

The Biden Era: What do Arabs expect?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When US President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris emerged victorious from the November 2020 presidential election — despite US President Donald Trump's continual challenges and objections — many people around the world let out a long-held sigh of relief. The same, however, cannot be said for those in the Arab world. The Arab Street, it seems, remain skeptical of any incoming US President regardless of winning party.

Indeed, an in-depth Pan-Arab survey conducted between the 21st and 28th of September 2020 by Arab News, the Middle East's leading international, English-language daily newspaper, in partnership with YouGov, the global leader in political online polling, found that nearly half (49 percent) of respondents believe that neither Biden nor Trump are necessarily good for the region.

With the inauguration on the horizon and Biden ready for his transitional team to take over from the Trump administration, the new US President's team would be well advised to listen to the views from Arab world when it comes to shaping regional foreign policy.

One of the key takeaways from the poll, which questioned people in 18 countries in the Middle East and North Africa, was that a

majority (58 percent) believe Biden should shed the approach to the region adopted by his former boss, Barack Obama. The 44th US president's policies proved highly unpopular among Arabs, who were disappointed by his failure to deliver the "new beginning" he promised during a speech at Cairo University in 2009.

The full survey — "The 2020 US Elections: What do Arabs want?" published on October 25, 2020 — also found that 44 percent of respondents view youth empowerment as a key driver of global development and believe it should be a priority for the incoming administration.

Here, Biden must look to the contrasting records of the two predecessor administrations. Obama reintroduced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which halted the deportation of undocumented immigrants who met certain criteria, while Trump rescinded it during the second year of his term.

However, it was Trump's "Muslim ban" that arguably played the biggest role in creating an environment of fear among students from majority-Arab countries, driving many to seek better higher-education options in Europe.



Biden's intention to rely on more-diplomatic methods gives Iran a better opportunity to negotiate a looser nuclear deal.



US Vice President Joe Biden and President Barack Obama walk past each other during a tribute to Biden at the White House. AFP

During the first coronavirus lockdown in July, the Trump administration also pushed for the cancellation of all visas issued to international students studying in the US, because they were no longer attending classes in person. This plan was abandoned following pressure from universities that make millions of dollars in tuition fees from foreign students, and from the US companies that often hire the highly skilled foreign workers who begin their careers in America after graduating from the nation's top universities.

Turning to US policy on Iran, a large proportion of those surveyed — 49 percent in Saudi Arabia, 53 percent in Iraq and 54 percent in Yemen — favored maintaining Trump's strict sanctions and war posture.

It is notable that respondents in Iraq and Yemen — which have intimate dealings with Iran because of the presence in those countries of its Popular Mobilization Units and Houthi militia proxies respectively — were strongly in favor of maintaining a tough line. This contrasts with Obama's diplomatic approach, which was to attempt to curb Iran's ambitions through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal.

As President Trump attempts to leave President-elect Biden with more headaches than he can cope with in the region, the latter would be wise to heed the advice of the majority of those most directly affected by his country's policies in the Middle East — the Arab people.

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the findings of an in-depth, pan-Arab survey conducted by Arab News, in partnership with YouGov, while offering domestic Arab perspectives incoming President-elect Joe Biden needs while drafting his Middle East foreign policy plan.

The poll — “The 2020 US Elections: What do Arab want?” — asked 3,097 Arabic speakers aged 18 years and over in 18 countries across the Middle East and North Africa what they want from the incoming US presidential administration. It solicited their views on a range of topics, including Iran and Israel, and asked what they perceive to be the top priorities and most dangerous threats to the region. As noted earlier, one of the most interesting takeaways from the Arab News poll is that a majority of respondents (58 percent) believe that Biden should shed the approach to the region adopted by his former boss, President Obama.

According to most of those surveyed, Obama left the Middle East in much worse shape than before he became America’s commander-in-chief. The 44th president’s policies proved highly unpopular among Arabs, who were expecting the “new

beginning” he promised during his 2009 speech at Cairo University.¹

Failing to properly tackle Iran — the key source of tension in the Middle East and seen by Arabs as one of the top threats facing the US globally — was seen as a key failure of the Obama-Biden administration, and one of which Arabs are particularly cognizant.

