey data shows that MENA populations hold a more rounded, substantive conception of democracy than Western media or public debate suggest. Recognising this is crucial to avoid repeating past policy mistakes. For example, when asked what two characteristics of democracy were essential, responses show a strong – often preponderant – concern with issues linked with social and economic rights as well as corruption, a notorious nexus of economics and politics.

**Two Essential Characteristics of Democracy, % Nominating in Selected MENA Countries by Type of Characteristic**



Analogously, when asked what factors drove popular participation in the Arab Uprisings, respondents analogously emphasised socio-economic factors.

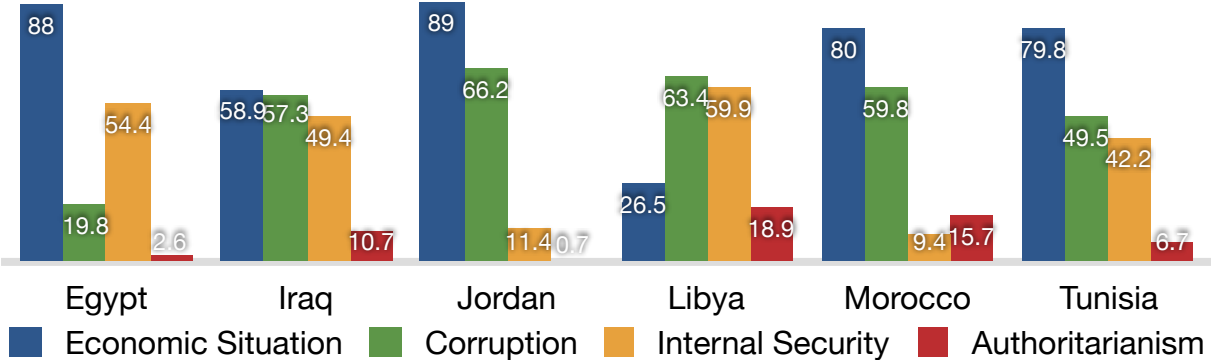
**Demands for Political Rights, Economic Rights and Fighting Corruption as Drivers of the Arab Uprisings in Selected MENA Countries, %**



When asked to name two challenges respondents perceived their country was facing,

they again displayed a complex mix of socio-economic, political, and security issues. The economy ranked highest for all countries save Libya. Iraq was the only country in which other concerns – corruption and security – even came close.

**Economic Situation, Corruption, Internal Security & Authoritarianism as One of Two Major Challenges in 2014, %**



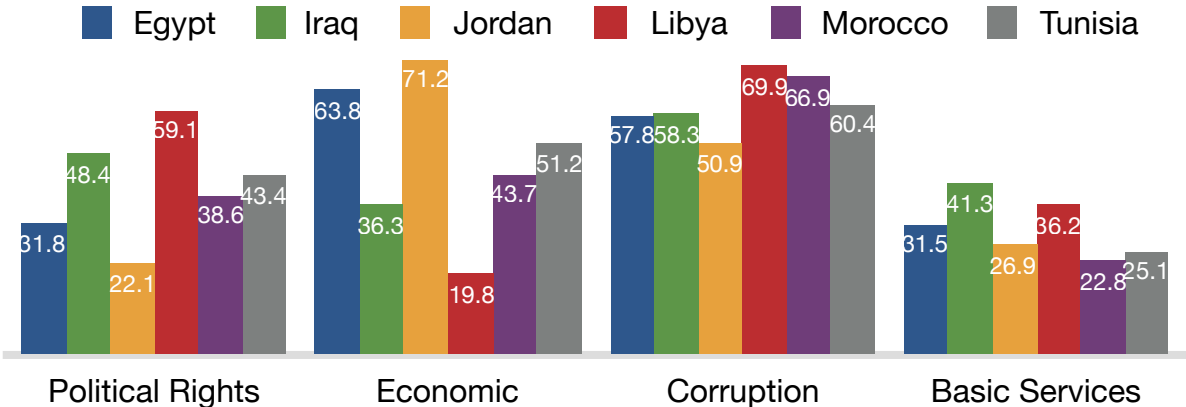
By clear majorities, respondents also believe democracy is better than alternatives and that governments should make laws reflecting the will of the people. The lowest approval for the idea that ‘democracy is better than alternatives’ is in Egypt (61.3%), while all others score at least 75 per cent (Libya 74.6%, Morocco 80.3%, Iraq 81.7%, Jordan 89.8%). Laws should be made according to popular will is a view subscribed to by at least 60 per cent of respondents (Jordan 60.3%, Morocco 62.3%, Libya 67.9%, Egypt 71.8%, Iraq 79.4%). It should also be noted that while respondents value religious values, they do not trust religious elites much, and while they would like to see more ‘pious’ values in public life, they consistently reject the notion that religious elites themselves ought to have direct political influence.

Overall, this ‘thick’ (substantive) conception of democracy is strikingly different from the ‘thin’ (formal) approach displayed in EU policy documents.

