



## The Missing Link to Improving Wellbeing in MENA Populations: The Restoration of Human Dignity

Tiliouine, H.

**Citation:** Tiliouine, H. (2022). The missing link to improving wellbeing in MENA populations: The restoration of human dignity. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8, 6-17.

**Abstract:** This paper explores the current situation of population wellbeing in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Twenty countries are included: five from North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Libya, and Tunisia), six Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates), in addition to Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen. Several domain indicators are used: healthcare, education, economy, freedom and participation in public life, alongside happiness, subjective well-being, and positive emotional experience. Findings show that the MENA region has witnessed advances in life expectancy at birth and education. Successes have been had, but to varying degrees with the Gulf states and Turkey leading in infrastructure and finance. Regaining stability remains a prerequisite to sustainable development in conflict zones such as Palestine, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Iraq. Efforts are needed to combat corruption, strengthen the rule of law and enhance civic participation. Yet, there remains a gap between the achievements made and levels of happiness and positive emotion experienced. This gap and any lasting developments cannot be broached unless human dignity is restored. Strategies to counter helplessness in the face of authoritarianism, managing frustrations and a loss of hope, resolving enduring political deadlocks and stabilizing volatility are imperative for a better life across the region.

تستكشف هذه الدراسة الوضعية الحالية لرفاهية السكان في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا. وتغطي عشرين دولة: خمس دول من شمال إفريقيا (الجزائر، مصر، المغرب، ليبيا، تونس)، ست دول خليجية (البحرين، الكويت، عمان، قطر، المملكة العربية السعودية، والإمارات العربية المتحدة)، بالإضافة إلى الأردن، إيران، العراق، لبنان، فلسطين، السودان، سوريا، تركيا واليمن. كما تستخدم الدراسة العديد من المجالات كمؤشرات، لا سيما: الرعاية الصحية، التعليم، الاقتصاد، الحرية والمشاركة في الحياة العامة، إلى جانب السعادة، الرفاه (أو الارتياح) الذاتي و الانفعالات الإيجابية. لقد أظهرت النتائج أن منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا شهدت تطورا في مؤشر طول العمر (الأمل في الحياة عند الولادة) ونسب التعليم. وقد تحققت النجاحات، ولكن بدرجات متفاوتة، حيث كانت دول الخليج وتركيا رائدة في البنية التحتية والتمويل. وتظل استعادة الاستقرار شرطا أساسيا للتنمية المستدامة في مناطق الصراع مثل فلسطين واليمن وليبيا والسودان وسوريا والعراق. وهناك حاجة إلى بذل جهود إضافية لمكافحة الفساد وتعزيز سيادة القانون وتدعيم المشاركة المدنية. ومع ذلك، لا تزال هناك فجوة بين الإنجازات التي تم تحقيقها ومستويات السعادة والمشاعر الإيجابية المعبر عنها. هذه الفجوة لا يمكن تجاوزها وأية تطورات دائمة لا تتحقق ما لم تتم استعادة كرامة الإنسان. إن تفعيل استراتيجيات تجاوز العجز في مواجهة الاستبداد، وتجاوز الإحباطات وفقدان الأمل، وحلحلة الجمود السياسي المستمر، وزرع الاستقرار في بؤر الصراع هي أمور ضرورية من أجل حياة أفضل في جميع أنحاء المنطقة.

**Keywords:** Wellbeing; Dignity; Social Development; Middle East/North Africa



**About the Author:** Dr. Habib Tiliouine is a member of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oran2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Oran, Algeria. Email: [hiliouine@yahoo.fr](mailto:hiliouine@yahoo.fr), [tiliouine.habib@univ-oran2.dz](mailto:tiliouine.habib@univ-oran2.dz)

**Declaration:** A complete version of this paper was previously published as *Citizens' expectations for individual well-being: Rethinking well-being around the idea of dignity*. IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2022. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/citizens-expectations-for-individual-well-being-rethinking-well-being-around-the-idea-of-dignity/>

**One of the most intriguing regions of the present time** is the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) zone. It is amongst the most prosperous places on earth in terms of both human and natural resources, in addition to being a strategic geographic position with a rich history and diverse culture. It links the three continents of Asia, Europe and Africa through which important trade routes flow (e.g., Suez Canal, Mediterranean basin, Arabian Gulf, Turkish straits, etc). The influence of the MENA region in all major world events since antiquity is uncontested and it is the cradle of the monotheist religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religious teachings continue to exert a major impact on regional cultures and ways of life. MENA nations own approximately 50% to 60% of the world's oil and natural gas reserves, as well as renewable energies combined with considerable financial capacities. While these assets help stabilize the global economy, they also hold great potential in strengthening the ability of all civilizations to attain higher levels of wellbeing (Drine, 2012; Tiliouine & Estes, 2016; Tiliouine & Meziane 2017).

