

Introducing the MENA Scholar Barometer Marc Lynch

This February, the MENA Politics Section cooperated with the University of Maryland's Sadat Center and the Project on Middle East Political Science to field the first ever MENA Scholars Barometer. Organized by Shibley Telhami and Marc Lynch, and administered by Brittany Kyser, the MENA Scholars Barometer offers an unprecedented snapshot into the views of scholars in the field.¹ The results were featured in the Washington Post's Monkey Cage Blog.² The MENA Scholars Barometer will be fielded twice a year, with some questions being repeated to track trends over time and new questions being introduced. Members of the APSA MENA Politics Section are encouraged to suggest questions which might be added to the survey.

Whose views are represented in the first round of the MENA Scholar Barometer? We began by constructing a list of scholars from the membership of the Middle East Studies Association, the MENA Politics Section and POMEPS. We identified 1,293 such scholars, across multiple disciplines. In future rounds, we hope to expand the list to include scholars not affiliated with those professional associations. During the three days the survey remained open, 521 scholars had responded (a 40 percent response rate), divided almost equally between political scientists and nonpolitical scientists. We asked basic demographic information, as well as primary academic discipline and whether they were primarily based inside or outside the United States.

The headline results have already been presented in The Monkey Cage. The results which attracted the most attention were those related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Those results were indeed striking. 59 percent described the current reality for Israel and the Palestinians as "a one-state reality akin to apartheid," while only 2 percent described the situation as a temporary Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. 52 percent said that a two state solution is no longer possible, while only 6 percent consider it probable within the next decade. And without a two state horizon, 77 percent expect to see the emergence of a one-state reality akin to apartheid, while only 1 percent expect to see a single binational state with equal rights for all.

The survey also found some fascinating disagreement over the future and the significance of the Arab uprisings. Thirty percent expect another wave of mass protests within the next decade, while 46 percent say that the uprisings are actually still ongoing in different forms. Only 7 percent think that the uprisings are over and gone, while 17 percent think they probably won't recur for at least a decade. A slim majority, 54 percent, describe their impact as significant, but not transformational. Surprisingly to me, at least, only 29 percent thought the uprisings had a transformational effect, while 17 percent view them as a temporary disruption with little long-term impact.

¹ The questionnaire and results can be found at <https://criticalissues.umd.edu/middle-east-scholar-barometer/middle-east-scholar-barometer>

² Marc Lynch and Shibley Telhami, "Here's how experts on the Middle East see the region's key issues, our new survey finds." Washington Post Monkey Cage Blog 16 February 2021
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/16/heres-how-experts-middle-east-see-regions-key-issues-our-new-survey-finds/>

We chose to survey one big current policy issue: a U.S. return to the nuclear agreement with Iran (the JCPOA). Overwhelming majorities supported such a return, while only 4% recommended that the U.S. continue the Trump administration's "Maximum Pressure" policy.

We also asked about international and regional power. Only 3 percent of the scholars view the United States as stronger in the Middle East today compared with a decade ago, while 75 percent view the United States as weaker. Quite strikingly, only 38 percent still view the United States as the single dominant external power in the region.

The survey did see some intriguing differences between political scientists (mostly, but not exclusively, members of this Section) and non-political scientists. Only 49% of political scientists described the current Israeli-Palestinian reality as "a one-state reality akin to Apartheid," compared to 72% of scholars from other disciplines. Political scientists were less pessimistic in their assessment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: 48% said a two state solution was no longer possible, compared to 58% of non-political scientists. But if the two state solution is taken off the table, the differences disappear: 77% of political scientists and 80% of non-political scientists then expect a one state Apartheid reality.

There were few other significant differences. More political scientists (34%) than non-political scientists (26%) viewed the impact of the Arab uprisings as "transformational." More political scientists (82%) than non-political scientists (68%) view the United States as weaker in the Middle East today compared with ten years ago, but they also were more likely to describe the U.S. as still the most dominant power in the Middle East (44% to 35%). Political scientists were more likely to say that global powers had less influence over MENA politics today, 33% to 25%.

We also asked a question about regional power, asking respondents to rank MENA countries in terms of "their current regional influence." The findings were difficult to interpret. Israel was named most often as the most influential (34%), followed by Iran and Saudi Arabia (tied at 23%). Egypt was most often named the least influential, by a full 50% of respondents. Those topline numbers are intriguing. But as a political scientist, I found the question and the results unsatisfying. I suspect that people had very different things in mind as they determined their rankings. Some probably had raw military power in mind, while others may have been thinking about influence over regional outcomes. Israel and Iran are certainly powerful, but how much influence do they really have over other regional powers? The UAE and Qatar both placed quite low, a result which matches conventional Realist understandings of the importance of large populations and territory in national power but which seems out of line with their outsized impact on conflicts around the region in the decade since the Arab uprisings. We hope to refine this question to probe more deeply in future surveys.