

## Global Epistemologies: Concepts, Methodologies, and Data Systems

# Public Policy Studies and Research in the Arab World

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## Global Perspectives

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Public policy studies in the Middle East and North Africa region are usually conducted either inside academic setups or within specialized and/or interdisciplinary research centers and think tanks. The field is considered relatively new, and up to this day the term may not be totally clear to the layperson. The context in which policymaking occurs in many parts of the region is not only complicated, taking into consideration the many near-failed states, but also characterized mostly by ambiguity and lack of transparency. The aim of this article is to look at some indicative trends and explore the what, where, and how of policy studies in the region, highlighting key challenges faced and achievements realized.

### SUMMARY

Public policy studies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are usually conducted either inside academic setups or within specialized and/or interdisciplinary research centers and think tanks. Up to this day, the term may not be totally clear to the layperson. The context in which policymaking occurs in many parts of the Arab world is not only complicated, taking into consideration the many near-failed states, but also characterized mostly by ambiguity and lack of transparency. Study findings point out how the field of public policy studies and research is relatively new in the Arab world. It has been discussed as part of various disciplines in earlier decades, and despite facing a number of challenges, it is a very promising field.

The purpose of this article is to explore the what, where, and how of policy studies in the region; to try to better understand the challenges faced and achievements realized; and to suggest some recommendations for the way forward. Among the challenges faced are the political context and the low performance of most Arab countries on democracy and freedom of expression. Other challenges relate to higher education institutions, where most academic programs and many research centers and think tanks are located, and how those HEIs lack academic freedom and the ability to produce students with high levels of critical, logical, and analytical skills. Limited data access, availability, and reliability result in conditions that are not conducive to quality public policy analysis, monitoring, and evaluation. This challenging environment hampers the vitality of

public policy analysis as a field of work, which consequently limits students' prospects of finding job opportunities and ultimately reduces students' interest in public policy as a field of study.

Despite the many challenges and weaknesses entrenched in the field of public policy in the Arab world, there are a number of bright points. There is a plethora of research centers and think tanks all over the Arab countries. There are a few, but well-established, specialized academic programs and degrees. There are also lots of academic courses being offered in public policy programs, and in other disciplines that integrate policy as a subtopic. Some think tanks and research centers get exposure and are influential, and there are a number of successful, rigorous public policy monitoring and evaluation (M&E) initiatives being implemented, such as at the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development in Egypt and at the University of Mohamed V in Morocco. Academia, research centers, and think tanks focusing on public policy analysis in the Arab world would benefit from a greater degree of freedom to enable them to teach, produce, and disseminate quality public policy research and invigorate public policy debates. Additionally, there is a need for more public policy research funding to promote Arab scholars' contribution to theory and knowledge production, their reflections on local priorities and perspectives, and their engagement with global public policy discourse. One way of achieving that latter objective is through targeted publishing in international peer-reviewed journals.

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## GLOBAL EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES

One of the most commonly used definitions of public policy is that by Thomas Dye (1972, 2), where public policy is defined as “anything a government chooses to do or not to do.” The focus on public policy as a response to problems is evident in a definition by Rinfret, Scheberle, and Pautz (2019, 20), where public policy is defined as “a course of action adopted or created by government in response to public problems.” Although these seem like all-inclusive definitions, the literature is riddled with many other definitions that try to cover different aspects of what public policy is all about. Birkland (2011) points out the near impossibility of agreeing on one definition of what constitutes public policy.

The focus on government and the many facets of public policy are exhibited in a definition by Wilson (2006, 154), where he talks about “the actions, objectives, and pronouncements of governments on particular matters, the steps they take (or fail to take) to implement them, and the explanations they give for what happens (or does not happen)” (as cited in Smith and Larimer 2017).

Some definitions of public policy highlight it as a “process.” The process of policy analysis has been succinctly described by William Dunn (2004, 2), one of the prominent scholars in the field, as “a multidisciplinary inquiry designed to create, critically assess, and communicate information that is useful in understanding and improving policies.” Different approaches, perspectives, and methodologies are used in the study of public policy. Reflecting on the diversity of approaches within the field of public policy, Guy Peters (2016, 5) has compared it to a “big tent” under which a range of approaches are housed.

Another yet more realistic definition pinpointing the complexity of public policy is that which perceives it as “a confusing game of players, dynamics, processes, and stages” (Theodoulou and Kofinis 2004, as cited in Rinfret, Scheberle, and Pautz 2019, 3). Some have considered the study and learning of public policy “chaotic” (Fan 2013) and “ubiquitous” (Simon 2018) due to the lack of agreement on what defines the scope, content, or boundaries of the discipline.

Public policy studies build on the disciplines of political science, economics, and public administration, at the very least (Fan 2013). Studies developed by economists, financial experts, political scientists, and sociologists have often investigated policy dimensions and ended with policy recommendations and suggestions for how the government should do things better.