The MENA nations represent about 6.5% of the total world population. The largest according to 2021 estimations are Egypt, Iran and Turkey, with the least populated being the Gulf states of Bahrain and Qatar (Table 1, World Bank, 2022). Population growth rates vary greatly but are all dominated by the preponderance of youth 15 years of age or younger, with the proportion of young people highest in Syria and Palestine. Unrest following the Arab Spring led to the mass exodus of about 15 million people, while ongoing political unrest in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya has resulted in further human losses. Still, estimations of population growth rates remain optimistic as the region registered 1.7% in 2021, compared with those reported for the world (around 0.84% per year and down from 1.05% in 2020) (World Bank, 2022). Such trends impose large social and economic constraints on the ability of MENA nations to hasten their pace of development and reduce escalating levels of social discontent, especially among unemployed university graduates in nations experiencing the most rapid population growth rates (Estes & Tiliouine, 2014; Tiliouine & Meziane, 2017).

Approaching the wellbeing of populations is an intricate task due to its nature as a complex psychosocial and cultural notion. As McGregor (2018) notes, '*in all societies, in order to be well in a holistic sense, there are things that we need to have, there are things that we need to do and there are things we need to feel and be. These are universal categories, but in different societies, there are different things that we need to have, that we need to do and that we need to feel and be if we are to be well*' (pg. 203). Thus, there are many entangled domains, all equally important and which constitute the prerequisites towards high levels of life satisfaction and the beneficial outcomes it



construes at the individual and community levels. Research shows that at the individual scale, it is necessary to have at a minimum, acceptable levels of income, education, mental and physical health, employment opportunities, family life that is well balanced with work hours, social support, and contexts that provide for freedom, high trust in people and institutions, the rule of law, an appropriate infrastructure, as well as a suitable natural environment (e.g., Helliwell et al., 2021; O'Donnell et al., 2014; Tiliouine, 2022). How these fare in the MENA nations diverges greatly causing the distribution of life satisfaction to be unfairly dispersed.

Table 1

*MENA region populations*

Country	Total population (millions) 2021	Population growth (annual %) 2021	Life expectancy at birth, total (years) 2020	Adult literacy rate (15 years+)
Bahrain	1.75	2.7	77	91 (2010)
Iran	85.3	1.2	77	86 (2016)
Iraq	41.18	2.4	71	86 (2017)
Jordan	10.27	0.6	75	98 (2018)
Kuwait	4.33	1.3	76	96 (2020)
Lebanon	6.77	-0.8	79	95 (2018)
Oman	5.22	2.3	78	96 (2018)
Palestine	4.92	2.5	74	98 (2020)
Qatar	2.93	1.7	80	93 (2017)
Saudi Arabia	35.34	1.5	75	98 (2020)
Sudan	44.91	2.4	66	61 (2018)
Syria	18.28	4.3	74	81 (2004)
Turkey	85.04	0.8	78	97 (2019)
UAE	9.99	1.0	78	96 (2019)
Yemen	30.49	2.2	66	54 (2004)
Algeria	44.62	1.7	77	81 (2018)
Egypt	104.26	1.9	72	71 (2017)
Libya	6.96	1.3	73	86 (2004)
Morocco	37.34	1.2	77	74 (2018)
Tunisia	11.94	1.0	77	79 (2014)

To understand this distribution and propose how wellbeing within the context of MENA nations can be better addressed is the aim of this paper. Areas where successes have been met, mainly those in health and schooling, alongside indicators related to freedom, participation in civic



life and life enjoyment are explored. Consequent low levels of life satisfaction and high negative affect experienced despite such developments inexorably prompt the notion of human dignity (Tiliouine, 2022) as the missing link to greater wellbeing at a social and individual level.

