

ISSUE BRIEF

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From Tunis to Baghdad: Can platform-based politics take root?

CARRIE SCHENKEL AND JAMES STOREN

The organization of political parties has served multiple distinct roles in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In many cases, regimes use them to create a light veneer of democratic legitimacy for authoritarianism; in other cases, parties exist to represent one identity group or are centered around a singular individual. In rare cases, but with a few successful examples, parties exist to represent an ideology. Rarer still, but key to the future democratic success of the region, are true platform-based parties. Vacuums of political leadership have developed due to the limited role parties play in shaping governance, representation, and public policy. In a rapidly changing region, the opportunity for effective, issues-based parties has never been more evident. Iran's proxies in the region have been significantly weakened and the "Axis of Resistance" dismantled, presenting openings for new political leadership to emerge.

Political parties are not yet poised to meet the moment. In much of the region, long histories of implicit and explicit bans and one-party dominance have left political parties weak, unpopular, and ineffective. Extended periods of suppression and restriction—such as Jordan's thirty-year party ban, Iraq's decades of one-party rule under Saddam Hussein, and Tunisia's twenty-three years of party bans during the Ben Ali era—have resulted in political parties that lack both organizational capacity and broad public appeal. Rather, they are fragmented, ideologically vague, and centered around individuals rather than coherent platforms.

The proliferation of political parties—more than 220 are currently registered in Tunisia, for example—has further undermined any sense of clear policy platforms and the ability to differentiate one party from another. Rather than reforming or uniting under existing frameworks, disillusioned members frequently break away to form new parties, stymieing coalition-building and the development of rooted, comprehensive party ideologies.

Disillusionment with traditional parties has led citizens to favor actors perceived as more directly serving their interests, such as Hezbollah—which positions itself as a resistance force against Israel—or Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties, which have gained trust through their provision of essential social services in Egypt, Jordan, and elsewhere. In an era defined by youth-led movements, digital activism, and persistent calls for democratization, these parties stand at a crossroads. Whether they act as agents of change or instruments of entrenched power remains a central question, shaping not

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only the future of governance within individual nations but also the trajectory of regional stability and development.

Why political parties are important in ensuring democracy in the region

The MENA region is widely viewed as one of the least free worldwide, particularly regarding political freedoms. V-Dem's *Democracy Report 2024* considers MENA the world's most autocratic region, with 98 percent of the population living in autocracies.¹ Freedom House's report titled *Freedom in the World 2024* presents a similar outlook, characterizing 93 percent of the regional population as "not free."² While the Atlantic Council's Freedom Index ranks MENA sixth out of seven regions in overall freedom in its 2023 data, the region ranks last in the political freedom subindex, which measures political rights, civil liberties, elections, and legislative constraints on executive power.³

Data from the Atlantic Council places MENA's 2023 political subindex score at 44.1, which is 6.1 points beneath the next lowest region, South and Central Asia, and 23.3 points behind the global average. While the region has improved 5.4 points overall since 1995, it has consistently scored lowest worldwide for each of the past twenty-nine years. Parallel to the rest of the world,⁴ political freedom in MENA has fallen in the past decade, declining from its peak score of 51.4 in 2012 to 43.4 in 2022, its lowest mark in more than two decades.

Though there is a notable appetite for democracy in the region—a 2022 report by Arab Barometer found majorities in all ten countries surveyed prefer democratic systems over other forms of government—many view democratic governance as flawed, with over 60 percent of citizens in Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, and Tunisia considering democracies ineffective in maintaining stability.⁵ Mirroring the region's broader trends in governance, democratic support among citizens is eroding in many countries, falling 7 percent or more in Tunisia, Iraq, Jordan, and Morocco since 2018.

Strong multiparty systems are key components of democratic governance, providing representation and a decision-making

platform for a diverse range of identities, ideas, and perspectives. Multiparty systems are most effective and foster trust in government when their leaders make decisions based on consistent ideologies and offer citizens choices to determine policies that are based on these ideologies.

These systems fail to foster trust when citizens feel their interests are not represented. The difficulties that parties have experienced in the region—ranging from outright bans on assembly to having their identities centered around elites and patronage—have hampered parties' abilities to form united ideological platforms and to govern citizens in a manner reflecting an accurate range of economic, political, and legal interests.

This paper will examine case studies in Lebanon, Iraq, Tunisia, and Jordan, exploring the history of political parties and current trends. While many political parties struggle with hostile governments or ineffective, elite-driven leadership, there is an active desire for reform and an opportunity for political leaders to gain public trust.

