



## Perspectives: Positive Psychology Tackles “Wicked Problems”

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**Abstract:** Psychology and positive psychology in particular, are being called upon to tackle some of the world’s biggest issues. These wicked problems, three of which are captured here including climate change, war and widespread mental health issues, are systemic, intertwined with other equally complex issues, and bring forth conflicting emotional, cognitive and behavioral responses that compound their very nature. Researchers in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region are being asked to go beyond the usual prevalence and comparison studies; it is time to raise our standards and meet existing challenges. By applying science in real time and to real life issues, we can demonstrate the relevance of psychology, but also have a concrete, long-lasting impact on MENA societies that can begin to ensure greater stability, sustainability and the wellbeing of all.

**المخلص:** علم النفس وعلم النفس الإيجابي على وجه الخصوص ، مدعوان لمعالجة بعض أكبر القضايا في العالم. هذه المشاكل الخطيرة ، التي تم تناول اثنتين منها هما تغير المناخ وقضايا الصحة العقلية المنتشرة . هي مشاكل منهجية ومتشابكة مع قضايا أخرى معقدة بنفس القدر ، وينتج عنها استجابات عاطفية ومعرفية وسلوكية متضاربة تضاعف طبيعتها. يُطلب من الباحثين في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا (MENA) تجاوز دراسات الانتشار والمقارنة المعتادة ؛ حان الوقت لرفع معاييرنا ومواجهة التحديات القائمة. من خلال تطبيق العلم في الوقت الفعلي على قضايا الحياة الواقعية ، يمكننا إثبات أهمية علم النفس ، ولكن يكون لنا أيضًا تأثير ملموس وطويل الأمد على مجتمعات الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا والتي يمكن أن تبدأ في ضمان قدر أكبر من الاستقرار والاستدامة والرفاهية للجميع.

**Keywords:** climate change; mental health; wellbeing; Arab; research; positive psychology

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Positive psychology’s early beginnings focused exclusively on positive constructs to differentiate itself from the pathology-focused perspective that pervaded mainstream psychology. This narrow focus on the positive helped to explore ideas, build its foundations, and eventually develop theories, constructs, and measures (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Lomas et al., 2020). Its second iteration (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Wong, 2011) (re)integrated the negative emotional side of human



experience, included more non-Western views, and sought to improve wellbeing through the development and empirical validation of positive psychology interventions (PPIs; Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013). More recently, a third wave (PP 3.0) takes broader contextual, sociocultural and political factors, including groups and systems, as its target of positive psychology inquiry and intervention (Kern et al., 2020; Lomas et al., 2020; Mead et al., 2019; Warren & Bordoloi, 2020).

Accordingly, the third wave of positive psychology positions the field to address “wicked problems,” social or cultural problems that are difficult to solve because of their complex and interconnected nature (Pohl et al., 2017). This third wave also addresses several criticisms, such as positive psychology’s seemingly WEIRD nature (Hendriks et al., 2019) – that it is a Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic endeavor, which may not align with individuals and/or groups that do not ascribe to these characteristics, or apply to those in crisis and affected by war and distress (Koch, 2019). Its applicability to the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region has been questioned as the region is markedly unequal in terms of socioeconomic status (Alvaredo et al., 2019), ranges from stable to politically and socially volatile, and democratic in practise to highly autocratic. Yet, by conducting more diverse research across the world, analyzing its applicability and cultural/religious congruency, as well as expanding the role of practitioners in schools, organizations and other social contexts, the field of positive psychology is maturing towards resolving “wicked problems” like climate change, the impact of war, as well as mental health and wellbeing.

### **Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Research in the MENA region is growing with publications on mental health rising by 160% in the last decade; still, such figures only represent 1.2% of the world’s output, despite representing 6% of the world’s population (Zeinoun et al., 2020). It is also unequally distributed. Zeinoun et al. (2020) showed the top publishing countries included Egypt (total output in numbers), Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon (highest output by capita), while Sweileh’s (2021a) review of mental health publications in university students showed the highest concentrations in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. Further, much of the literature is focused on the negative, including the term “mental health”, which focuses on depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, autism, child development disorders, and PTSD. In fact, Zeinoun et al.’s (2020) bibliometric analysis used controlled search terms that defined mental “health” as mental “illness.” Identifying an over-concentration of publications on university student stress (43%), anxiety (31%), and depression (20%), Sweileh (2021a) found little on suicide, eating disorders, substance use, and happiness. Notably, as many nations are currently experiencing civil strife, there are few studies examining the impact of armed conflict on the wellbeing of students.