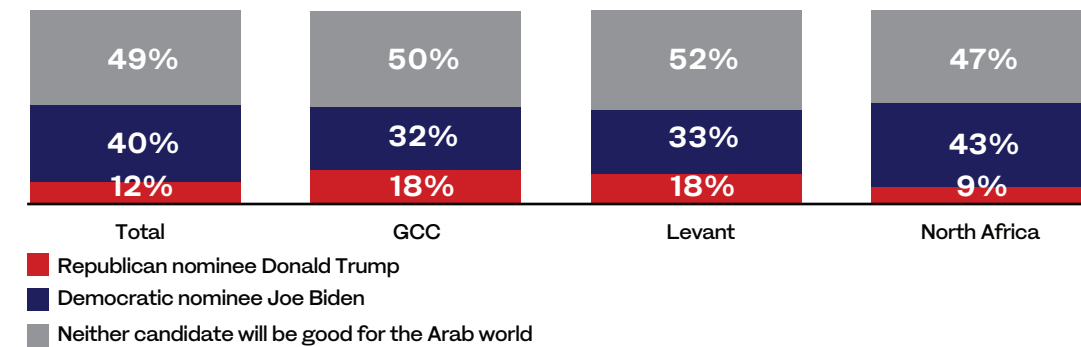
Ali Khedery, a regional expert who was at one point the longest serving US diplomat in Iraq, notes: “Obama even looked the other way while the Iranian IRGC increased their influence in the region across Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Yemen.”²

Arabs across the region recognize that Obama’s foreign-policy legacy in the Middle East is one of continual and repeated failure. The US foreign-policy failure in Libya, currently a failed state that is being ripped apart by a raging civil war and violent tribal conflicts, is an ongoing monument to Obama’s legacy.

“He also abandoned (Egyptian President) Hosni Mubarak, not understanding the fact that the vacuum left would be filled by Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood specifically,” Khedery also points out.

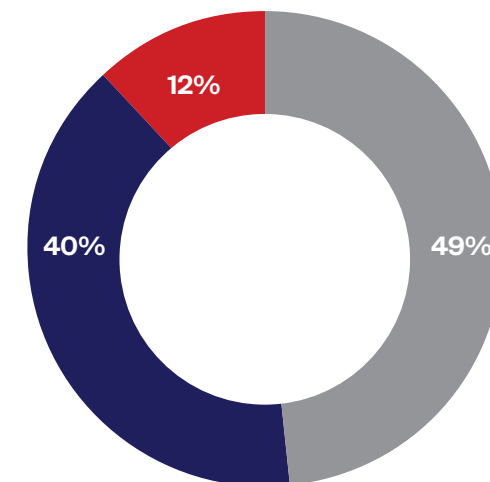
It can be clearly understood, then, why respondents to the Arab News/YouGov poll largely disagreed with Obama’s policies in the Middle East.³

WHO’S BETTER FOR THE ARAB WORLD’S INTERESTS?



WHICH CANDIDATE IS BETTER FOR THE MIDDLE EAST?

■ Donald Trump
■ Joe Biden
■ Neither



US - IRAN POLICY

Iran continues to be a cornerstone issue in understanding the Arab world’s discontent with the Obama administration. From the perspective of Arab states, Biden and Obama stand under the same umbrella, given that the former veep bears responsibility for many of Obama’s foreign-policy failures in the Arab world.

Under the new Democratic administration, Washington’s Arab allies are unsure whether the incoming occupant of the White House will meet their expectations when it comes to Iran.

The Arab News/YouGov survey reveals an unchanged attitude and skepticism about US foreign policy among a large proportion of Arabs.

The results indicate that 84 percent of people believe the US has not done enough to support countries in the region.⁴ Arabs also fear the imminent anticipated reversal by the Biden presidency of Trump’s policies and priorities in the Middle East, which is an issue of particular concern for those who want to see the US maintain its recent tough stance on Iran.

“Containing Iran and Hezbollah” featured among the four main issues on which respondents want the new US president to focus. One-third of respondents in all 18 countries agree that the Washington should maintain its sanctions and war-like posture against Iran.

While a new deal might slow Iran’s process of enriching nuclear materials, many in the Arab world believe it will not succeed in restraining the regime’s regional aspirations.


The loudest and most influential voice in the Arab world, on all fronts, is arguably that of the region’s youth.