Many scholars have tried to simplify the complexity of public policy as described above. Hence, they have developed many public policy models and theories to achieve

that goal (Sabatier 2007). Theoretical frameworks range from the simplest to the most complicated. The range of the well-known public policy models and theories includes the stages model, multiple streams, punctuated equilibrium, advocacy coalition, policy diffusion, rational choice, bounded rationality, incrementalism, the network approach, the constructivist approach, the narrative policy framework, and many others (Simon 2018; Birkland 2011; Sabatier 2007).

Since the 1970s, especially in the United States, public policy courses have become an integral part of public administration programs of study, and in 1972, for the first time ever, the American Political Science Association (APSA) started issuing the *Policy Studies Journal* (Farah 2013). Shortly after, the Association of Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) was established in 1979 (APPAM 2022). During the 1970s, a number of universities in both the United States and Europe established graduate programs in public policy, many of which were supported by the Ford Foundation (Dunn 2004). In the 1980s and 1990s, the master of public policy (MPP) tended to emphasize quantitative and economics-grounded methods, the master of public administration (MPA) less so (Morcol et al. 2020). Many of the scholars who developed methods in public policy sciences had a background in engineering, mathematics, systems analysis, and operations research (Dunn 2004). Gradually, qualitative methods were integrated into policy analysis to take account of the politics of policymaking (Farah 2013).

Globally, the majority of scholars attribute the exact timing of the recognition of public policy studies as an independent discipline to the works of Harold Laswell in the mid-twentieth century (Smith and Larimer 2017; Fan 2013). Laswell identified several distinguishing features of the discipline: its *problem orientation*, where the focus is on major problems faced by government, and its *multidisciplinary* approach, cutting across different fields of science. Dunn (2004, 34) used the term “porous boundaries” to describe how public administration, political science, and policy analysis are all concerned with the study of politics and policy. A third defining feature of public policy studies is its quantitative methods and conceptual modeling.

Finally, Laswell asserts the *value orientation* of public policy studies. His early writings describing the new “policy sciences” elaborated on how the purpose of public policy analysis of processes and actors was not just to help governments come up with efficient decisions but also, more importantly, to help them improve democratic practices (Dunn 2004; Smith and Larimer 2017). This last point is very important to keep in mind when we reflect on the situation in many countries of the Arab world.

## THE ARAB REGION CONTEXT

Public policy as a stand-alone discipline is a new field in the Arab world.<sup>1</sup> When we say “a new field,” we mean a stand-alone discipline that is taught in higher education institutions as an independent subject and sometimes offered as an academic degree. A study by El-Taliawi, Nai, and Van der Wal (2021) mentions that policy schools<sup>2</sup> in the Middle East were established, or restructured, in 1999 onward, but public policy courses and degrees were in existence earlier. Relatively few studies and papers emanating from, and about, the Arab region reflect upon public policy as a discipline. There is an abundance of studies investigating specific policy issues but much less focus on analyzing the field itself.

One clear exception is an edited volume published by the Public Administration Research and Consultation Center at Cairo University (Gomaa 2004) with the title *Public Policy Analysis in the Arab Nation*. It includes a number of contributions by Arab scholars from Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon.

According to Gomaa's 2004 study, in Egypt, public policy studies were carried out by various entities in the 1960s and 1970s, but without referring to the field as “public policy” per se. As early as the 1960s, the National Planning Institute and the National Center for Sociological and Criminological Studies issued papers and documents about aspects of economic and social policy (Helal 2004). In 1987, a workshop was held at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science (FEPS) of Cairo University to discuss public policy analysis, and a number of researchers wrote dissertations on specific policies such as housing, economic, and cultural policies. By the mid-1990s, the subject of public policy analysis and evaluation started to be taught for the first time at FEPS at both the undergraduate and graduate levels<sup>3</sup> (Helal 2004). Ismail (2004) reviewed theses written at FEPS between 1990 and 2002. He sorted through the studies searching for the type of policy studied—financial, economic, environmental, investment, population, human rights, cultural, industrial—and checked whether the research focused on policy inputs, process, content, implementation, or evaluation. He also looked for unit of analysis, methodology, and data collection tools used. He concluded that most theses were concerned with the state; that there was more emphasis on traditional public policies (e.g., health and education) than on newer policies (e.g., environmental); and that few scholars used methodologies

like impact assessment, and few focused on policy implementation.