While the world and region will continue to struggle with COVID-19 and pandemics still to come, recent research paints a compelling picture. Studies on mental health issues during the pandemic across the region (e.g., Al Dhaheri et al., 2021; Cheikh Ismail et al., 2021; Kharaba et al., 2021; Saddik et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020) revealed the need for access to culturally congruent mental health services and made evident the usual risk factors contributing to poor mental health outcomes, i.e., young adults, females. In addition to building a foundation for mental health literacy lacking in the region (Sweileh, 2021b), and in light of rising mental health issues (Zeinoun et al., 2020) exacerbated by COVID, as well as long-standing social and political conflict, and poor governance, researchers must rise to the challenge. To make meaningful progress, we must ask more



complex questions and focus on contributors of a social, cultural, religious, gender and political nature that contribute to poor and robust states of wellbeing.

### **When Trouble Strikes: Civil Strife and War**

Questions have arisen as to the relevance of positive psychology in unstable contexts, such as those embroiled in political and social strife as well as conditions of poor governance where basic needs are often not assured. With inequality on the rise (Warren & Bordoloi, 2020), in 2020, the world became sadder, angrier, more worried and stressed than at any point in the last 15 years (notably, only physical pain declined; see Table 1). This was especially the case in the broader region, where five nations occupied the lowest 10 spots on the positive emotion index (Iran, Jordan, Tunisia, Lebanon, and neighboring Turkey), and the top 10 for negative emotional experiences (Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran). Notably, Iraq scored highest in the world for pain, anger, and sadness. Despite offering seemingly effective defenses against vulnerability (Proctor, 2021), negative emotional states threaten psychological and health outcomes, but more importantly, undermine social stability and heighten the likelihood of prolonged and future conflict (e.g., Musisi & Kinyanda, 2020). Even in the face of hard-won peace, learned helplessness, low self-efficacy, social mistrust, and forms of passive-aggressive resistance towards happiness remain long after. The challenge will be for positive psychology to address negative emotional experiences and create more positive and credible collective narratives moving forward; is it up to the task?

A positive psychology approach is increasingly being used to remediate negative emotional experiences and build states of greater individual and collective wellbeing; it is also showing potential in changing ingrained attitudes and perceptions of the “other” (e.g., Dweck, 2012; Goldenberg et al., 2018). Recently, Shoshani’s (2021) experimental study showed that PPIs delivered over the course of 15 weeks to Israeli children not only increased their wellbeing as intended, but successfully boosted their willingness to negotiate with Palestinians, decreased their perception of Palestinian hostility and increased their expectations for peace. Likewise, Mousa (2020) tested the contact hypothesis in post-ISIS Iraq. Christian soccer leagues had randomly assigned to them Muslim players in a bid for all to decategorize themselves with religious and ethnic group memberships and recategorize themselves with a shared identity instead. After six months, Christian players exhibited greater inclusive behaviors and spontaneous acts of respect towards their Muslim teammates. This behavior did not extend to all spheres of life, but this type of research is much needed: relevant applications to the region’s “wicked problems.”

Going further, Foka et al. (2021) offered a six day “Strengths for the Journey” program for refugees in-transit to settlement in Greece. Children from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria were taught optimism, the recall of positive emotional experiences, a future growth mindset, mindfulness, and how to identify their character strengths. Gains to wellbeing, self-esteem, optimism, and depression were evident three months on. Similarly, Walther et al. (2021) exposed the roots of resilience in Syrian and Afghani adult refugees showing promotive factors to include social support, volunteering, holding a future focus, actively forgetting the past, and developing a growth mindset. The authors noted that while some developed psychological disorders, many individuals do not, and others report post-traumatic growth. Such examples suggest that by examining the positive, i.e., protective and promotive factors, growth and healing are possible and more can be done to uncover and apply



“what works” rather than solely dwelling on what does not. Given ongoing hostilities, the application of such programs should not be dismissed. It counters criticisms that positive psychology is merely a Western endeavor; in fact, these works have been built upon a growing number of reviews on the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions with Islamic and cultural precepts in the region (Basurrah et al., 2021; Hendriks et al., 2018; Rashid & Baddar, 2019).