LEBANON

Historically, Lebanon has operated in a confessional system, whereby political power and parties are associated with religious sects.⁶ The country's National Pact mandates the highest offices be held by specific religions, with the president a Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim.⁷ In parliament, the 128 seats are split evenly between Islam and Christianity and divided further by specific sects within those faiths.

Though Lebanon's institutions are shaped heavily by religious affiliation, modern political parties mainly arose as ideological movements or militias formed in opposition or support of foreign intervention.⁸ The Lebanese Forces (LF), Amal, and Hezbollah, for example, formed during the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s and 1980s, while others such as the Future Movement (FM) and Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) arose during subsequent Syrian and Israeli occupations in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁹

- 1 Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, *Democracy Report 2024*, V-Dem Institute, 2024, https://v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf.
- 2 Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024*, accessible via "New Report: Freedom in the Middle East Remains out of Reach for Most; Israel and Gaza Strip Experienced Changes," Freedom House, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-freedom-middle-east-remains-out-reach-most-israel-and-gaza-strip-experienced>.
- 3 "Freedom and Prosperity Indexes," Freedom and Prosperity Center, Atlantic Council, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://freedom-and-prosperity-indexes.atlanticcouncil.org/>.
- 4 "Freedom and Prosperity Indexes: Country Profiles," Freedom and Prosperity Center, Atlantic Council, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://freedom-and-prosperity-indexes.atlanticcouncil.org/#country-profiles>.
- 5 Arab Barometer, "State of Governance: Arab Barometer VII Report," Arab Barometer, July 2022, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Governance_Report-EN-1.pdf.
- 6 Chatham House, "Lebanon's Politics: The Impact of Sectarianism," Chatham House, August 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/08/lebanons-politics>.
- 7 US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2010*, August 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/171739.pdf>.
- 8 Wilson Center, "Lebanon's Presidential Election: The Elusive Search for Outside Influence and an End to Deadlock," Wilson Center website, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/lebanons-presidential-election-the-elusive-search-for-outside-influence-and-end-to>.
- 9 Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, "The Lebanese Political Party System," Middle East Political and Economic Institute, n.d., <https://mepei.com/the-lebanese-political-party-system/>.

The Cedar Revolution in 2005, which ended Syrian occupation, gave rise to coalition governance, a key development for the multiparty system. Parties such as the Shia Hezbollah and Christian FPM united to form the March 8 Alliance, while membership in the opposing March 14 Alliance included the Christian LF and Sunni FM. This shift coincided with gains in political freedom, with Lebanon's score vaulting 8.7 points between 2004 and 2016 in the Atlantic Council's Freedom Index, surpassing the global average in 2009.¹⁰

Political freedom, however, has dropped since 2016, falling 7.6 points and declining beneath the global average. While the impact of the country's economic crisis and heightened tensions after the 2019 protests in Beirut cannot be overlooked, systemic factors also play a critical role.¹¹ Favoritism and corruption are commonplace. Elitism is also pervasive, with many figures having held powerful offices over decades, such as FPM's Michel Aoun (president, 2016–2022; prime minister, 1988–1990), Amal's Nabih Berri (speaker of parliament, 1992–2009), and FM's Saad Hariri (prime minister, 2009–2011 and 2016–2020). Electoral reforms meant to combat elites have had opposite effects, such as raising registration fees and giving endorsement powers to private organizations, creating significant barriers for candidates who are not already wealthy and connected.¹²

Today, Lebanon's politicians are perhaps most notable for their struggles to elect a president, with the office remaining vacant for more than two years after the 2022 parliamentary elections until Joseph Aoun was selected to fill the post in January 2025.¹³ Antiestablishment voters elected reform-minded, small party candidates to a record-breaking twenty-nine seats in 2022.¹⁴ Mainstream parties suffered, with the March 8 Alliance losing its majority and the Future Movement vacating its twenty seats after boycotting the election. Despite the parliament's fragmentation, this new makeup indicates that political pluralism is on the rise. Political freedom has already improved, increasing 1.9 points between 2022 and 2023—the seventeenth-highest jump worldwide—according to the Atlantic Council's Freedom Index.

Still, present-day Lebanon's current climate features political stalemate, economic collapse, and recovery from conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. Parties have failed to deliver stability, and the environment is ripe for change. With Hezbollah weakened and an increased number of independent and small-

party candidates in parliament, this change could take the form of a strong, platform-based Shia party and a diverse generation of leaders, while maintaining the confessional system and coalition governance.