### **The Present Analysis**

The wellbeing of individuals in MENA countries can be approached through several life domains, namely: health, education, income, provisions for freedoms and participation in public life, as well as more subjective judgments, feelings and the expressed expectations of the studied populations. Contextual-historical and quantitative analyses are used to discuss the background and development of wellbeing in the region. Quantitative analysis is focused on five domains of wellbeing, with each having several proxies. The first concerns the extent to which the selected populations are leading a long and healthy life (i.e., life expectancy at birth). The second domain refers to the adult literacy rate, while the third includes income, the standard of living estimated through Gross National Income (GNI per Capita, PPP US\$). The fourth includes the level of social chaos and provisions for political and civil liberties. The fifth domain is happiness and subjective well-being representing the subjective component of wellbeing estimated through international surveys. Quantitative data is mostly taken from the World Bank Open Databank (2022a, b).

### **Healthcare Provisions**

Historically speaking, the MENA region has been among the first places in the world to institute a professional healthcare service and practice of medicine. For instance, hospitals were known starting from the ninth century under the Islamic Empire, including psychiatric care hospitals (Tiliouine & Meziane, 2017). Today, an efficient healthcare system is indicative of a successful country and a good indicator of high human development (Estes & Sirgy, 2017). Considering 'life expectancy at birth' as one of the most favourable outcomes and most known for social development and the general assessment of quality of health services, reports indicate that MENA countries have made great progress in reducing mortality and prolonging life. Research found a consistent increase in all MENA countries from 1980 to 2012 except for setbacks in conflict zones like Iraq and Syria (e.g., Estes & Tiliouine, 2014). This corroborates WHO figures asserting that on average, the region gained about six years in life in a span of about 30 years (from 67.53 in 1990, to 70.79 in 2000 and up to 73.42 in 2012; Tiliouine & Meziane, 2017).

Still, like in most places, the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on human longevity in the region. Younis et al. (2021) found that 481,347 cases and 11,851 deaths occurred in the region accounting for 7.37% and 3.06% of the global cases and deaths respectively. Iran had the highest number of cases and deaths accounting for 34.1% and 68.1% of the MENA cases and deaths. Meanwhile, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries together accounted for 52.2% and 10.6% of MENA cases and deaths respectively. Egypt had the highest number of confirmed cases and deaths among the African countries of the region, while Syria, Libya and Yemen had the lowest. The MENA region Case Fatality Rate (CFR) was estimated at 2.46%. The highest CFR (22.75%) occurred in Yemen and the lowest (0.07%) was observed in Qatar (Younis et al., 2021).



Life expectancy at birth remains high in some MENA countries, 80 years in Qatar, 79 in Lebanon and 78 in Oman in 2020 (Table 1). The six Gulf States had an average age of 77.33 years compared to the lowest figures of 66 in Yemen and Sudan respectively. As a collective group though, average years of life expectancy for member states is higher than that reported for the world (72.75 years) (e.g., Estes & Tiliouine, 2014). Still, this should not downplay the substantial disease burden from contagious communicable, neonatal, nutritional, and maternal causes which persist in the low-income countries of the region.

### **Education Opportunities**

Education impacts heavily on all aspects of life, such as a lower fertility rate, healthier and better-educated children, and stronger national identity (International Labour Organization, 2014). In this domain also, the MENA regions have a good tradition of providing educational opportunities. The influence of Islam and the support of its believers has been positive in combating illiteracy and promoting education and the spread of knowledge. Consequently, the region developed the world's first universities very early, with the universities of Qurawyin in Morocco and Al Azhar in Egypt being the oldest functioning and well-attended universities in the world (for a review of Islamic education see Tiliouine, 2014). Yet, for many reasons, the Islamic world gradually regressed on major life aspects and fell under foreign occupation. In recent years, enrolments at primary, secondary and tertiary school levels have improved, although pre-primary enrolments (preparatory education) continue to lag (Tiliouine & Miliani, forthcoming). The region's gross school enrolment ratio (i.e., the number of students enrolled at a certain level of education as a percentage of the population of the age group that corresponds to that level) at the primary level stands above 100 (105 in 2020) (World Bank, 2022).

