

April 2023

Greetings from Washington,

Ten years ago, the United Nations' General Assembly adopted [Resolution 66/281](#), proclaiming March 20th as the International Day of Happiness. Since then, there has been a growing consensus that the collective success of countries should be judged by the happiness of their nations. There has also been growing research interest in measuring happiness in a standardized way, in line with established socio-economic indicators, such as GDP growth, poverty, and inequality rates.

The [World Happiness Report](#) uses a survey-based approach to measure the well-being of nations. The basic question the report considers is "what habits, institutions, and material conditions produce a society where people can have higher well-being?" The survey also investigates the skills that people can gain to further their own long-term sustainable well-being. To assess happiness on a country-by-country basis, the report addresses six primary pillars: i.) income, ii.) social support, iii.) healthy life expectancy (including physical and mental health), iv.) freedom of making choices (such as basic human rights), v.) generosity/philanthropy, and vi.) transparency and lack of corruption.

The most recent [data](#) from the World Happiness Report 2023 used three-year average numbers (2020-2022) and ranked Finland as the "happiest country in the world," followed by Denmark (#2), and Iceland (#3). Most Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries are at the bottom half of the list, including Iraq (#96), Palestine (#99), Morocco (#100), Tunisia (#110), Egypt (#121), Jordan (#123), and Lebanon (#136). The only two exceptions are the UAE (#26) and Saudi Arabia (#30), which are on par with many Asian and European countries, such as Singapore, Italy, and Spain.

The report also assesses the happiness gap between the top and bottom halves of each country's population, on a three-year average basis (2020-2022), and found MENA countries "less unequal" than other regions in terms of happiness, with the exception of Algeria (#28), Tunisia (#60), Saudi Arabia (#67), and Egypt (#68), which all rank higher than average.

So, what makes MENA countries "less happy" than others? One of the main triggers of unhappiness in the MENA region is low-income. The average GDP per capita in MENA (\$7,569) is almost half of the world average (\$12,236) and less than a quarter of its equivalent in the countries of the European Union (\$38,411). It is also 10 to 20 percent lower than the average per capita income in the [East Asia and Pacific](#) region—excluding high-income countries—and [Latin America and the Caribbean](#).

Another trigger is "freedom to make life choices". The Freedom House Institution, which rates people's access to political rights and civil liberties in 210 countries and territories through its annual Freedom in the World report classifies most MENA countries as "not free" in terms of the citizens right to vote, freedom of expression, and equality before the law. This includes Bahrain, Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

Another significant trigger is transparency and lack of corruption. Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#) ranks many MENA countries among the lowest worldwide in terms of transparency, including Iraq (#157), Lebanon (#150), Egypt (#130), and Morocco (#94). Saudi Arabia (#54), Qatar (#40), and the UAE (#27) rank significantly better than average in the region on the transparency list.

It is worth noting that MENA governments can design targeted policies to promote happiness and well-being at the country level. These policies should promote better health (physical and mental), education, social cohesion, sustainability, and freedoms. Some countries in the region are ahead of others in shaping these policies, including the UAE where a new Ministry for happiness and wellbeing was [established](#) in 2016 to promote wellbeing and social cohesion.

Sincerely,  
**Racha Helwa**  
Director, empowerME  
Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East  
Atlantic Council