IRAQ

Many of the parties that dominate the modern Iraqi political scene were formed in the 1950s and driven into exile in Iran, Syria, and Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the brutal tactics of the Baathist regime. These parties learned key lessons abroad and returned to Iraq following the fall of the regime in 2003 with more organizational skills, experience, and legitimacy.

Iraq's 2005 constitution established a sectarian power-sharing system, known as *muhasasa*, which allocates governing authority to each of Iraq's main ethnic groups. The prime minister, the president, and the speaker of parliament are Shia, Kurdish and Sunni, respectively, giving legitimacy and power to their associated legacy parties. The massive 2019 Tishreen (i.e., October) protests voiced frustration with this quota system and its failures—institutionalized corruption, weak governance, and structural barriers to national unity and national, nonsectarian political parties—as well as widespread youth unemployment and general discontent. A severe state response that led to the deaths of more than 600 protesters prompted the resignation of then-Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi and a sudden explosion of political life among young Iraqis, who began forming new political parties to compete in snap elections in 2021. Some civic-minded parties, like Imtidad and Ishraqat Kanoon, won seats in parliament, while others faced internal struggles, systemic hurdles, and the challenges of organizing effective campaign communications efforts.¹⁵

The early success of the Tishreen movement and its resulting parties and alliances posed a potential threat to legacy parties, which quickly began to introduce bills in parliament to restrict freedom of speech and consolidate power. Ahead of 2023 provincial council elections, the Shia Coordination Front (SCF) eliminated the single nontransferable vote (SNTV) system that played a crucial role in enabling nascent political parties and independent candidates to compete with larger, better-funded political parties in the run-up to the 2021 parliamentary elections and instead reestablished the proportional representation list

10 "Freedom and Prosperity Indexes: Country Profiles," Atlantic Council.

11 "All of Them Means All of Them': Who Are Lebanon's Political Elite?," *Middle East Eye*, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/all-them-means-all-them-who-are-lebanons-political-elite>.

12 "Freedom in the World 2024: Lebanon," Freedom House website, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/lebanon/freedom-world/2024>.

13 "Lebanese Factions Revive Bid to Fill Presidency as Israel Attacks," Reuters, October 2, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanese-factions-revive-bid-fill-presidency-israel-attacks-2024-10-02/>.

14 "What Is the Make-up of Lebanon's New Parliament?," Reuters, May 17, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-make-up-lebanons-new-parliament-2022-05-17/>.

15 Zeidon Alkinani, "The Political Transformation of Protest Movements in Iraq and Lebanon," Arab Center Washington, June 24, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-political-transformation-of-protest-movements-in-iraq-and-lebanon/>.

system. This change was intended to limit Shia Muslim cleric and rival political leader Muqtada al-Sadr's potential electoral success, eliminate competition from nascent parties and independent candidates, and favor SCF incumbents in central and southern Iraq. The amended law necessitated that smaller parties come together in electoral coalitions for the provincial council elections to be more competitive. Given these roadblocks, the Tishreeni parties had some limited success in these elections but learned some important lessons that could help them continue to play a key role in Iraqi politics.¹⁶

TUNISIA

Twenty-three years of the Ben Ali regime and full media censorship sent Tunisia's political opposition underground and into exile, all but eliminating organized political parties—leaving them unprepared for the transition that followed the Arab Spring.

Focused on trying to keep the peace in the wake of a revolution, early post-Arab Spring governments emphasized unity over political ideology. In the 2011 interim government and the 2015–2019 grand coalition, Ennahda, formerly an underground religious movement tied to the Muslim Brotherhood, and Nidaa Tounes, a secular counterweight made up of former regime loyalists, dropped their ideologies to form a unity government. While inspirational to a postrevolutionary public, the pairing of these two rivals stymied efforts at economic and judicial reform by preventing bold political action.¹⁷

The inability to push through reforms, however, was not just a party failure. Resistance came from Tunisia's influential unions and from businessmen who benefitted from monopolies and graft. More importantly, the Ben Ali era bureaucracy stayed in place, leaving administration officials and police and neglecting judicial and economic reform that allowed for continued internal rotting.

