

Assessing Arab Public Opinion Toward the Palestinian Issue⁽¹⁾

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Abstract: This paper seeks to present trends in Arab public opinion toward the Palestinian issue through AOI data published by the ACRPS. It focuses on the question of whether Palestine is an Arab issue or simply a Palestinian issue, views on recognition of Israel and assessments of global and regional powers' policies and positions in the region. It shows that Arab public opinion is generally inclined to see Palestine as an Arab issue, that it is almost unanimous in rejecting recognition of Israel (88% of respondents), and that respondents' views of countries' policy in the region is determined by their assessment of their policy on Palestine.

Palestine

Arab-Israeli Conflict

Arab Public Opinion

Arab Opinion Index

Normalisation with Israel

Introduction

A debate is currently ongoing among elite groups – politicians, media figures, experts, academics, and even most recently religious figures – about the importance of the Palestinian issue and its centrality in the Arab region. Some have argued that it is no longer as important as it once was: it is now the Palestinians' problem and of no concern to other Arab countries. Proponents of this view cite the great political transformations in the region over the last 40 years – whether that means political realignments, agreements signed with Israel (including by the PLO), or the most recent wave of normalisation arrangements. These views are, of course, hardly unbiased. They are part of a periodic attempt to announce the death of the Palestinian issue as an Arab issue and replace it with questions of domestic relevance.

Proponents of these views, and likewise Arab governments, have been surprised at every political turn by the emotional attachment of the Arab public to the Palestinian issue. There were concerted individual and organizational efforts to muster support for Palestinians when the US embassy was moved to Jerusalem, when the most recent wave of protest broke out throughout Palestine in May 2021, and around the attack on Gaza. Those who claimed that Palestine is no longer important to Arabs are having to reconsider. In this paper we will show that the popular reaction, however, should not have been surprising. The underlying currents of popular opinion in this regard are much the same as they always have been.

First: The Palestinian Question and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

As part of its assessment of public opinion in the Arab region on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the AOI has

regularly asked respondents whether they consider the Palestinian issue to be an Arab issue generally or

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of relevance only to Palestinians. The answer to this question can clearly help explain Arab attitudes to the conflict as a whole, since those who consider it to be a pan-Arab issue are not only expressing sympathy with a just cause but feel themselves to be both partners and common victims with the Palestinians.

There was near consensus (78%) among citizens of the Arab countries surveyed that Palestine is a pan-Arab issue and not merely a Palestinian issue. Only 15% of respondents said that it was a solely Palestinian cause. The exact percentages varied by country: more than 80% of Algerian, Jordanian, Qatari, Tunisian, Saudi and Mauritanian respondents agreed that it was a pan-Arab cause, while in the other countries support for this statement ranged between 66% in Palestine, 69% in Lebanon and 74% in Egypt. This is a slight increase from last year's figure of 77% and a rise from the historic low of 75% recorded in the 2015/2016 AOI, although it is still lower than in 2011 and 2012/2013, when 84% of respondents agreed that Palestine was a pan-Arab issue. By comparison, the number who stated that it was a solely Palestinian issue was at an all-time high of 18% in 2015/2016, having risen rapidly from 9% in 2011.

Although the number of people saying Palestine is a pan-Arab issue has fallen across the board since 2011, the change has been most marked in Palestine (25 points since 2011) and to a lesser extent in Sudan

(14 points) and Morocco (11 points). While Egypt and Saudi Arabia also saw marked falls in 2016 (16 and 14 points respectively), this change has since been reversed, and in 2017/2018 Egypt showed greater support for the idea of Palestine being a pan-Arab cause (85%) than it did in 2011 (83%), while the figure for Saudi Arabia today (89%) is some 18 points higher than in 2016 and four points higher than 2011. The same applies in Mauritania, where support for the proposition today (82%) is 17 points higher than in 2011 (65%).

These trends show clearly that there has been no significant change over time in overall Arab popular opinion on this question. There is near-consensus that Palestine is a pan-Arab issue. Domestic political developments in some countries have led to small shifts in support for this proposition but these shifts are fairly insignificant when considered over the duration of the AOI. It is also worth noting that even those small groups of respondents who maintain that Palestine is a solely Palestinian issue may still be supportive of Palestinians and convinced that their cause is just. Some 30% of Palestinians themselves, who suffer the worst effects of Israeli occupation, believe that Palestine is their issue alone. And some of those who deny Palestine is a pan-Arab issue may simply be affirming the importance of Palestinians making the decisions.