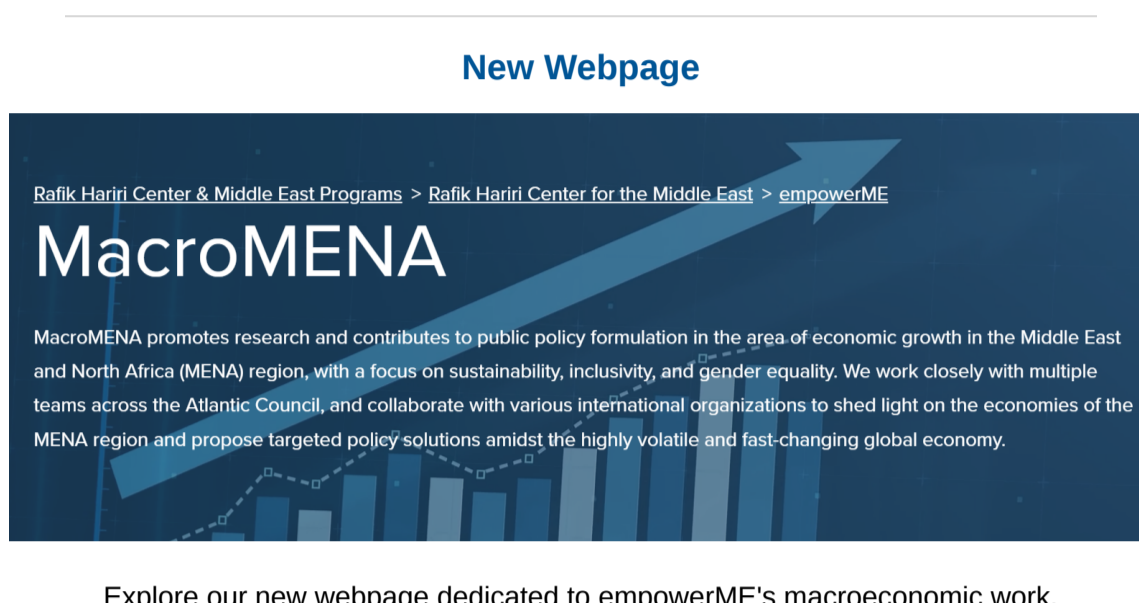
### World Happiness Report



Read the [2023 World Happiness Report](#).

[Read More](#)

### New Webpage



Explore our new webpage dedicated to empowerME's macroeconomic work.

[Explore](#)

### Previous Event



On Thursday, April 13th, the Atlantic Council's [empowerME Initiative](#) and [GeoEconomics Center](#) hosted a [virtual conversation](#) with the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Trade H.E. Dr. Thani Al Zeyoudi to discuss the UAE's trade and economic challenges and opportunities in 2023 and beyond. This conversation was moderated by empowerME Director Racha Helwa.

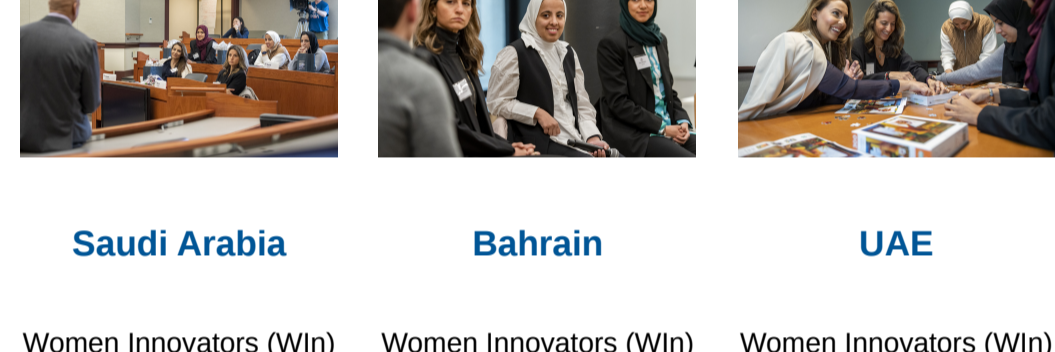
[Watch Here](#)

### Private Roundtable with H.E. Nadia Fattah Alaoui



On Friday, April 14th, the Atlantic Council's [empowerME Initiative](#), [GeoEconomics Center](#), and the [Africa Center](#) hosted Morocco's Minister of Economy and Finance, H.E. Nadia Fattah Alaoui, for a private roundtable discussion ahead of the highly anticipated IMF / WB Fall 2023 meetings in Marrakesh with key government, economic, and social leaders at the Atlantic Council headquarters.

### Win Fellowship 2023 Applications are Open!



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Women Innovators (Win) Fellowship Application – KSA Cohort

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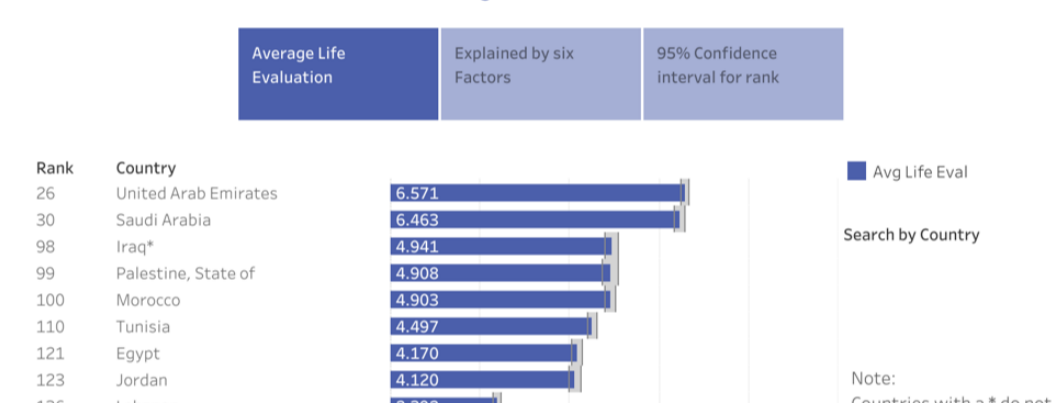
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### Big Data