Still, the public largely blamed political parties for these failures and the resulting economic decline. International Republican Institute (IRI) polling in late 2020 found growing pessimism in

the country driven by economic worries and a sense that the government and parties weren't doing enough to address the concerns of citizens.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Tunisia's political parties failed to both reform from within and empower the younger generation who bore the largest burden of a flagging economy.

In 2019, amid growing discontent, voters elected Kais Saied, a law professor and independent candidate, as president after he promised to fix the problems parties had failed to solve. Saied has taken increasingly authoritarian measures to strip power from the parliament, consolidate decision-making within the presidency, and again marginalize political parties and silence the opposition. As during the Ben Ali era, the opposition is facing censorship and is barred from appearing in state-run media. Prior to the October 2024 election, only three candidates were approved by the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) to compete for the presidency—while twelve declared and potential candidates, along with numerous other opposition figures, are either in jail or facing charges.¹⁹

Tunisia's democratic experiment has stalled, and parties once again have been driven largely underground. The challenge for parties now will be to once again use this period to take stock, reform from within, and establish a vision for Tunisia's future that will allow them to regain public trust to lead when the next opportunity arises.

JORDAN

Jordan is in an interesting period of political party reform, driven by a top-down effort to make parties more relevant after a thirty-five-year ban from 1957 to 1992 and a subsequent period during which political parties, although legal, were still taboo and unpopular.²⁰ In 2022, less than one percent of the population belonged to one of the fifty-one political parties registered in Jordan.

From 2012 to 2017, King Abdullah II released a series of discussion papers²¹ aimed at setting Jordan on a course toward parliamentary democracy, thereby setting in motion a series of

¹⁶ Alkinani, "The Political Transformation of Protest Movements."

¹⁷ Tanvi Madan and Shadi Hamid, *Tunisia's Consensus: Why the Country's Transition Is a Model for the Middle East*, Brookings Institution, January 31, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/FP_20200131_tunisia_consensus_grewal_hamid.pdf.

¹⁸ In the IRI poll, 87 percent of Tunisians said that their country was going in the wrong direction. Another 88 percent of people said that the economic situation in the country was bad, and 83 percent reported their household to be at or below subsistence. In the wake of their struggles, 85 percent of people felt that the national government was doing little or nothing to address their needs, and 80 percent said that political parties weren't doing enough to address the needs of voters. See *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia*, Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republican Institute, September 24–October 11, 2020, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020-10_iri_tunisia_report_-_final.pdf.

¹⁹ "Tunisia: 3 Candidates Selected for the 2024 Presidential Election," Africa 24 English, September 3, 2024, <https://africa24tv.com/tunisia-3-candidates-selected-for-the-2024-presidential-election>.

²⁰ Karim Merhej, "Latest Political Reforms in Jordan: Systemic Changes on the Horizon?," The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, May 25, 2022, <https://timep.org/2022/05/25/latest-political-reforms-in-jordan-systemic-changes-on-the-horizon/>.

²¹ King Abdullah II, "Discussion Papers," a series, King Abdullah II of Jordan, accessed December 2024, <https://www.kingabdullah.jo/en/vision/discussion-papers>.

reforms, including a gradual loosening of regulations on parties. The third paper in this series,²² published in March 2013, called for “broad-based and representative political parties,” but it still did not give tacit enough approval to instill public confidence in direct involvement in parties. In 2021, a royal committee on modernization was formed and tasked with creating the foundations of a parliamentary monarchy. Nearly a year later, in April 2022, new laws on political parties, parliament, and electoral districts took effect. These acts sparked increased openness from the public for change: IRI polling in October of that year showed that 28 percent of Jordanians felt that empowerment and development of political parties could improve political reforms—demonstrating that many hoped for a better party system.²³

The most novel change to come from these laws was a new approach to the allocation of seats in the parliament, which had previously been determined by a single, nontransferable vote system that long benefited local members of tribes, created patronage networks, and disincentivized the consolidation of small parties centered around one individual into robust, ideological platform-based groupings. The new law set aside an increasing number of seats in the 138-member parliament for political parties over the next three election cycles—30 percent of seats in the 2024 elections, increasing to 50 percent in 2028 and 65 percent in 2032. A subsequent result of this change was the redrawing of electoral districts, creating larger constituencies and reducing tribal control over specific parliamentary seats.