The idea that it will cause Iran to abandon its nuclear-weapons research is regarded as far-fetched. Despite Trump’s broad sanctions and hard-line policy on Iran’s destabilizing activities in the Middle East, Tehran has managed to continue meddling in conflicts and crises in countries such as Lebanon and Syria.

Iran has been struggling domestically with the coronavirus pandemic, a crippled economy, a campaign of sabotage against multiple government facilities,⁵ and the targeted killings of its nuclear scientists within the nation’s borders.

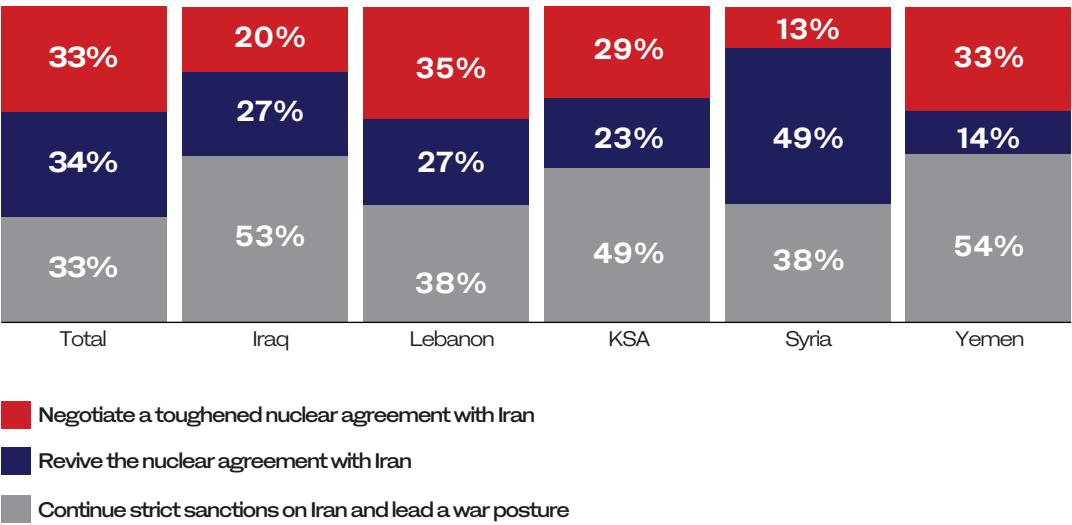
Internationally, its concerns have focused on the assassination by the US of its top military commander, Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, and the international outrage that followed the executions of wrestler Navid Afkar and journalist Ruhollah Zam, and the recently suspended death sentences handed to three protesters.⁶

These concerns in Tehran might be eased after the new administration takes over at the White House. Unlike his hard-line predecessor, Biden’s intention to rely on more-diplomatic methods gives Iran a better opportunity to negotiate a looser nuclear deal under which it regains economic incentives in exchange for concessions on its nuclear project.

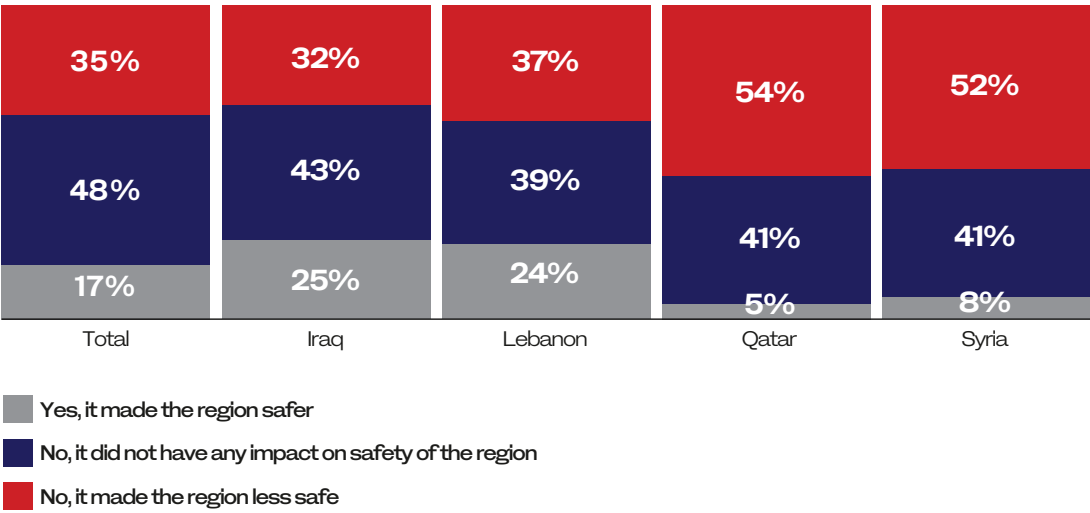
Incoming US Secretary of State Tony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, both of whom were participants in the JCPOA under Obama, are most likely to be the ones negotiating with Tehran.⁷

Whatever deal the Biden administration seeks to strike after taking office, it is certain

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT SHOULD THE NEXT US PRESIDENT DO ABOUT US RELATIONS WITH IRAN?