A paper by Harb (2004) discussed the main entities responsible for conducting public policy studies in Lebanon and underscored the role of policy analysts as consultants and the role of donor agencies. Harb explained how Lebanese ministries overburdened with bureaucratic regulations resort to young political appointees, who had graduated from international universities, to write up policy papers; these policy papers vary in quality. In universities, the policy papers are produced mostly by scholars as consultancies paid for by donor agencies. Harb also pointed out how the research centers and think tanks, like the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) and the Center for Study and Research of the Contemporary Middle East (CERMOC), also work with funding from international partners and produce important policy reports that document the situation in Lebanon (Harb 2004).

El Rabbabah (2004) discussed public policy analysis in Jordan and identified three challenges: (i) lack of reliance on quantitative analysis in public policy research, (ii) lack of sufficient resources directed to policy research, and (iii) weak policy research competencies. She recommended more capacity-building efforts in universities and research centers.

In 2008, Bremer and El Baradei examined the four main master's programs in public administration / public policy in Egypt and explored whether they are comparable with international programs in the same field. The article discussed public policy studies as a subfield within public administration. Bremer and El Baradei pointed out the lack of sufficient quantitative techniques employed in teaching, the limited practical component, and the fact that most students were studying on a part-time basis, rather than full-time. They concluded that there is a gap between employers' needs and competencies attained by the graduates of the four programs, and that none at the time had met the international standards of NASPAA.<sup>4</sup>

In 2013, the situation changed. Both the MPA and MPP programs at the American University in Cairo were accredited by NASPAA, and then later by the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPPA) and the International Commission on the Accreditation of Public Administration and Training Programs (ICAPA), to become the first triple-crowned in the region. In 2022, the

1 The Arab world is defined in multiple ways. The more common designation in development studies is “MENA region.” According to the World Bank definition, the MENA region covers twenty-one countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen (World Bank 2022a). UNICEF, on the other hand, defines the MENA region as including Sudan (UNICEF 2022). The 2021 MENA-OECD Initiative on Governance drops Israel, Malta, and Iran, and adds Mauritania (OECD 2022). We focus in this article on the twenty-two countries that are part of the Arab League: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

2 The authors were looking for schools with the terms “public policy,” “government,” and/or “governance” in their titles (372).

3 The courses on public policy and evaluation were first taught at FEPS, Cairo University, by Professor Salwa Gomaa in the mid-1990s.

4 NASPAA is the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration, based in the United States. In 2008, it was still referred to as the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration and was doing accreditation only for US-based programs.

MPP and MPA programs at Doha Institute for Graduate Studies were also accredited by NASPAA.

In 2018, the Arab Council for Social Sciences (ACSS) conducted a preliminary investigation of universities in the Middle East that offer public policy degrees. It identified fifteen programs offered in ten countries. However, the data shared is based on an unpublished dataset that is only indicative (ACSS 2018).

## CURRENT PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES IN THE ARAB REGION

Given the scanty information on public policy as a stand-alone field of study, we attempted to update information through a regional survey that was conducted between August and November 2022. The results are still indicative, and there is a need for more expansive surveys in the future. More information about the survey sample is found in the appendix.

GROUP I: EGYPT AND THE LEVANT (LEBANON, SYRIA, PALESTINE, IRAQ, AND JORDAN)<sup>5</sup>

### WHO OFFERS PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES AND RESEARCH

In Egypt, a wide array of research centers and think tanks were mentioned by respondents to the survey: those affiliated with the government, those affiliated with universities, private, and not-for-profit. Respondents noted the diversity in public policy academic programs and course providers and in the training offered by various types of institutions. There were references made to universities where there were clearly identified public administration and public policy programs, such as the American University in Cairo and Cairo University, and other universities where public policy was taught as a subtopic within a single course or as a minor. Additionally, respondents mentioned both old and new public policy training entities, whether taking on public policy as their main mandate or just offering occasional public policy workshops.

In Jordan, public policy courses are offered at universities such as the Jordanian University, Al-Yarmouk University, Al-ElBeit University, Mouta University, and the Institute of Public Administration. There are master's and PhD dissertations written about public policies. Training takes place in government organizations; training and research centers; ministries; international NGOs; and local, regional, and international civil society organizations. Additionally, a number of training institutions offer courses

about public policymaking and analysis. As for research centers, respondents mentioned a variety of governmental, private, and university centers.<sup>6</sup>

In Lebanon, examples of universities where public policy is taught include Saint Joseph University in Beirut and its Higher Institute for Public Health doctoral program. There is also the American University of Beirut (AUB) and its Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. Respondents mentioned many government agencies and international agencies that have been offering public policy training to Lebanese public civil servants since the 1990s, such as the Basil Fuleihan Financial Institute.

In Iraq, examples of universities where public policy is taught include the Department of Public Policy, the School of Political Science, Al-Nahreïn Official University, Baghdad. Public policy is also taught as a subtopic within various other disciplines, such as political psychology and political sociology. Course titles include Developmental Public Policies in Light of the UN Agenda and the Public Policy Cycle. Public policy training takes place at a number of Iraqi universities, research centers, think tanks, and NGOs, examples being AlNahrain Center, Dar El Khebra (DKO-Iraq), and El Bayan Center.