At 84 and 31, enrolment ratios at the secondary and tertiary levels in MENA are reasonable compared to the world averages of 70 and 30 respectively. Yet, enrolments of 36 at the pre-primary level are far behind the global average of 50 and many of the developed countries (Tiliouine & Meziane, 2017). Adult literacy rates, which reflect the efforts made by individual countries in extending to their populations basic literacy skills in reading and writing, have also increased. For instance, from 1986 to 2011 gains of 9.1 percentage points were observed from 74.5 to 83.6 (Estes & Tiliouine 2014; Tiliouine & Meziane, 2017). Though the data vary in the years they were collected, the highest adult literacy rate is 98% and is registered in Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, followed by Turkey (97%). In contrast, the lowest rates are in Yemen and Sudan.

### **Income and Economic Issues**

Below a certain level, one's economic situation indeed predicts poor wellbeing (Tiliouine & Meziane, 2017) as low socioeconomic status individuals and communities struggle with satisfying basic life necessities such as food and housing. At the same time, a high degree of regional economic heterogeneity prevails. Using per capita gross domestic product (PCGDP), the North African countries (N=6) earned an average of \$16.75 in 2021, which is lower than the world's average of \$18.63 in the same year. PCGDP levels are especially low for the poorest MENA nations, such as Yemen (\$3.52) and Sudan (\$4.00). Per capita incomes at this level are in contrast with those reported



by the richest member states which are about 26 times higher than those of its poorest, i.e., Qatar (\$92.08), Kuwait (\$59.04). The wealth gap across the region continues to widen, especially as population growth rates stabilise (Moshrif, 2020). Estes and Tiliouine (2014) found intra-MENA wealth differences to be prominent among countries experiencing significant rates of population and economic growth, i.e., -10.5 percent for resource poor but population rich Yemen versus +18.8 percent for oil rich Qatar (see Tiliouine & Meziane, 2017).

Table 2

*Selected data on the economic situation of MENA countries*

Country	GNI (PPP) per capita in 2020 (1)	Extreme poverty rate (% of population) (2)	Unemployment total (% of total labour force) 2021(3)	GINI Coefficient (Income inequality) (4)
Bahrain	40,73 (2020)	---	1.9	---
Iran	15,76 (2021)	1.1 (2019)	11.5	40.9 (2019)
Iraq	10,32 (2021)	0.1 (2012)	14.2	29.5 (2012)
Jordan	10,90 (2021)	0 (2010)	19.3	33.7 (2010)
Kuwait	59,04 (2019)	---	3.7	---
Lebanon	10,36 (2021)	0 (2011)	14.5	31.8 (2011)
Oman	28,85 (2020)	---	3.1	---
Palestine	7,37(2021)	0.5 (2016)	24.9	---
Qatar	92,08 (2021)	---	.3	---
Saudi Arabia	47,7 (2021)	---	7.4	---
Sudan	4,00 (2021)	15.3 (2014)	19.8	34.2 (2014)
Syria	---	1.1 (2003)	10.6	37.5 (2003)
Turkey	30,02 (2021)	0.4 (2019)	13.4	41.9 (2019)
UAE	66,68 (2020)	0 (2018)	3.4	26 (2018)
Yemen	3,52 (2013)	19.8 (2014)	13.6	36.7 (2014)
Algeria	11,75 (2021)	0.5 (2011)	12.7	27.6 (2011)
Egypt	12,91 (2021)	2.5 (2017)	9.3	31.5 (2017)
Libya	23,55 (2021)	---	19.6	---
Morocco	8,02 (2021)	1.4 (2013)	11.5	39.5 (2013)
Tunisia	11,27 (2021)	0.1 (2015)	16.8	32.8 (2015)

GNI: Gross National Income; GINI Coefficient: Income Inequality Coefficient. (1) World Bank (2022a) (2, 3, 4) World Bank (2022b)