Figure 1: Attitudes towards the Palestinian cause by country

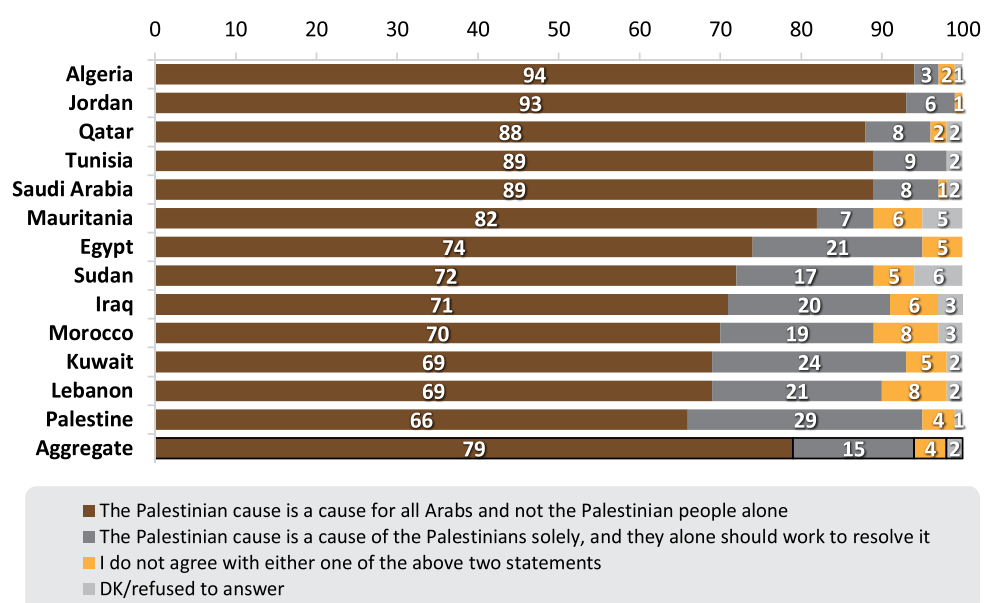
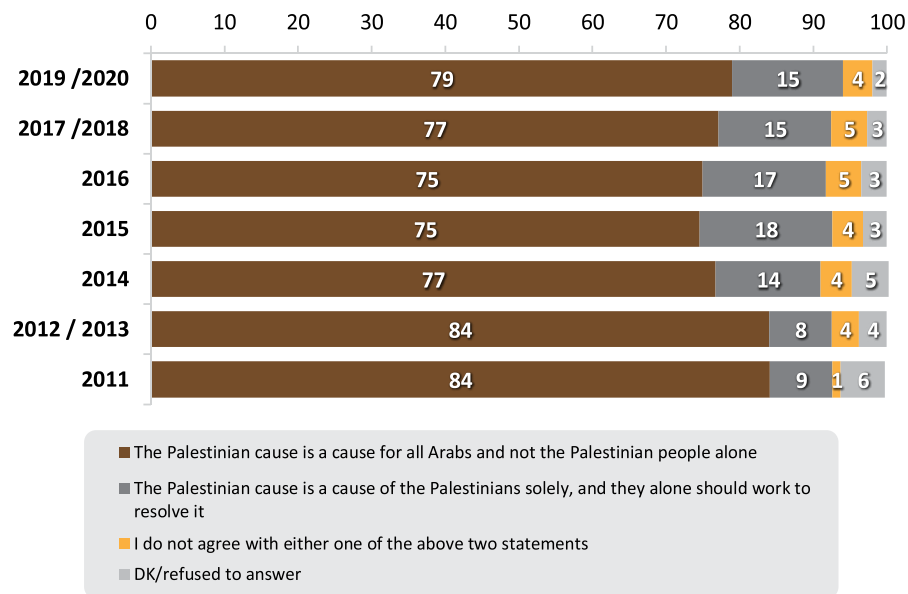