### WHAT TOPICS ARE RESEARCHED AND STUDIED

This section explores examples of public policy research produced and mentioned by the survey respondents.<sup>7</sup>

In Egypt, respondents mentioned a long list of categories of public policies studied. Some were traditional issues, such as health, education, trade, and women's empowerment; some were relatively new policy issues, such as digitalization, sustainable development goals (SDGs), and the green economy. While most policy issues were locally focused, policies of regional security and climate change tended to have a global bent. Many respondents in Egypt were generally favorable and positive about the policy research relevance and impact, especially in areas related to social protection programs, gender empowerment, and food waste management, where research had an impact on program review/implementation or informed legislation. In Jordan, respondents mentioned policy analysis in traditional topics such as health, education, and economics. In Lebanon, the policy research identified by respondents focused on developing performance indicators at the municipal level, plus economic recovery options for the country.

5 Some of the earliest complex nations started in this region, dating back to nearly 8000 BC, including ancient Egypt, Sumer, Babylonia, and Phoenicia (Encyclopedia Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia 2020). This is relevant to the study of public policy studies and studying how governments with such a rich history make decisions.

6 The Institute of Public Administration, the Center for Strategic Studies, Jordan Center for Public Policy Research and Dialogue, the Higher Council for Science and Technology, the Royal Scientific Society, the Jordan Center for Social Research Association, and the American Center of Research in Jordan (ACOR).

7 The categorization was developed by the authors, knowing that there might be some expected overlap and that any one policy can fit under a number of categories.

### HOW PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES AND RESEARCH ARE CONDUCTED

This section looks into what methodologies are commonly used in studying public policies and then zeroes in on monitoring and evaluation. In Egypt, respondents primarily mentioned “mixed methods.” Several respondents explained that the choice of mixed quantitative and qualitative methodologies is usually an attempt to overcome shortages in data. In Jordan, responses seem to indicate that researchers are keen on using quantitative methods, although the tools may not be sufficiently advanced. In Iraq, the preference is for mixed methods, and the content taught and researched uses existing theories and tries to link to the local context through case studies.

### MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES

Policy monitoring and evaluation is a core component of public policy research and studies. Respondents in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq pointed out the weakness of this area, where only NGOs and public media engage in policy monitoring and evaluation, and said that these are largely driven by international funding. In Egypt, however, respondents also listed a number of governmental organizations, donor agencies, think tanks, and academic institutions engaging in M&E of public policies. They referred to various governmental entities establishing M&E units, such as the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, which works with the Jameel Poverty Action Lab at the American University in Cairo to assess policy using randomized control trials. M&E, however, still faces challenges in this group of countries. Respondents in Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan mentioned lack of effectiveness of the governmental M&E units, lack of access to data, government censorship of evaluation reports, and the lack of seriousness by parliaments and the media in holding governments accountable. In the case of Iraq, political instability was added to the challenges that reduce the impact of M&E. A respondent in Iraq (#49) who self-identified as a public policy professional said: “The political situation in the country is unsteady ... Public policy requires a stable context.”

### GROUP II: THE GREATER MAGHREB COUNTRIES (MOROCCO, MAURITANIA, ALGERIA, TUNISIA, AND LIBYA)<sup>8</sup>

#### WHO OFFERS PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES AND RESEARCH

Outside of academia, several types of organizations are involved in public policy

studies and research. In Morocco, the list of organizations producing policy research includes the 9th Commission in Parliament, academic research centers in universi-

ties, the Prime Minister’s Office, the Ministry of Finance Research Center, the Ministry of Governance, the Economic Social and Environmental Council, the Supreme Planning Authority, UNDP, and the UN Human Rights Office in Morocco. In Tunisia, public policy is researched within the Tunisian Association of Administrative Law; the Constitutional, Administrative and Financial Lab (Laboratoire des Sciences Constitutionnelles Administratives et Financières-Lascaf); and the Tunisian Association for Insurance Law (Association Tunisienne du Droit des Assurances-ATDA).

As for academic institutes, in Morocco, public policy is taught as part of courses for a master’s in public finance and public administration within law faculties, or within the National School of Administration. At the University of Mohamed V, a course on public policy assessment is taught within the master’s of public finances and taxation in the Department of Public Law. Another course on Economics and Evaluation of Public Policies is taught in the Economics Department. In Algeria, the topic of public policy is dealt with as a subtopic within the program of public administration in all political science departments.