While the powers of parliament are limited in the Jordanian system and have been weakened in recent years,²⁴ it remains to be seen whether these changes can lead to parties with distinct identities and a national reach. In all, twenty-five party lists registered to compete²⁵ in the first parliamentary elections held under this system in September 2024. Despite incentives to consolidate and reform internally, little actual change was evident: The Islamic Action Front continued to dominate, taking seventeen of the forty-one party list seats; nine parties secured the remaining seats, but showed little progress toward broad, substantive platforms. For the system to progress, parties will need to further consolidate and establish identities that resonate with Jordanian voters.

The path forward

Though platform-based parties have historically not played much of a role in the MENA region, numerous changes are taking place that have the potential to completely reshape the political landscape and provide an opening for a wave of political party renewal. For the first time in decades, the possibility of a post-Hezbollah and post-Hamas era presents an opening for new leadership to emerge in Lebanon and in the West Bank and Gaza. The timely emergence of political alternatives could prevent or counter the possibility that something worse could follow.

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s regime could give new opportunities for political discourse and organization to long-silenced Syrians who became accustomed to self-censorship with little to no ability to participate in open dialogue around political or social issues. It is imperative that actors committed to an inclusive, democratic vision for Syria do not hesitate to seize the opportunity afforded by this fragile transitional period to revive civic space in Damascus, openly debate the country’s future, and proactively engage with other key stakeholders to ensure a forthcoming political process that delivers on the Syrian people’s aspirations.

These changing dynamics will likely have a major impact on the political trajectory of its neighbors. Given Iran’s weakened position, Iraq is likely to emerge as the next battleground in Tehran’s efforts to avoid further strategic loss and reexert regional influence, particularly as parliamentary elections approach in 2025. Syria’s trajectory will likely also have a gravitational pull on Iraq—democratic advances there could have the potential to inspire the same in Iraq, while a sectarian outcome could give rise to further division among Iraqi political factions.²⁶ Tishreeni parties will continue to be disadvantaged in the coming elections because of a lack of financial resources and structural barriers, in addition to the new regional political dynamic. To maintain their momentum, these parties will need to focus on establishing their vision for Iraq’s future, building both coordinated campaign strategies and effective voter mobilization. Recent political regression in Tunisia is stifling political parties for now, but the overwhelming repression of freedoms to speak and organize is untenable and

22 King Abdullah II, “Each Playing Our Part: A New Democracy,” the third of seven papers in a series, King Abdullah II of Jordan, December 13, 2020, <https://www.kingabdullah.jo/en/discussion-papers/each-playing-our-part-new-democracy>.

23 International Republican Institute, *State of the State: Nationwide Survey of Jordan*, last modified February 22, 2023, <https://www.iri.org/resources/state-of-the-state-nationwide-survey-of-jordan/>.

24 Mayssoun Sbeity, “Jordan Election 2024,” *Sada* (online journal), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/10/jordan-election-2024?lang=en>.

25 “IEC Approves 174 General Lists, 25 Political Parties for Upcoming Elections,” *Jordan Times*, December 23, 2024, <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/iec-approves-174-general-lists-25-political-parties-upcoming-elections>.

26 Jon B. Alterman, “How Assad’s Fall Could Impact Iraq,” United States Institute of Peace, December 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/12/how-assads-fall-could-impact-iraq>.

unstable. Despite the promises made in Saied's election campaigns, the economy has only gotten worse after five years of his rule. Public debt is at 94.4 percent of gross domestic product and rising, investors are fleeing, and youth unemployment is at 39 percent.²⁷ The state of the economy becomes increasingly hard to pin on the failure of prior governments as the years pass, and in the absence of avenues for political expression it is not hard to imagine that Tunisians might once again take to the streets to demand bread.

As dynamics in the region continue to shift, there is a real need for continued technical support to parties, even if their gains have slowed since 2021. Unfortunately, this support has been almost completely deprioritized in favor of efforts to strengthen civil society and monitor elections and human rights violations. But without the vehicle of effective political parties to channel the priorities of everyday people, there may never be a viable political alternative prepared to step in and hold their ground within the region's political systems as opportunities emerge, and cycles of democratic advancement and decline will continue without lasting progress toward stability and sustainable economic growth.

About the Authors

Carrie Schenkel is a deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa at the International Republican Institute.

James Storen is a former assistant director at the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Center.

STATE OF THE PARTIES

This paper is the fifth in the Freedom and Prosperity Center's "State of the Parties" series analyzing the strength of multi-party systems in different regions of the world.

27 "The Slow Death of Tunisia's Revolution and Democracy," *New Arab*, December 23, 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/slow-death-tunisias-revolution-democracy>.



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