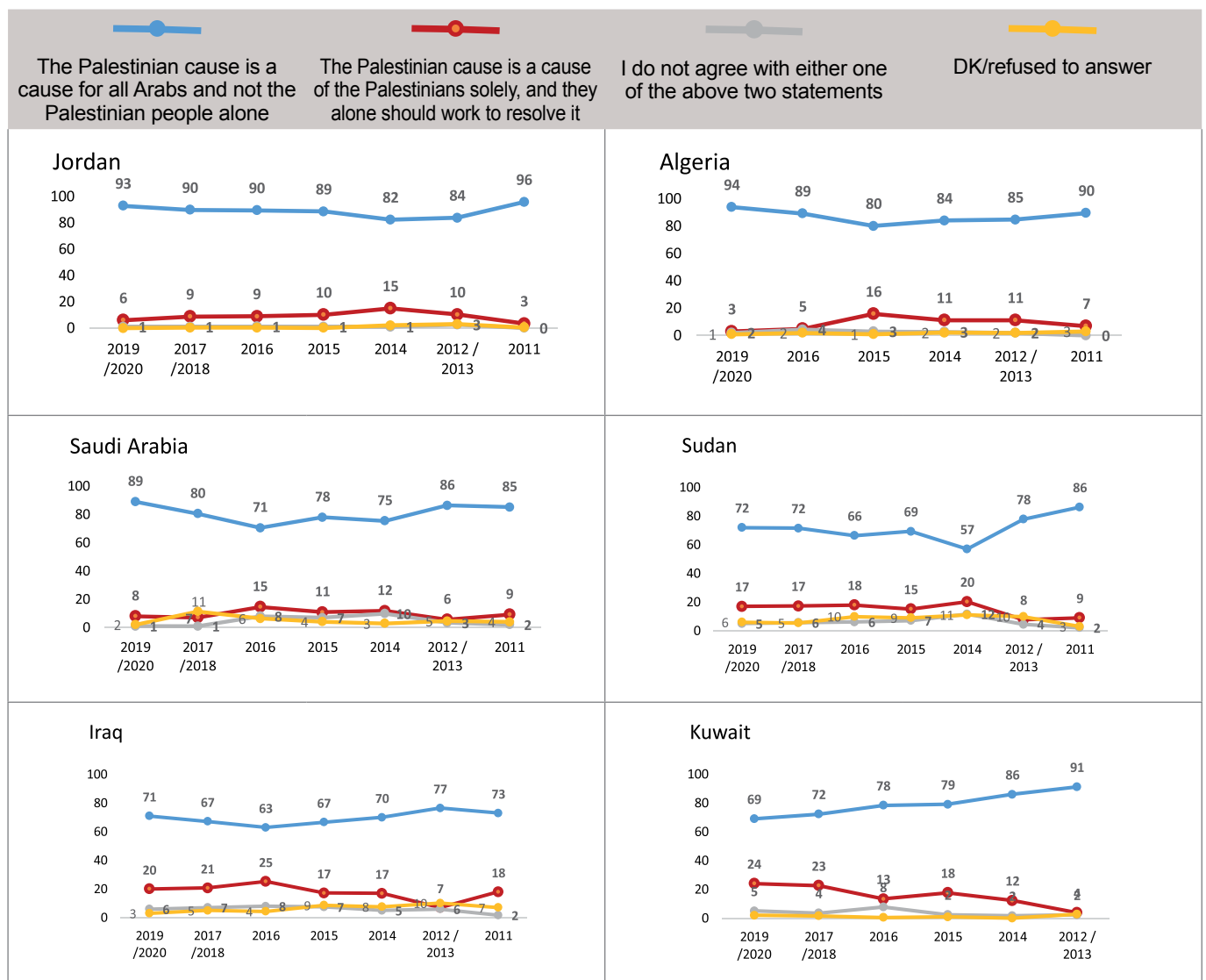
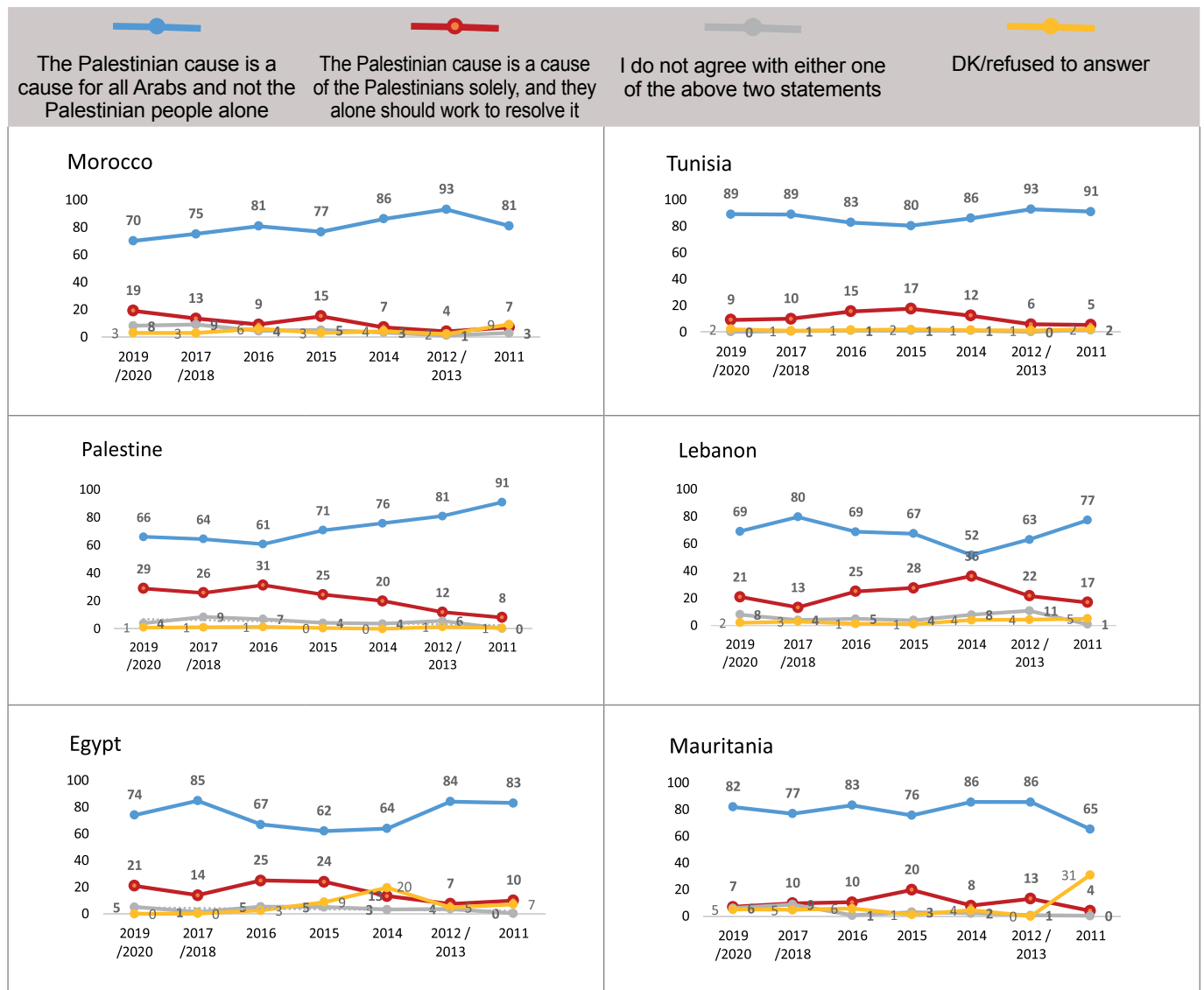