In addition to economic concerns, social unrest further devastates regional economies. For instance, by the end of 2013 Syria's total economic loss since the start of the conflict was estimated



at \$143.8 billion, which is equivalent to 276 per cent of the GDP of 2010 in constant prices (Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2014). Poverty figures, estimated by head count ratio at \$2.15 a day (2017 PPP), indicate a dramatic situation with extreme poverty levels touching 20% of the population in Yemen and 15% in Sudan in 2014 (World Bank, 2022; Table 2). The ongoing Israeli aggression against Palestinians continues to result in human loss of life and billions of dollars in material and infrastructure damages (Weinthal & Sowers, 2019). Similar trends are occurring in Libya, Yemen and to some extent Iraq, and an escalation seems inevitable in other conflict zones. Similarly, unemployment and under-employment levels are high (on average 14% in North Africa), i.e., more than four times higher than the average in the Gulf States (3.3%) and twice the global average (6.2 %) (World Bank, 2022). Joblessness in certain areas among young people exceeded 25% and is well above that for the MENA's women for whom joblessness is a norm (Estes & Tiliouine, 2014; Tiliouine & Estes, 2016). Poverty levels have also increased for many nations since the 2011 Arab Spring; COVID-19 has deteriorated this situation further.

### **Freedom and Participation in Civic Life**

Gaining governing legitimacy through the assurance of free choice reinforces the stability of nations and the ability of individuals in them to flourish. Similarly, legitimacy via free choice engages people as responsible and responsive citizens. In other words, the social contract cannot be strengthened unless governing rulers respect their missions, preserve people's rights, and offer them legitimate mechanisms for participation. Yet and for many reasons, in most MENA countries this contract is inconsistent and often tenuous, despite reforms towards regaining people's trust being a necessity towards better civil functioning. Wide scale corruption remains a major social ill, hampering development efforts whereby some groups, originally part of the elite and or state 'nomenklatura', continue to exploit their positions for private advantage and derive rent from them (Tiliouine & Meziane, 2017). The Corruption Perceptions Index ranks countries and territories based on how corrupt their public sector is perceived to be on a scale of 0 - 100 (0 meaning that a country is perceived as highly corrupt). Countries such as Turkey score 38 (ranking 96th out of 180 countries), with Algeria and Egypt (both 33 and 117th) remaining the most corrupt societies in the world. Less populated countries such as the UAE (69, ranked 24<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries), followed by Qatar (63, ranked 31<sup>st</sup> out of 180) and Jordan 49 (58<sup>th</sup> of 180) are ranked as the least corrupt.

Political instability goes hand in hand with corruption and is strongly correlated in places like Syria 13 (178<sup>th</sup> of 180), Yemen 16 (174<sup>th</sup> of 180) and Libya 17 (172<sup>nd</sup> of 180) (Table 3). Corruption creates bitterness in all groups, but more so in marginalised populations who do not derive any benefit. It also weakens social institutions and degrades social trust with cyclical revolutions like the Arab Spring being predictable outcomes. The Fragile State Index (FSI) is also telling. The Fund for Peace (n.d.) ranks countries on the FSI where a higher score, with a maximum of 120 indicates a weaker, more vulnerable or fragile situation in the country. Results showed high levels in Yemen (111.7), Syria (108.4) and Sudan (107.1), whereas countries such as the UAE (39.1), Qatar (42.3), and Kuwait (52.2) have lower fragility scores (Table 3). Respect for political freedom and civil liberties follows the same trend, with the most fragile countries being the least free (Table 3).



Table 3

*Corruption, state fragility, liberties and subjective indicators of MENA countries*

Country	Corruption PI (1)	Rank (of 180 nations) (1)	Fragile states index 2022 (2)	Political freedom (3)	Civil liberties index (3)	Happiness score (4)	Happiness ranking of 146 nations (4)	Positive experience (5)
Bahrain	42	78	66.6	2	10	6.647	22	--
Iran	25	150	84.1	4	10	4.721	116	--
Iraq	23	157	93.8	16	13	4.854	109	--
Jordan	49	58	76.6	11	22	4.395	124	58
Kuwait	43	73	52.2	14	23	6.106	46	--
Lebanon	24	154	91.3	13	29	4.584	121	37
Oman	52	56	49.5	6	18	--	--	--
Palestine	--	--	85.6	3.5	13.4	--	--	--
Qatar	63	31	42.3	17	18	--	--	--
Saudi Arabia	53	52	67.5	1	6	6.494	26	--
Sudan	20	164	107.1	0	10	--	--	--
Syria	13	178	108.4	-3	4	--	--	--
Turkey	38	96	78.1	16	16	4.948	102	42
UAE	69	24	39.1	5	12	6.561	25	--
Yemen	16	174	111.7	1	8	3.658	138	--
Algeria	33	117	72.2	10	22	4.887	107	58
Egypt	33	117	83.6	6	12	4.283	129	52
Libya	17	172	94.3	1	8	5.41	78	--
Morocco	39	87	70.1	13	24	4.918	104	60
Tunisia	44	70	68.2	26	38	4.596	120	57