Courses on Public Policy Evaluation and Comparative Public Policies are taught at the School of Law and Political Sciences at the University of Djelfa. Additionally, at the National School of Administration in Algeria, courses focusing on public policy, such as Public Policy Strategy, Public Policy Making, and Public Policy Evaluation, are offered, plus courses that include public policy as a subtopic, such as Public Management and Public Procurement. In Tunisia, public policy is taught as part of the master’s program in political science at the Faculty of Legal, Political, and Social Sciences and is taught also at the National School of Administration.

### WHAT TOPICS ARE STUDIED AND RESEARCHED

In Morocco, respondents mentioned public policy assessment, harmonization and convergence of public policies, urban territorial development, potable water policy, national social and health insurance for workers in the informal sector, and financial equity. In Tunisia, respondents mentioned environmental law, digital technology law, and public sector economies. In Algeria, the public policy issues being researched are finance transparency in public organizations. The Djelfa Center Info for Studies and Research tries to assess the level of citizens’ satisfaction and publishes the results in its e-journal. Some of the public policies getting attention are related to health, economic development, housing, trade, education, and foreign policies.

<sup>8</sup> The traditional configuration of the Arab Maghreb countries was limited to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. When Mauritania was added, the region became referred to as the Greater Maghreb.

### HOW PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES AND RESEARCH ARE CONDUCTED

Mixed methods are mostly used as a preferred methodology in Morocco. “Depending on the case: from qualitative analysis to econometrics,” said one respondent. In Algeria, quantitative methods are mostly used in conducting policy studies without “any social implications,” said an Algerian respondent.

### MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES

In Morocco, respondents tied the field of M&E to the political process. One respondent clarified that M&E of public policies may not be “intensive, but only periodical for the elections of the parliamentary representatives and the presidents of the municipalities.” At that point, there would be a heightened interest in evaluations of public policies to support the election campaigns. Another respondent mentioned that the Moroccan Parliament reserves an annual session to discuss and evaluate public policies, as per article 101 of the 2011 Constitution. In Algeria, monitoring and evaluation of public policies are usually carried out by government organizations such as the National Economic, Social and Environmental Council and the National Auditing Office. In Tunisia, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are used, and according to the respondents, “It is rather governmental entities and think tanks, in particular think tanks, that carry out the monitoring and evaluation of public policies. Universities are almost absent in this area.”

Monitoring and evaluation in the Maghreb countries, according to respondents, are challenged by a series of problems: in Morocco, respondents mentioned limited interdisciplinarity, the focus on output indicators that do not allow for measurement of impact, limited transparency, and difficult access to stakeholder groups. The lack of competencies in M&E was also mentioned because of the limited number of experts in the field, many of whom leave the country. Some mentioned the difficulty of conducting rigorous M&E in the field due to “lack of cooperation by the municipalities.” The latter point was also mentioned by respondents in Algeria. They also pointed to the lack of trust by the government in the national expertise available, and the government’s preference for foreign experts.

### GROUP III: GULF COOPERATION COUNTRIES (BAHRAIN, QATAR, OMAN, SAUDI ARABIA, THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, AND KUWAIT)

The Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) transitioned in the 1970s to oil-rich economies. Today, they have some of the highest per capita incomes in the world and an entrepreneurial, forward-looking policy scene.

### WHO OFFERS PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN THE GCC

Qatari research centers and think tanks involved in public policy studies and research include the Excellence Center

for Training and Consulting at Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, and the Brookings Institute. In the UAE, active research centers and think tanks mentioned by respondents include the Emirates Policy Center, the UAE Policy Institute (funded by the government), the Future for Advanced Research and Studies, the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, and the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. The Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government (MBRSG) in Dubai also engages in public policy research and issues on a periodical basis the *Dubai Policy Review (DPR)*.

As for academic programs in Qatar, a public policy program is offered for undergraduate students within the Department of International Affairs at Qatar University. At Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, there is a Department of Public Policy at the graduate level offering a master’s of public policy, which has recently been accredited by NAS-PAA. The College of Public Policy (CPP) at Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU) offers courses and trainings in public policy. In the UAE, one of the most active academic institutions that teach and train about public policy is the MBRSG, formerly known as the Dubai School of Government, which offers an MPP. There is also Zayed University, which offers an MPA program, and the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), which offers a master’s degree in governance and public policy. Other universities mentioned by respondents include New York University Abu Dhabi, Higher Colleges of Technology, Sorbonne University in Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi University, and Khalifa University.