Figure 2: Attitudes towards the Palestinian cause by year**Figure 3: Attitudes towards the Palestinian cause by country and year**



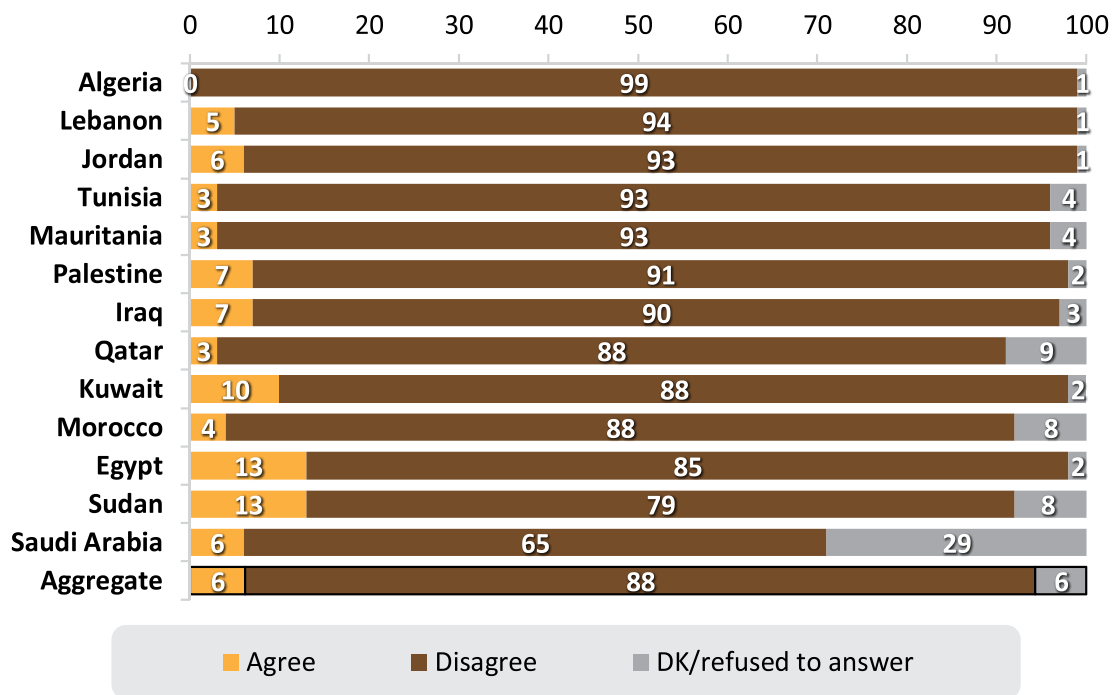
Second: Public Opinion on Recognising Israel

Given the near consensus that Palestine is a pan-Arab issue and not simply a Palestinian one, it is perhaps not surprising that respondents in the 2019/2020 AOI show a similar near-consensus (88%) against their countries granting Israel diplomatic recognition, against a mere 6% of respondents who supported it. It corresponds with respondents' broad opposition to the peace treaties signed between Israel and various Arab countries and their view that Israel is the country that represents the greatest threat to regional security.

Almost every Arab country exhibited high levels of opposition to recognition for Israel. Particularly high levels of opposition were recorded in Algeria (99%), Lebanon (94%), Jordan (93%), Tunisia

(93%), Mauritania (93%), Palestine (91%) and Iraq (90%). A notable outlier is Saudi Arabia, where 65% of respondents said they opposed recognition and only 6% that they supported it, but some 29% either refused to answer or said that they had no opinion. The majority of respondents in the countries that have signed peace agreements with Israel (Jordan, Palestine and Egypt) are opposed: 93% in Jordan, 91% in Palestine, and 85% in Egypt.

The 88% figure is the highest figure ever recorded by the AOI, up four points on the figure recorded in 2011 (84%). This increase reflects a corresponding increase in every individual country, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, where numbers remain below those

Figure 4: Attitudes towards home country recognizing the state of Israel by country

recorded in 2015/2016 and the 65% figure is some 17 points lower than that recorded over the last five years. But even in Saudi Arabia this drop in opposition does not reflect a swing towards support: the change has been in favour of "I don't know", up 22 points on previous years. This is presumably

driven by an unwillingness to give an opinion at a time when the Saudi government is normalising its relations with Israel, or perhaps a feeling of uncertainty after the government's concerted efforts to promote this option. 89% of the Saudi public still believe that Palestine is a pan-Arab issue.