**Have Expectations Been Met?**

While no single pattern applies to all countries, protesters clearly were motivated by dissatisfaction with a specific mix of factors – social justice, the economy, politics and corruption. ArabTrans survey data provides an insight into both the causes of the revolts, and the opinion of post-Uprisings developments since by those who supported

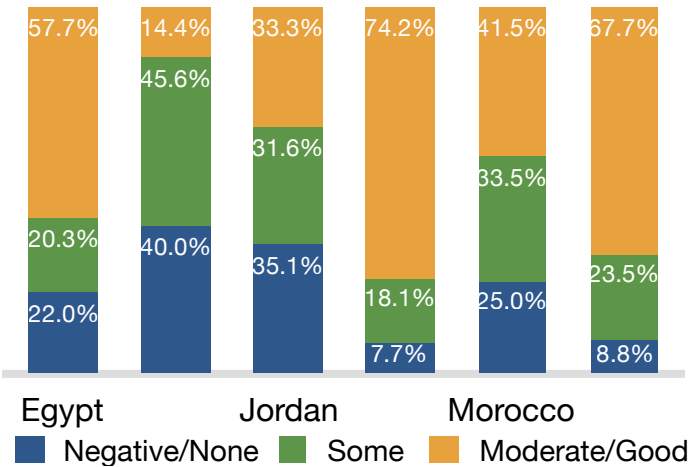
**Reasons for Supporting the Uprisings: % of Supporters Nominating as One of Two Main Reasons, by Country**



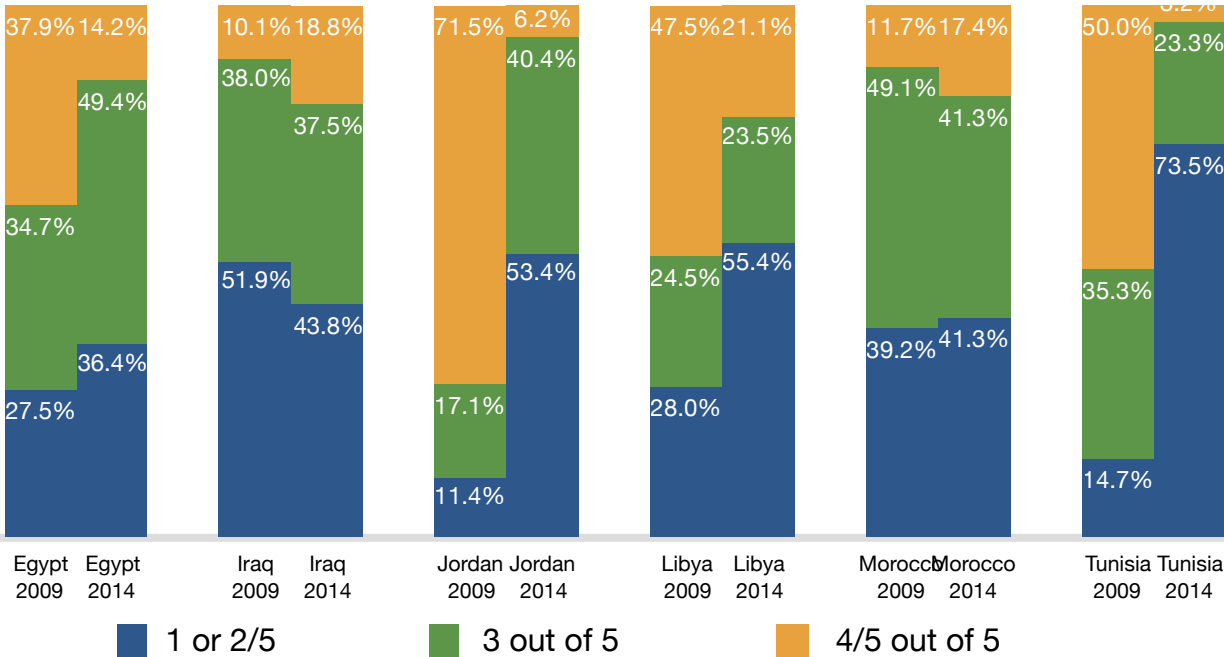
them. The data suggests that corruption and economic issues are generally more important to respondents than political ones, but the picture emerging from respondents' post-Uprisings assessments is of demands that have gone largely unanswered, and little hope for the future.

Among supporters of the Uprisings, those who wanted more political freedom were more positive about its outcomes than those who wanted economic issues addressed. Tunisians and Libyans were most satisfied with changes, followed by Egyptians, while Iraqis and Jordanians more often than others saw no change or negative changes, with greater proportions of Moroccans and Iraqis seeing some minor improvements.

**Improvement in Political Rights 2009-2014, % Wanted More Political Freedom**



**National Economy in 2009 and 2014, % Those that supported the Arab Uprisings for Economic Reasons**



Those who supported the Uprisings for socio-economic reasons also perceived the situation in 2014 as generally worse than in 2009: only in Iraq and in Morocco do respondents think the economic situation has improved (albeit marginally), and in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and particularly Jordan there are dramatic drops in confidence in the economy.

Nor is the picture more heartening when it comes to corruption. Those who supported the Uprisings motivated by corruption perceive it to still be an extremely significant

problem, with even the lowest level of significant corruption being 65% in Libya. For all other countries, corruption is rated as significant by at least 90% of respondents.

Overall, survey data reveals frustrated expectations along the entire range of factors which caused the Arab Uprisings, suggesting that these problems remain significant and urgent, and that the mismatch between these and EU policy priorities is that much more significant.

### **Conclusions: Missed Opportunities**

The EU has cannot on its own bring about democratic transitions, but its efforts on those factors it can control has fallen short. Policy reform has not matched what evidence shows is MENA populations' demand for a more rounded democracy which pays attention to both socio-economic rights and social justice as well as civil-political rights. Instead, it failed to re-examine its conception of democracy, development, and security, falling back on approaches to all three which have been tried and have failed. The Uprisings presented the EU a strategic and normative opportunity it has thus far missed.