World Happiness Report 2023

Figure 2.3 Ranking of happiness based on a three-year average 2020-2022



Source: [World Happiness Report \(2023\)](#)

### Big Question

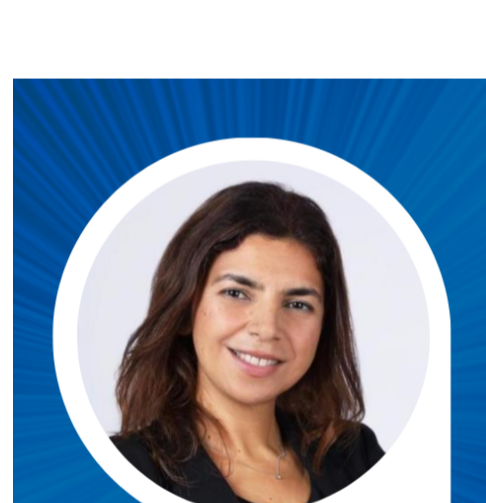
**What economic, social or political incentives can MENA countries provide to boost happiness as a key pillar for human development in the region?**



**Mohamed El-Komi**  
Associate Professor of Economics  
The American University in Cairo

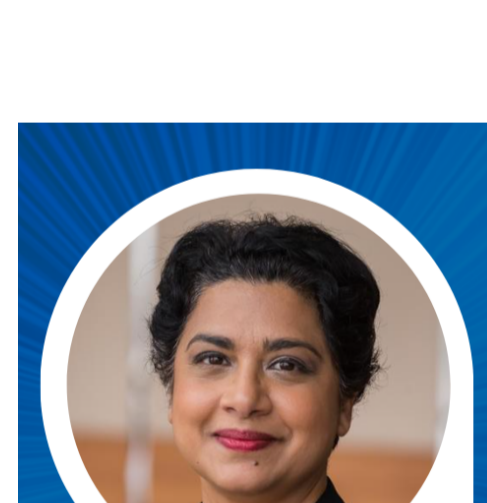
"People, including those from the MENA region, generally think they know what will make them happy, but they rarely are when their thoughts of happiness materialize. The feeling of happiness comes from over-reaction to temporary changes. However, this over-reaction is much higher for negative changes than it is for positive changes of the same magnitude (i.e. unhappiness occurs far more easily than happiness). Contentment, on the other hand, is more stable and more permanent than happiness. Hence, people should pursue contentment rather than chasing happiness."

"I believe 'peace of mind' is the essence for happiness. By focusing on safety, accessible quality healthcare, business friendly regulations, and ease of transport we can create a recipe for happiness. Such activities promote well being and motivation which eventually result in our positive behavior. However due to a country's dynamics, the essence for happiness should be initiated through a visionary, creative ecosystem that is built on structure, honesty, self respect, and achievements."



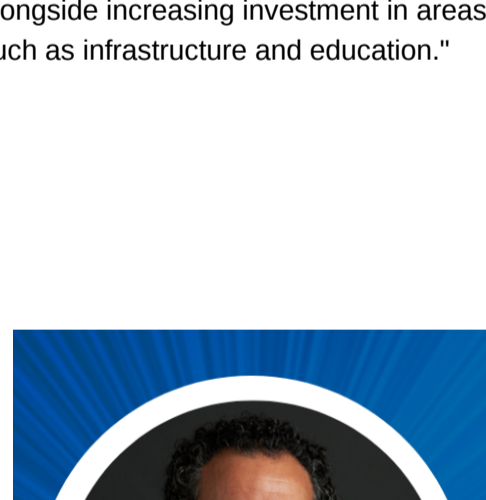
**Mona Habib**  
Customer Success Director  
Topped

"From an economic perspective, increasing job opportunities will be critical and this remains one of the largest challenges facing the region. The standard of living in many MENA countries has also been eroded by high inflation over multiple years. Strengthening economic policy and enacting reforms will be important, alongside increasing investment in areas such as infrastructure and education."