(1) Transparency International (2021): 100 is very clean, 0 is highly corrupt, (2) Wikipedia (2022), (3) Freedom House (2021), (4) Helliwell et al. (2021), (5) Gallup (2022)





### **Subjective Well-Being (SWB) or “Happiness”**

The happiness of individuals has been estimated in many ways. The most frequent method is by using the average of responses to this question on the measure of individual life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2013), which asks: ‘Taken all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?’ It is scored on an 11-point scale with 0 as a minimum and 10 as a maximum. From Table 3, the highest scores are registered in the UAE (6.561, ranked 25<sup>th</sup> of 146 countries), followed by Saudi Arabia (6.494, ranked 26<sup>th</sup>), and Kuwait (6.106, ranked 46<sup>th</sup>). The least happy countries were Egypt (4.283) and Yemen (3.658), ranked respectively at 129<sup>th</sup> and 138<sup>th</sup> position. For comparison, the highest score worldwide was in Finland (7.842) and the lowest was in Afghanistan (2.523) (Helliwell et al., 2021).

The Gallup Global Emotions Index (2022) is also commonly used, where higher scores reflect more widespread and frequent positive emotional experiences. Fifty per cent of the countries with the lowest Positive Experience Index are in the MENA region: Morocco (60), Algeria and Jordan (58), Tunisia (57), and Egypt (52) (Gallup, 2022). According to Gallup (2022), these scores strongly relate to people’s perceptions about their living standards, personal freedoms and the presence and strength of their social networks. Other wellbeing measures support these findings. In surveys using the Personal Well-being Index (PWI), Algerian samples had lower ratings than Australians not only in the average PWI score, but also in satisfaction with standards of living, personal security, personal relationships, life achievements and future security. The only domains in which both were similar were health and feelings of belongingness (Tiliouine, 2020). Having significantly low confidence in one’s future prospects, feeling unhappy with one’s life achievements and experiencing declining feelings of self-worth reflect the fears of these populations, despite a country like Algeria for example, having huge economic potential and the capacity to offer more promising conditions for its people.

### **Restoring People’s Dignity**

While national development concerns can be helped by increasing spending in education, infrastructure, health, employment opportunities as well as security and stability, such measures would overlook critical psychological considerations and social dimensions. The ‘Arab Inequality Puzzle’ is one such phenomenon. According to Ianchovichina (2017), high- and rising-income inequality should be ruled out as a reason for the Arab Spring uprisings given that, relative to other world regions, the Arab region has a low to moderate Gini coefficient. Yet, other reports and popular perceptions insist that social inequality is growing and was in fact a major cause of regional protests in previous years (Achnar, 2020), as opposing trends of relatively high-income inequality on the one hand and low social equality persist across the region. The ‘unhappy development’ paradox may also explain the situation (Ianchovichina, 2017). While economic growth and social development have been occurring in the region, life satisfaction has remained low and, in some instances, declined in developing Arab countries over the second half of the 2000s. In the years preceding the Arab Spring, a strong negative association between life satisfaction and satisfaction with standards of living, labour market conditions, and corruption was observed and considered the main driver fuelling the popular 2011 uprisings.