**Table 1**

A look at the region’s wellbeing

Nation/ Territory	World Happiness Report 2021 Ranking of happiness 2018-2020 Ranking	World Happiness Report 2021 Ranking of happiness 2018-2020 Score	Gallup Global Emotions 2021 Positive Experience Index Ranking (lowest regional scores only)	Gallup Global Emotions 2021 Negative Experience Index Ranking (highest regional scores only)	2021 Global Peace Index Ranking**	2021 Global Peace Index Overall Score**
Algeria	109	4.887*			124	2.337
Bahrain	22	6.647			56	1.87
Egypt	132	4.283		50	69	1.954
Iran	118	4.721	61	46	129	2.399
Iraq	111	4.854		53	161	3.535
Israel	12	7.157		22	152	2.922
Jordan	127	4.395	61		59	1.884
Kuwait	47	6.106*			25	1.637
Lebanon	123	4.584*	46	51	146	2.71
Libya	80	5.410*			93	2.083
Morocco	106	4.918			76	2
Oman	n/a	n/a			37	1.749
Palestinian Territories	125	4.517*				
Qatar	n/a	n/a			8	1.4
Saudi Arabia	26	6.494			117	2.282
Syria	n/a	n/a			101	2.113
Tunisia	122	4.596	58	47	44	1.787
United Arab Emirates	25	6.561			26	1.656
Yemen	141	3.658*			137	2.469

\*Scores unavailable in 2020. Their averages are based on the 2018-2019 surveys (Gallup Global Emotions 2021).

\*\* Scores taken from <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>



Approaches to addressing conflict and those affected in its wake, including internally displaced persons, refugees, violence-affected populations, or at-risk groups most often take a well-intentioned deficit reduction approach; that is, a focus on the minimization of psychological distress, i.e., trauma, depression, PTSD, anxiety, etc. While this focus, including programming, interventions, and initiatives, is effective to a degree, it merely sets the standard for success back to baseline norms. This is problematic as the baseline may have been what led to these problems in the first place. Further, the baseline may not be robust enough a position from which to promote peaceful states of being that can prevent future conflict. A more optimistic approach is that happiness and wellbeing are a fundamental right across the region (Alhariri et al., 2021). As the MENA landscape continues to experience unrest and war, as well as growth and opportunity, all psychological tools, positive or otherwise, will be needed to help the region address traumas, unite with one goal in mind, and flourish, as Arab societies historically have done, and as many parts of the region presently do. Researchers and practitioners are well positioned to contribute to this growth and help individuals and societies as a whole (re)engage with life (Zeinoun et al., 2020).

### **Climate Change: A Role for Positive Psychology**

The UN's sixth annual Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021) report released this summer paints a grim picture. The report comprised a review of more than 14,000 empirical research papers on a variety of climate change issues authored by hundreds of researchers. Overlooking the often-touted projection of reaching the 1.5-degree temperature rise by 2040, projections were revised for 2025 instead. Typically conservative by nature, this year's report was bluntly honest, predicting a very difficult decade ahead should governments, organizations, industries, and individuals alike not get emissions under control. Unfortunately, much of the repercussions of climate change are inextricably woven into the ways our systems function, and thus, unavoidable. This means dealing with more frequent and intense fires, floods, droughts, mudslides, and other extreme weather patterns that will impact livelihoods, health and illness, business activity, trade, food availability, as well as our relationships within and between countries. Mental health issues are also rising as a result of climate change: climate anxiety, aggression, social polarization, and depression await (Wu et al., 2020). This will especially be the case in low-income nations where mental health and social issues are already prevalent and where the ability to tackle climate change is likely the weakest (Sharpe & Davison, 2021).

Regardless, as decisions we have taken in past years are now showing their impact, actions we take going forward, will too. It is not too late to change course, but our practical actions will have a predictably delayed impact. Invariably, what we do in the coming years to psychologically bolster ourselves against the immediate effects of climate change (i.e., eco-anxiety, desperation, as well as distress in the face of natural crises), as well as what we do to mitigate the coming future effects, like reducing air and car travel, consuming less, growing local food, recycling goods, and building more resilient cities and neighborhoods, will matter. As next year's United Nation's Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 27, 2022) will be held in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, and COP 28 (2023) will be held in the UAE, regional climate action will remain on the agenda. Research in positive psychology can play a role in addressing the immediate and future consequences of climate change and our targets must be set accordingly for the next 12 to 24 months.



***The role of regional higher education is not just education.***

The topic of climate change cannot be left to the hard sciences alone. In the absence of an educational policy mandate, regional institutions can show leadership and incorporate the human side of climate action into disciplines like psychology, economics, ethics, political sciences, health, philosophy, communications, engineering, and architecture to ensure that young people are psychologically equipped to deal with its effects and have a clear vision and rationale for their climate action. Such courses cannot be isolated options, but ongoing offerings that discuss social values and the decisions we make on a daily basis about consuming, living, investing, travelling, coupling, and working. They must also include subjective wellbeing and how to live a meaningful life in this context. Sustainable happiness (O'Brien, 2012) must comprise an integral part of the MENA region's education system if we are to harness the potential of young people.