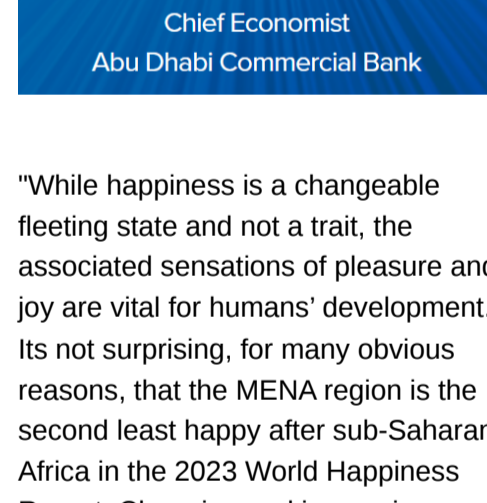
**Monica Malik**  
Chief Economist  
Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank

"While happiness is a changeable fleeting state and not a trait, the associated sensations of pleasure and joy are vital for humans' development. Its not surprising, for many obvious reasons, that the MENA region is the second least happy after sub-Saharan Africa in the 2023 World Happiness Report. Changing and increasing people's happiness requires a more inclusive, representative, legitimate, and dynamic social contract that responds to the ever-changing ways of life that the people in the region aspire to. This means widening (and qualitatively better) service provisions, enhanced and participatory governance, equal protection under the law, and promoting creativity and innovation."



**Ahmed Eorsi**  
Senior Researcher, Middle East & North Africa Program  
Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

"Happiness (and policies for it) are often overthought in the MENA region, considered an elusive luxury amidst a plethora of multifaceted challenges. Nonetheless, boosting happiness lies in simple, yet bold actions geared towards eradicating multidimensional poverty, improving accessibility to and quality of basic services, and creating decent economic opportunities throughout. In actuality, this just about sums up the actual purpose of public policy: to address citizens' needs comprehensively, improve living standards, and ensure equal opportunities."

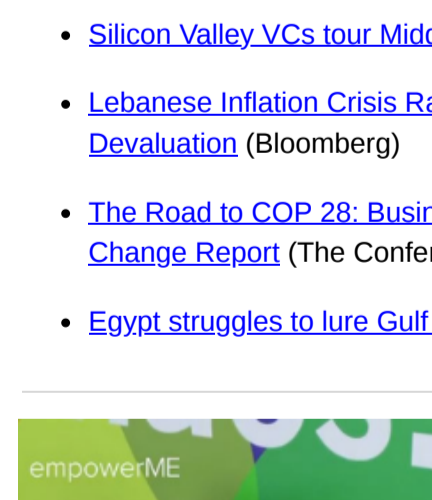


**Seif Saleh**  
Associate Minister for Public Policy & Investment  
Egypt Ministry of Planning and Economic Development

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### Big Reads

- [Silicon Valley VCs tour Middle East in hunt for funding](#) (Financial Times)
- [Lebanese Inflation Crisis Rages Anew After 90% Pound Devaluation](#) (Bloomberg)
- [The Road to COP 28: Business Takeaways from the UN's Latest Climate Change Report](#) (The Conference Board)
- [Egypt struggles to lure Gulf buyers in state asset sell-off](#) (Financial Times)



### About empowerME

empowerME is the Middle East by focusing on economic prosperity. Watch this video to learn more about empowerME and its unique chairman, regional venture capital pioneer Amjad Ahmad.

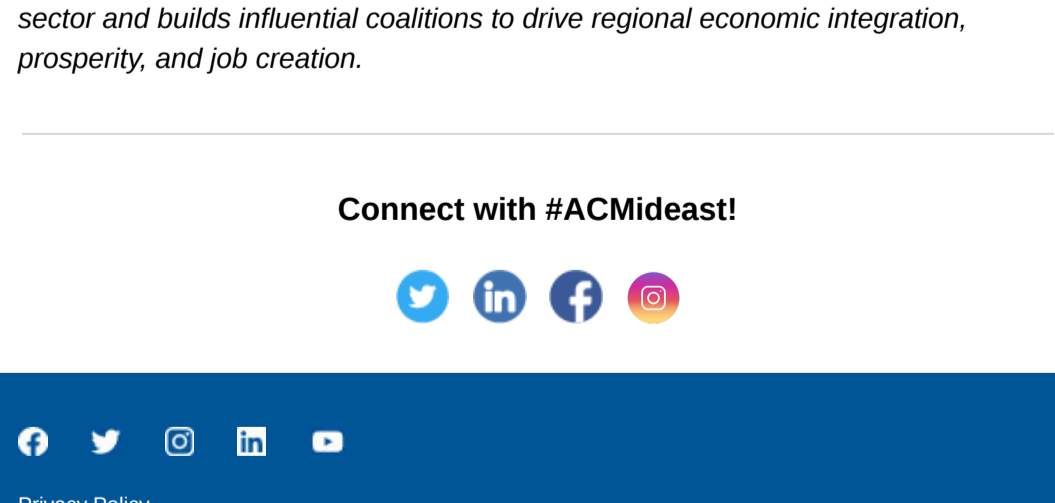
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[empowerME](#) shapes solutions to empower entrepreneurs, women, and the private sector and builds influential coalitions to drive regional economic integration, prosperity, and job creation.

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