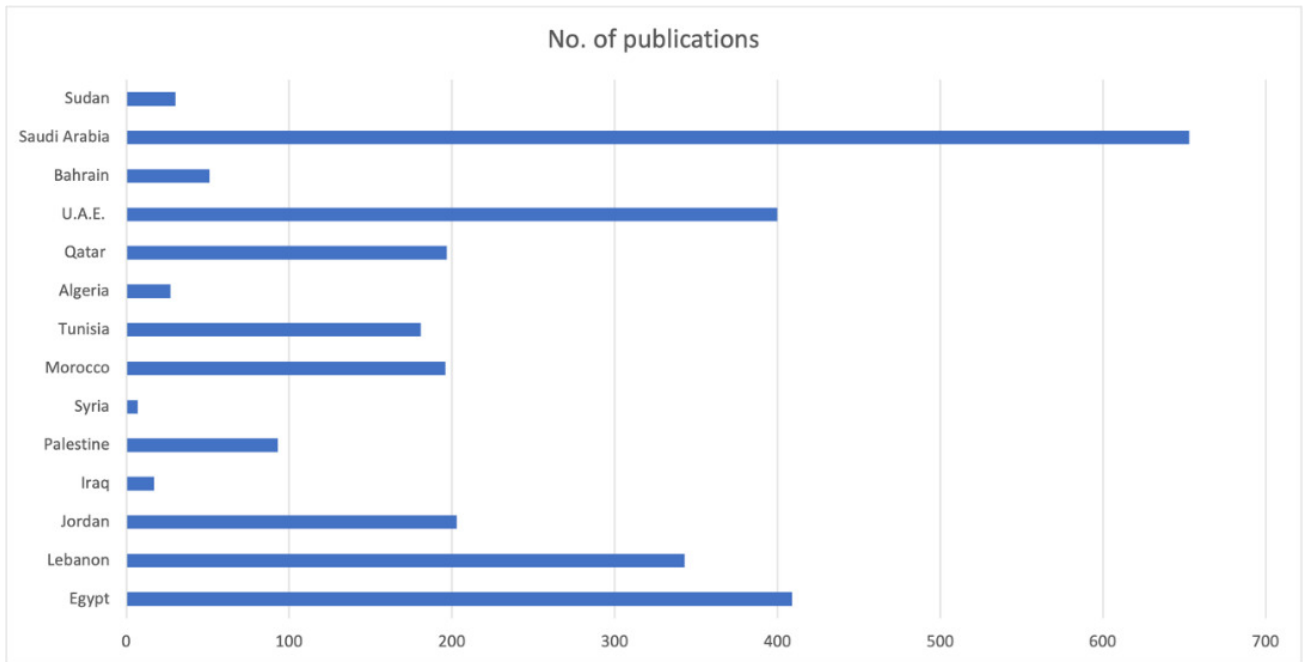
### WHAT PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES ARE STUDIED AND RESEARCHED IN THE GCC

Some examples of public policy issues currently being researched in Qatar and the UAE and mentioned by the respondents include energy transition, sustainability and climate change, geopolitical stability, foreign trade policies, artificial intelligence, smart cities, government agility, governance, digital government, government communication, gender studies, and economic diversification. One respondent observed how the UAE is keen to follow new developments; this is reflected in public policy studies.

### HOW PUBLIC POLICIES ARE STUDIED AND RESEARCHED IN THE GCC

Qatari and Emirati researchers use quantitative and qualitative methods, with some respondents saying the qualitative ones are predominant. Respondents pointed to several challenges including limited access to reliable data, research restrictions, and inconsistent funding streams. Overall, research methods in both countries, according to respondents, advance government priorities and serve policy advocacy to promote the entrepreneurial nature of public policymaking in those countries.





**Figure 1. Web of Science publications in public policy by country**

Years covered from the 1990s until now, with the exception of Egypt (one publication in 1986), Palestine (one publication in 1989), Lebanon (two publications in 1969 and 1988, respectively), and Iraq (one publication in 1987). Public policy publications are broadly defined to include publications in public health as well as publications in public policy journals. For the list of universities in each country that produce research in public policy, please refer to the supplemental material. Source: formulated based on the Web of Science database, 6 November 2022.

is demanded and what is allowed. The “how” is often defined by availability of data and rigor of research, again as demanded and allowed. Public policy studies as a field is enabled—or often disabled—by a number of challenges and opportunities.

General governance, freedom of expression, and university governance are among the most pertinent.

## GENERAL GOVERNANCE

Presented at THE 2022 World Government Summit (WGS) in Dubai, the *Arab Public Administration Report (2022)* recognized huge disparities in wealth, resources, and degree of political stability between Arab countries and gave a critical view of the challenges facing governments and hindering the effective implementation of national strategies and plans. The report pointed to the paternalistic development model pursued in all Arab countries. It pointed out the limited involvement of the private sector and the overstaffing and limited efficiency of the public sector. The report did not neglect to mention the state of armed conflict in many Arab countries that severely diminishes the quality of life for citizens and presents public policymaking and public administration with unique constraints (WGS 2022). The report was published only in Arabic and was not widely disseminated. Its content corroborates what is already known based on World Bank governance indicators:

- Voice and Accountability: Egypt and Sudan are the two lowest performers.

- Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism: Sudan and Lebanon are the two countries suffering the most. Qatar is denoted as the most stable.
- Government Effectiveness and Regulatory Quality: UAE and Qatar are top performers.
- Rule of Law: Qatar, UAE, and Jordan are doing better than the others.
- Control of Corruption: The best performers are UAE and Qatar; the worst performers are Sudan and Lebanon (World Bank 2022b).

This survey did highlight the restrictive political environment as a challenge for public policy studies. This was manifested in limited space for policy debates and a lack of transparency about how policies are made. In some countries, respondents mentioned security concerns that limit the freedom of research. A respondent in Egypt who self-identified as policy expert said: “There are no public debates in Parliament. There are no regular meetings with policymakers and policy researchers. No policy that was adopted by government had passed by the steps of the public policy cycle. The government does not publish or refer to any research while adopting or dismissing policy” (Respondent #31). A respondent in Qatar said: “Autocracy and autocratic systems create an environment that obscures the vision and the courage to speak the truth. There are parameters that should not be crossed.”

A defining feature of governance in the region today is a deep transformation in the political economy of power. In an article published in the *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Lisa Anderson (2022) saw the region move away from a postcolonial focus on sovereignty and a social contract dri-



ven by social justice and citizen loyalty toward no social contract in a region where states are financial entrepreneurial enterprises. She made the transition vivid with phrases such as from transitional justice to transactional justice; from citizen to customer; from voters to consultants; from campaigning to marketing. Corruption has remained as the corollary of that transition. Authors in the field of public administration—for example, Ibrahim Madkur (2021), Merit Ghali, and Ahmed Sakr Ashour (1995, 2010)—have lamented in writing about the disturbing levels of corruption that characterize public authorities.

This GCC consensus, as Anderson (2022) observes, may be widespread in the Arab region. The UNESCO World Social Science Report (2010) alludes to the phenomenon of social science in the service of business, corporate, and technical development in Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon because these entities have the funds. The aforesaid phenomenon has an impact on public policy studies. As respondents to the survey from the GCC said, public policy analysis is informed by corporate frameworks; that could imply the retreat in policy analysis of the frameworks of democratic critique and questioning of use of power.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE ARAB WORLD

Freedom of expression is a logical prerequisite for the public policy studies field to question public policy processes and outcomes. “You cannot work in the field of public policy except in a democratic context,” ascertained Helal back in 2004. If we check indicators for freedom in the Arab world, we find that the overall picture is grim. According to World Population Review, the top ten countries in 2021 with the lowest human freedom indexes included six Arab countries—namely, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Egypt, Iraq, and Libya (World Population Review 2022).

## DATA

Respondents to the survey put access to data and the quality of data high on the list of challenges to public policy studies. A World Bank (2020) report on transparency of data in the MENA region showed that the region surpassed East Asia and the Pacific as well as sub-Saharan Africa in 2005, then fell behind, and by 2018 it was the lowest of all regions in data transparency, availability, and accessibility. Availability of data is not a luxury; its absence reduces rigorous diagnostics of policy issues and efficient/effective policy implementation (El-Mikawy et al. 2022).

## HIGHER EDUCATION

The region has nearly eight hundred universities and more than nine million students (Badran, Baydoun, and Hillman 2019). Private universities are increasing across the region, especially in Egypt, the GCC, Jordan, and Lebanon. Therefore, we cannot generalize, as there are huge discrepancies in quality between countries and within the same country. And yet universities in the region are largely overcrowded and underfunded, and research is largely under state control, especially in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and the Maghreb. One of the main challenges facing higher education institutions in the Arab world is the diminished level of autonomy and the excessive interference of governments in university management (Waterbury 2019). Academic freedom is, thus, suffering in many countries of the Arab world (Forster 2017; El Baradei 2022). In the absence of academic freedom in higher education institutions, students and researchers find it difficult to produce critical research.

Furthermore, in 2016, the quality of higher education in the MENA region was described by one of the World Bank’s senior researchers as being among the lowest in the world (Devarajan 2016). The top one hundred universities in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings of 2022 do not include any Arab university (THE 2022). The top one hundred universities in the QS ranking also do not include any Arab university (QS Ranking 2022). The same applies to the Shanghai Ranking of World Universities of 2022. Within the five hundred top universities ranked by Shanghai, only four Saudi universities and the Cairo University in Egypt<sup>9</sup> are mentioned.

A large proportion of public policy studies and research takes place within academic institutions of higher education. This does not bode well for public policy studies. Yet one silver lining exists. Two-thirds to three-fourths of Arab university students are in the social sciences, according to the UNESCO World Social Science Report (2010). While Arab university students, with few exceptions, generally lack critical and analytical thinking skills (Badran, Baydoun, and Hillman 2019), the increasing interest in the region in pursuing accreditation and achieving high marks in international rankings and assessments may improve the quality of higher education research, and it is hoped that that will reflect on teaching and training, including in public policy studies (Badran, Baydoun, and Hillman 2019). The challenge is to balance the “hyper-empirical and topical” social science (UNESCO 2010) with reflective and critical public policy research and studies.