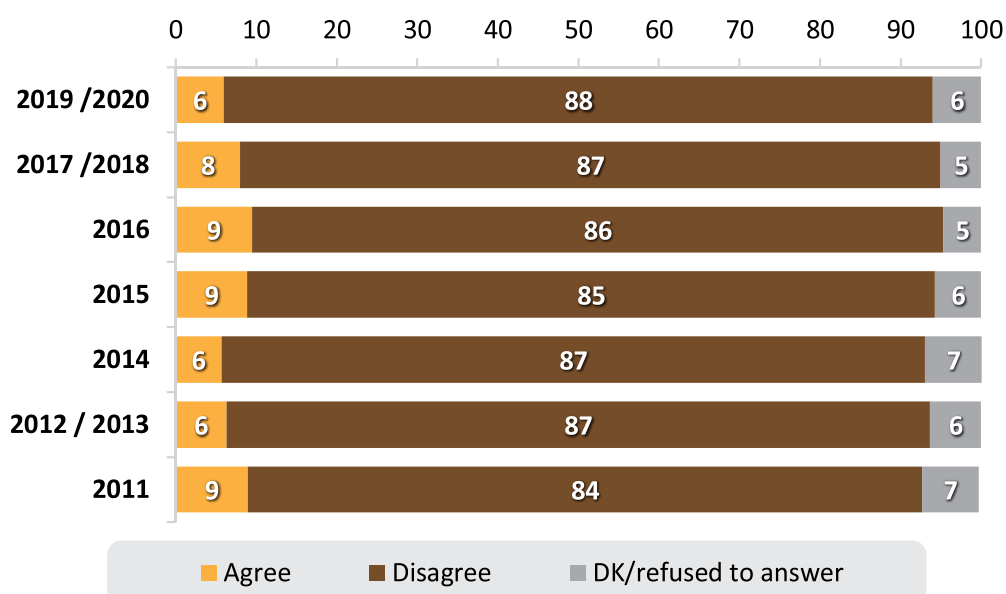
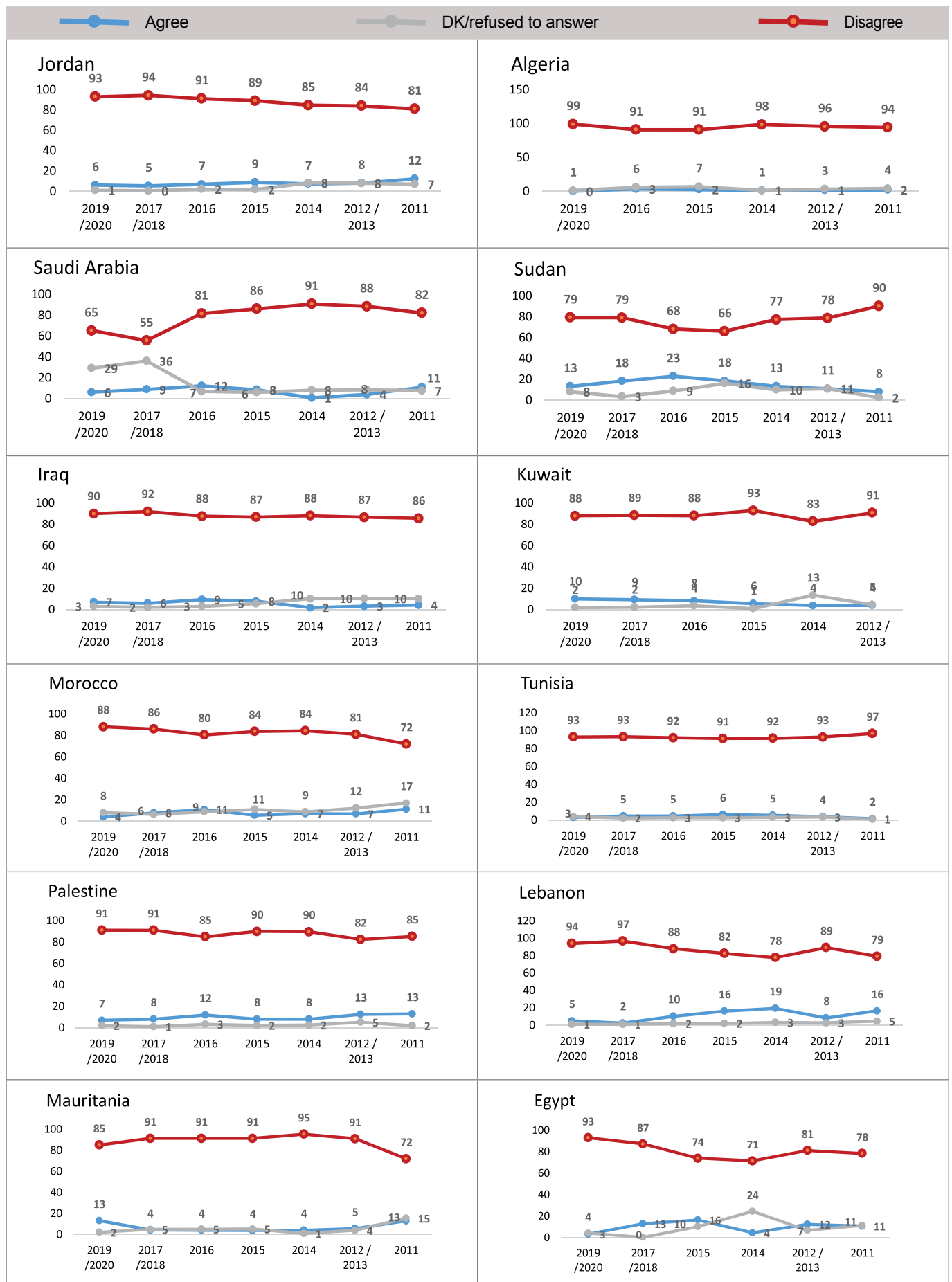
Figure 5: Attitudes towards home country recognizing the state of Israel by year