Though disentangling the factors which create a complex picture in the MENA region is difficult, discussing their failures to improve wellbeing level is essential. Such discussions however cannot be had with a mere focus on material fulfilments of tangibles like money, food, and economic opportunities, as important as they are. Rather, the concept of human dignity is far more pertinent and appropriate for many reasons. The concept of dignity acquired a specific appeal to social scientists in the 1990s. Within current political theory, this concept is not only considered a key legal notion, but a fundamental aspect of democratic societies. Secondly, during the revolts of the Arab Spring, the issue of dignity represented, besides freedom and economic opportunity, the cornerstone of people's demands. To demonstrate, the claims and tone of the Tunisian revolution gradually moved from socio-economic concerns to more overtly political ones, with an insistence on jobs, dignity and freedom (Ayeb, 2011). Similarly, in Egypt, the population's revolts focused on three life necessities encapsulated by the chant of "Bread, Freedom and Human Dignity" (for a review see Tiliouine, 2022). These notions suggest that human dignity extends beyond the fulfilment of material needs towards the valuation and respect of human life, voice, and potentials.

Dignity is also at the heart of policies which address marginalisation and reparation. For example, the Tunisian government created the Instance Vérité et Dignité (IVD, Truth and Dignity Commission) with the task of identifying zones that have suffered systematic marginalisation or exclusion in the country. In Algeria, a word has been coined to characterise the state of violated dignity, *hogra*. Its significance attests not only to widespread poverty but to unprecedented levels of social, political and economic exclusion. The Algerian Minister of Interior has recognised recently that Algeria encompasses some 15,000 shadow zones in which 8.5 million people live under the extreme poverty line. This proportion represents about 20% of the total population and most of them live in the outskirts of big cities and in some rural areas (Algérie Presse Service, APS, June 15, 2020). On the 15th of February 2020, then new Algerian President presented his government with a video on life in these poverty pockets and many of the cabinet members were in tears as shown on national TV screens. The notion of *hogra*, taken from Algerian dialect to mean a state of injustice and feelings of oppression, accompanied by the total impunity of misguided authorities, is very close to feelings of a 'wounded' dignity that requires restoration for any material developments to be trusted and opportunities harnessed appropriately.

In sum, the dissatisfaction of many of the MENA populations should be looked at from a larger socio-historic spectrum. Feelings of unworthiness, collective low self-esteem, a sense of powerlessness, loss of agency, as well as low trust in institutions and in some cases, one another, are the result of long periods of authoritarianism, exclusion and feelings of injustice. It is worth remembering that responsive governments have as one of their core functions the job of identifying, monitoring and meeting the psychological expectations of their people and not only provide roads, hospitals and schools.

A lack of dignity concerns the world given the region's geopolitical position; however, such notions are not unique to the region and the same demands are being made in other parts of the world, i.e., Black Lives Matter. Dignity is an essential human need which needs to be addressed and actively demonstrated by governments and all its institutions that serve individuals and societies alike, for greater wellbeing to take root. Accordingly, researchers interested in wellbeing can work to fill



the gap between identifying the psychological needs of individuals and how these correspond to, and fluctuate with broader national developments and more specifically, which emerge from the social contract. Strengthening existing gains in the areas of healthcare, employment, education and the economy are good steps, but alone, not enough for real progress to sustainably thrive. Without attention to dignity, regional stability and global stability continue to be at risk.

### References

- Achcar, G. (2020). On the 'Arab inequality puzzle': The case of Egypt. *Development and Change*, 51(3), 746-770. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12585>
- Algérie Presse Service, APS. (June 15, 2020). L'Algérie compte 15 000 zones d'ombre habitées par 8,5 millions de citoyens. <http://www.aps.dz/algerie/106229>.
- Ayeb, H. (2011). Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: The Alfa Grass revolution. *Review of African Political Economy*, 38(129), 467-479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2011.604250>
- Diener, E., Inglehart, R., & Tay, L. (2013). Theory and validity of life satisfaction measures. *Social Indicators Research*, 112(3), 497-527. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-012-0076-y>
- Drine, I. (2012). 'Successful' development models in the MENA region. United Nations University & World Institute for Development Economics Research (Working Paper No. 2012/52). <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/%E2%80%98successful%E2%80%99-development-models-mena-region>
- Estes, R. J., & Sirgy, M. J. (Eds.). (2017). *The pursuit of human well-being: The untold global history*. Springer.
- Estes, R. J., & Tiliouine, H. (2014). Development trends in Islamic societies: From collective wishes to concerted actions. *Social Indicators Research*, 116(1), 67-114. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24720521>
- Freedom House. (2021). *Political rights and civil liberties 2021*. <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>. Accessed 24.11.2022
- Gallup. (2022). *Global emotions report*. [https://img.lalr.co/cms/2022/06/29185719/2022-Gallup-Global-Emotions-Report-2022\\_compressed.pdf](https://img.lalr.co/cms/2022/06/29185719/2022-Gallup-Global-Emotions-Report-2022_compressed.pdf)
- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J., & De Neve, J. E. (2021, Eds.). *World happiness report 2021*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network. <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2021/>
- Ianchovichina, E. (2017). *Eruptions of popular anger: The economics of the Arab Spring and its aftermath* (No. 121942). <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/251971512654536291/eruptions-of-popular-anger-the-economics-of-the-arab-spring-and-its-aftermath>
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2014). *Global employment trends 2014: Risk of a jobless recovery?* ILO. <https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-employment-trends/2014/lang-en/index.htm>
- McGregor, J. A. (2018). Reconciling universal frameworks and local realities in understanding and measuring wellbeing. In I. Bache & K. Scott (Eds.), *The politics of wellbeing: theory, policy and practice* (pp. 197-224). Palgrave Macmillan.