## DEMAND AND SUPPLY

There is an issue of supply of public policy programs and entities in the region. As mentioned above, public policy teaching, research, and training is relatively recent, and the

<sup>9</sup> King Abdulaziz University and King Saud University rank in 101–150, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in 201–300, Cairo University in 301–400, and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in 401–500 (Shanghai Ranking 2022).

**Table 1. SWOT Analysis: Public Policy Studies and Research in the Arab World**

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public policy research has existed since the 1960s as part of other disciplines;</li> <li>Plethora of research centers and think tanks;</li> <li>Few specialized and well-established academic programs in public policy;</li> <li>Lots of academic courses in public policy and in other disciplines that integrate public policy as a subtopic;</li> <li>Some public policy research of think tanks gets exposure and is influential;</li> <li>Pilot successful M&amp;E efforts, e.g. at Egyptian Ministry of Planning, J-PAL.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public policy publications on Web of Science very limited;</li> <li>Relatively nascent field of study;</li> <li>State-bound concerns/local focus and few global issues;</li> <li>Limited public policy expertise;</li> <li>Weak quantitative analytical skills;</li> <li>No homegrown public policy theories and models; mostly US and Eurocentric;</li> <li>Sometimes a disconnect between think tanks and government.</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhanced role for public policy regional networks;</li> <li>More study and research of global issues, besides local issues;</li> <li>More publications in international journals;</li> <li>More partnerships and research networks to be established between Arab and international academic public policy programs, research centers, and think tanks to produce comparative public policy research and case studies focused on the Arab world.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grim situation regarding freedom of expression, a prerequisite for public policy;</li> <li>Restrictive political environment;</li> <li>Quality of higher education needs improvement; deficiencies in critical and analytical skills;</li> <li>Data availability and access issues;</li> <li>Public policy studies and research not perceived as a priority;</li> <li>M&amp;E challenges: strong influence of international donors, government censorship, limited role of media, parliaments not playing an effective role in holding governments accountable;</li> <li>Security instability in some Arab countries;</li> <li>Interest by students mostly conditional on their ability to find jobs.</li> </ul>

number of entities that have focused programs is still on the rise. Respondents pointed to the limited number of affordable programs and the limited number of opportunities to train with policymaking entities. There is also an issue of demand for the field. The survey respondents talk about a shortage in the number of qualified researchers and in the number of students who are interested in public policy studies.

This is an issue of employability. Many respondents in our survey said students and researchers pursue a career in public policy studies to get a promotion in their place of work or to seek a better job in international development agencies and international civil society. Some hope to get recruited by ministries. In the case of Morocco, employment opportunities also included local municipalities. But all in all, students perceive limited employability across the region. The context seems different in the GCC. Respondents to our survey in Qatar and the UAE consistently indicated that public policy studies are popular, especially among local nationals who work in government or with businesses.

## FUNDING PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES

Funding of research continues to be tight, with some role to play for corporate business, international development agencies, and private foundations (UNESCO 2010). Funding public policy studies is a complex matter. On the one hand, a number of respondents mentioned how the lack of adequate funding is an obstacle facing public policy research and evaluation. On the other hand, a number of respon-

dents complained about how funding skews public policy analysis. Funders either focus on specific projects/programs or have changing streams of funding based on their changing strategies. Some respondents said funding of public policy studies often serves the funding agencies' own strategic thinking; funders cannot ensure that public policies in the respective countries of the region will benefit from research findings. Be that as it may, it is a fact that most countries of the Arab world are reliant on international financial institutions (World Bank and IMF) and on UN agencies. Thus, their role in funding and influencing research agendas in public policy studies is not to be underestimated.

## THE WAY FORWARD

The field is complex. A number of strengths and weaknesses need to be carefully considered. Challenges need to be addressed and opportunities augmented.

Moving forward, there are a lot of opportunities that can be capitalized upon in order to strengthen public policy as a discipline and as a field of research. More partnerships and research networks need to be established between Arab and international public policy programs. These partnerships could be the first step toward further development of research competencies, enabling more international publications, more exposure, and more impact. Research centers and think tanks need to be encouraged to produce comparative research, venture into diverse policy issues, and create local case analyses. Some respondents to our survey underlined the importance of forming consortia of think

tanks, policymakers, government entities, NGOs, and entities in the private sector and academia. Such consortia, if long-term, would be able to develop research and outreach strategies and publications that would enhance their participation in local, regional, and global events.

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