Figure 6: Attitudes towards home country recognizing the state of Israel by country and year

The AOI also included a semi-open question intended to establish respondents' reasons for supporting or opposing granting diplomatic recognition to Israel. Around one third of respondents said that they opposed recognition for Israel because it was an occupier and a settler-colonial state. 10% said that Israel was an expansionist state seeking to dominate or occupy Arab countries. 8% said that Israel is a terrorist state that sponsors terrorism. 7% cited Israel's expulsion and ongoing oppression and murder of Palestinians. 6.4% gave religious reasons. 5.9% said that Israel is racist towards, or hates, Arabs. 4.8% said that recognising Israel would mean erasing the Palestinians, denying them their rights and accepting the legitimacy of its actions against the Palestinian people. 4.2% said that Israel has a special hatred for their country and more generally for Arabs, and 3.8% said that it threatens regional security.

A review of the answers given by those who opposed recognising Israel shows that the vast majority base their views on the premise that the Israeli state is an occupying power, aggressive and expansionist, racist, or a danger to regional security. Some also cite past and present behaviour towards the Palestinians. These views are not based on hostility to Jews because they are Jews or on the idea that there is a fundamental cultural gap between Jews and Arabs. They are rooted in a political assessment of the Israeli state.

The reasons given differed from country to country. Respondents were most likely to attribute their opposition to Israel's colonial nature in Algeria (60%), Jordan (58%), Palestine (50%), Iraq (41%) and Mauritania (40%). Expansionism was most cited in Lebanon (19%), Kuwait (13%), Algeria (13%), Egypt (11%) and Morocco (11%). Terrorism was cited by more than 10% of respondents in Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, Egypt and Sudan. Some 15% of Moroccan respondents, meanwhile, attributed their opposition to Israel's racism.

The reasons given have also changed over time. In 2014 only 1.2% of respondents cited Israel's support for terror, while in 2015 it shot up to 10.4%, falling to 7.6% in 2016 and 7.4% in 2017/2018 before returning in 2019/2020 to 8%. While in 2014 only 2.4% of respondents cited expansionism, this rose to 13% in 2015 and 2016 before falling to 10.1% in 2017/2018

and 9.7% in 2019/2020. There has been a year-on-year rise in the number of people saying they oppose recognition for Israel because it is a colonial state, from 23.4% in 2014 to 34% in 2019/2020.

The 6% of respondents who support recognition for Israel likewise gave a number of reasons, most commonly that Israel is present regardless (1.3%), that it has already been recognised under the peace agreements (1.1%), or that this would serve a comprehensive peace and regional stability (1%). Smaller numbers said that Israel is a state just like any other (0.6%), that they would recognise Israel if Israel in turn recognised a Palestinian state (0.5%), that recognising Israel would lead to the creation of a Palestinian state (0.5%), that it would serve the mutual interests of Israel and their people (0.4%), that Israel is too strong to confront (0.3%) or that it was an advanced country worth emulating (0.2%). There were no significant changes in the percentages when compared to previous years due to the small number of people expressing support for recognition.

It is clear that there is near-consensus that Israel should not enjoy diplomatic recognition. Arab citizens are not prepared to simply accept a new narrative imposed by political circumstance. This is not simply a matter of solidarity with Palestinians – although this is important – but of an understanding of Israel and its nature, its role in the region and its effect on Palestinians and Arabs more broadly. This is unlikely to change without very serious changes on the ground – that is, without a just solution to the Palestinian issue.