- Moshrif, R. (2020, November). *Income inequality in the Middle East*. World Inequality Lab, Issue Brief No. 2020-06. <https://wid.world/news-article/income-inequality-in-the-middle-east/>
- O'Donnell, G., Deaton, A., Durand, M., Halpern, D., & Layard, R. (2014). *Wellbeing and policy*. Report commissioned by the Legatum Institute. <https://li.com/reports/the-commission-on-wellbeing-and-policy/>
- SCPR, Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2014). *Syria: Squandering humanity. Socioeconomic monitoring report on Syria*. [http://scpr-syria.org/att/SCPR\\_Squandering\\_Humanity\\_En.pdf](http://scpr-syria.org/att/SCPR_Squandering_Humanity_En.pdf)
- The Fund for Peace. (2022). *Fragile States Index FSI*. <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>
- Tiliouine, H. (2014). Islamic education and youth well-being in Muslim countries, with a specific reference to Algeria. In A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frønes, F. Casas, & J. E. Korbin (Eds.), *Handbook of child well-being: Theory, indicators, measures and policies in global perspective* (pp. 1209-1226). Springer.
- Tiliouine, H. (2020). Algeria, Personal Well-Being Index. In F. Maggino (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research*. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69909-7\\_3989-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69909-7_3989-2)
- Tiliouine, H. (2022). Citizens' expectations for individual well-being: Rethinking well-being around the idea of dignity. *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2022*. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/citizens-expectations-for-individual-well-being-rethinking-well-being-around-the-idea-of-dignity/>
- Tiliouine, H., & Estes, R. J. (Eds). (2016). *The state of social progress of Islamic societies: Social, economic, political, and ideological challenges*. Springer.
- Tiliouine, H., & Meziane, M. (2012). The quality of life in Muslim populations: The case of Algeria. In K. Land (Ed.), *Handbook of social indicators and quality of life studies* (pp. 499-527). Springer.
- Tiliouine, H., & Meziane, M. (2017). The history of well-being in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In R. Estes & M. Sirgy (Eds.), *The pursuit of human well-being: The untold global history*. Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39101-4\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39101-4_16)
- Tiliouine, H., & Miliiani, M. (forthcoming). Early childhood education in Algeria. In G. Sultana (Ed.), *Early childhood education in the Mediterranean: Availability, accessibility and affordability of services*. Brill Book Series.
- Transparency International. (2021). *Corruption Perception Index*. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/bhr->
- United Nations and League of Arab States. (2013). *The Arab millennium development goals report: Facing challenges and looking beyond 2015*. <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/pubaction.asp?PubID=1364>
- Weinthal, E., & Sowers, J. (2019). Targeting infrastructure and livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza. *International Affairs*, 95(2), 319-340. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz015>
- World Bank. (2022a). *List of countries by GNI*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>
- World Bank. (2022b). *DataBank*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>
- Younis, N. K., Rahm, M., Bitar, F., & Arabi, M. (2021). COVID-19 in the MENA region: Facts and findings. *The Journal of Infection in Developing Countries*, 15(03), 342-349. <https://doi.org/10.3855/jidc.14005>