Further, as regional educational institutions do not have a tradition of cooperation and partner more with international institutions than their neighbors (Zeinoun et al., 2020), regional and national unity is needed now more than ever. Structural, organizational, and regulatory barriers must be dissolved for mutual cooperation to yield progress towards shared challenges. Universities must partner with one another *locally* to build capacity on the ground as well as devise city, emirate, national and regional level working groups to set and reach basic and applied research targets. Regular accountability must follow. As researchers, our primary duty is to science as well as to the nations in which we live; our role in investigating, understanding, and proposing interventions for positive regional impacts must be prioritized. As this will be the greatest challenge of our time, it cannot be up to climate scientists alone to solve. Let us take that role to heart and with the determination it demands.

**Want to get involved?** Although there are strong connections among psychologists working in applied fields, there has been less organization and fewer connections among researchers conducting work in the basic fields of psychology. The “psychresearchame” (Psychology Research in the Arab Middle East) listserv was created to help researchers build a stronger community. Targeting postgraduate researchers working in social, personality, or cultural psychology or related fields, the listserv shares announcements with email overviews posted in English and Arabic. This year, announcements have included online conferences, speaker series, scholarships, job listings, and other opportunities targeted toward Arab students and academics. Qualified academics looking to join can sign up [HERE](#).

To help, there is much research showing what encourages individuals to take climate action, with emotions representing a vital route. Schneider et al. (2021) reviewed a host of studies showing that positive emotions act as antecedents to climate change engagement as well as a consequence of doing so. Taking pro-environmental action enhances subjective wellbeing; in fact, the more effort spent in time and money raises it even further as individuals feel they are doing something meaningful and impactful. Alternatively, positively valenced campaigns can increase the willingness to act pro-environmentally, and instilling hope, optimism, gratitude and pride are motivators when



combined with clear pathways for action. Yet, their review and others (i.e., Hornsey & Fielding, 2020) also caution that feeling too positively can paradoxically lower the urgency of taking action, with individuals often confusing the desire and intention to act with actually doing so.

A range of studies (e.g., meta-analyses including 23 nations by Bouman et al., 2020 and van Valkengoed & Steg, 2019) show that like positive emotions, negative emotions (i.e., guilt, fear, worry, etc.) can also be harnessed for climate action. Negative emotions increase levels of acknowledgement of climate change and concern for it, as well as the willingness to take climate action. Support for climate change policies can be positively driven by negative affect (Wang et al., 2018), as individuals seek to control and/or minimize negative affect as well as take personal responsibility, and pointing the way to action can help them do so. Yet, just like positive emotions, too much of anything can be counterproductive. Too much fear and anxiety can paralyze decision-making and overwhelmed individuals may avoid the topic altogether (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009).

Climate action can be induced in many ways, with positive and negative emotions being among them (Brosch, 2021); yet, other routes exist. van Lange (2021) explores the role of values like prosociality and egalitarianism, both activated by highlighting the harm individuals will face as a result of climate change, including those who are already disadvantaged and deserve the most protection given existing vulnerabilities like heat and drought. Social norms (Cialdini & Jacobson, 2021), that is, the attitudes, beliefs, and acceptable behavioral norms shared within groups, can also be positively influenced as is the case with other socially desirable actions, like wearing seatbelts and sun protection. As individuals fear social ostracism, they more readily conform if others do. Alternatively, research is also looking at the undermining role of political elites in supporting climate action, that is, the influence on social norms and in-group message from political figures (Van Boven & Sherman, 2021), suggesting that voices of climate action should perhaps be extended to non-political figures like athletes, popular artists, or even locally, members of regional royal families instead. Research examining habits (Verplanken & Whitmarsh, 2021) as well as identity, including religious Islamic identity is also taking place (Abdelzaher & Abdelzaher, 2017; Bouman et al., 2021; Koehrsen, 2021) to support climate action efforts.

### Conclusion

In sum, there is much for researchers and practitioners to do in the region in the next few short years. We must stop citing slow development or a lack of infrastructure and organization as excuses for inaction; we must instead point the way as we know how, through research, advocacy, and raising “wicked problems” to the forefront. Existing studies of an applied and basic nature show the potential for positive (and mainstream) psychology to not only contribute to the wellbeing of the region, but to its peaceful co-existence as well. Yet, to do so, we too must emerge from our silos, work in a multi- and transdisciplinary manner and reach across geographical boundaries more often and systematically even if our institutions do not. The goals for positive psychology are many (see Editorial, this issue), but overall, they are to become a true science of wellbeing that can mobilize individuals around higher order goals where the integrity of people, cultures, as well as the planet can co-exist.



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