Perhaps one of the best expressions of Arab public opinion towards the Palestinian cause is its assessment of countries' policies with respect to Palestine.

The results of the AOI show divisions over Turkey's Palestine policy, with 42% of respondents describing it as "good" (12% "very good", 30% "somewhat good") and 41% "bad". The number describing it as "good" fell by seven points from a high of 53% in 2017/2018. The AOI results are hostile to Iranian policy on Palestine, with 58% describing it negatively and 23% positively, similar to the results in 2011 (60% and 23% respectively).

There is near consensus that US policy on Palestine is bad, with 81% of respondents ranking it negatively

Table 1: Reasons given for opposing recognition of Israel by year

Reasons/ opposing respondents	Year	2019 /2020	2017 /2018	2016	2015	2014
Colonialist occupying power in Palestine		33.7	31.7	27.0	24.5	23.4
Expansionist state set on controlling more Arab territory		9.4	10.1	13.0	13.0	2.4
A terrorist state/supports terrorism		7.6	7.4	7.6	10.4	1.2
Israeli dispossession of the Palestinians; continued oppression of the Palestinians		6.8	8.3	8.1	6.9	5.5
Religious reasons to oppose Israel		6.7	6.6	5.2	3.3	4.9
(Israel) is racist towards Arabs		5.9	6.3	8.2	10.3	12.2
Recognizing Israel negates the Palestinian people		4.8	5.3	5.8	5.6	7.5
Israel is an enemy of my people/the Arabs in general		4.1	3.4	3.3	4.7	11.5
Israel threatens regional security		3.6	3.4	3.2	3.4	2.5
Israel violates agreements and treaties		1.6	1.6	2.1	2.4	2.3
Israel does not exist		2.3	1.1	0.6	0.3	3.4
No reasons given		1.9	1.6	1.8	0.6	10.2
Total of those opposed to recognizing Israel		88.2	86.8	85.9	85.4	87.0
Approve of the recognition of Israel		6.2	7.9	9.5	8.9	6.0
Do not know/declined to answer (as a percentage of respondents)		5.6	5	5	6	7
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

and only 7% positively. This is a broadly similar result to previous years: in 2016 79% of respondents described US policy towards Palestine negatively, while in 2017/2018 the figure was 87%. US policy towards Palestine has not changed and neither have Arab attitudes towards that policy. More than half of respondents likewise described Russian and French

policy on Palestine in negative terms, with only 26% characterising French policy as positive – down six points on the result in 2017/2018 and similar to the result in 2011 – and 53% as negative.

Arab public opinion on regional and global powers in the region is determined by their policy on Palestine. Citizens in the region believe that Palestine is an issue

Table 2: Reasons given for approving recognition of Israel by year (as a percentage of respondents)

Reasons/ approving respondents	Year	2019 /2020	2017 /2018	2016	2015	2014
It exists inevitably		1.2	1.8	2.5	2	1.6
Recognition has already happened and peace agreements have been signed		1.1	1.7	2.6	2.2	0.5
In order to achieve peace and stability in the region		1.0	0.8	0.9	1.5	1.4
Because it is a State like any other with the the right to be a state		0.5	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.4
Provided it recognizes a fully sovereign Palestinian state		0.5	1.0	0.7	0.9	0.4
It could lead to a Palestinian State		0.5	0.9	1	0.9	0.1
Because it is a strong state that we are unable to combat		0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5
Because of common interests and strengthening relationships		0.4	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.6
Because of its progress and development		0.2	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1
Religious reasons		0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1
Other		0.1	0.0	--	0	0.2
No reasons given		0.2	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.1
Approve of the recognition of Israel		6.2	7.9	9.5	8.9	6.0
Total of those opposed to recognizing Israel		88.0	86.8	85.9	85.4	87.0
Do not know/declined to answer (as a percentage of respondents)		5.6	5	5	6	7
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

of direct relevance to them. They reject the idea of granting Israel recognition because of the nature of the state and its past and present activities. It seems very unlikely that their attitudes on these countries will change so long as there are no genuine changes to their policy in Palestine – genuine, not rhetorical.