HAS THE WITHDRAWAL FROM THE JCPOA MADE THE REGION SAFER?



that it would be wise to take into account the implications the previous deal had for the Arab region. Under the JCPOA the Iranian regime was able to rake in billions of dollars, which helped it to prop up a criminal regime in Syria, and arm and fund Hezbollah in Lebanon, Kataib Hezbollah and others in Iraq, as well as the Houthi militias in Yemen.

It is imperative that any new deal guarantees that both Iran’s nuclear program and the proliferation of its proxies are reigned in.

One should also not underestimate the importance of the prevailing sentiment in the Gulf states about Trump’s attitude toward Iran. The survey found that about 20 percent of respondents in GCC states believe that Trump’s withdrawal from the Obama-era nuclear deal boosted safety in the region (with the figure rising to 49 percent among Saudi nationals).

Furthermore, residents of the countries most directly (and forcibly) affected by Iran, such as Yemen and Iraq, said they want the next US president to adopt a combative stance on Tehran, including tough sanctions and a war posture.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

The survey found that three issues topped the list of priorities for Arab youth in the next US president’s Middle East foreign policy: youth empowerment, the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and tackling the coronavirus crisis.

With nearly half (44 percent) of respondents indicating that they would like to see the


Youth in the Middle East expressed frustration with the blatantly biased US role with regard to Israel.

new administration focus on empowering young people,⁸ Biden must look to the very contrasting records of the two administrations that preceded his, both of which had consequences for Arab youth.

Obama reintroduced the DACA program, for example, which halted the deportation of undocumented immigrants who met certain criteria. Trump rescinded it during his second year in office.

It was Trump’s “Muslim ban”, however, that arguably played the biggest role in creating an environment of fear among students from majority-Arab countries, causing many to seek better higher-education options in Europe.

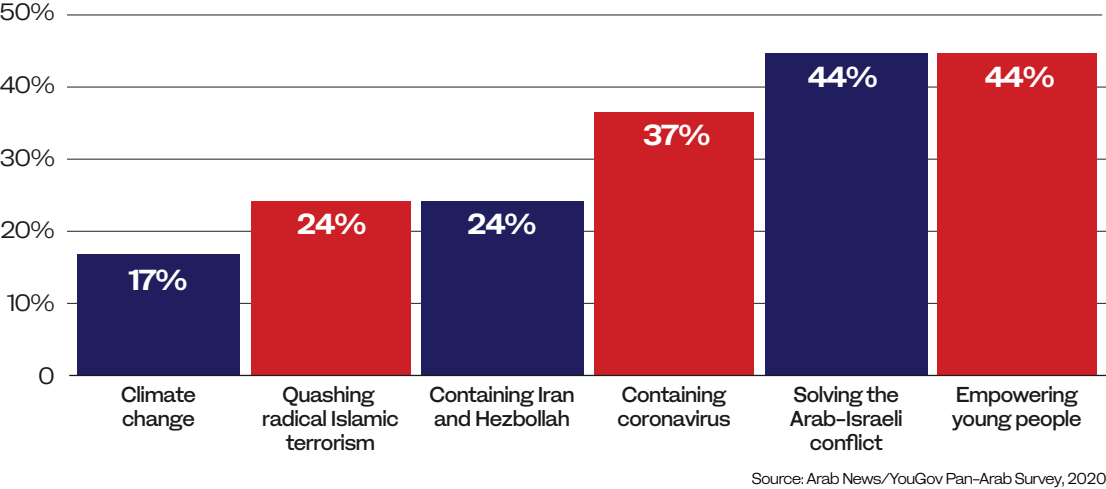
During the first coronavirus lockdown in July, the administration also pushed for the cancellation of all visas issued to international students attending US colleges, on the grounds that they were no longer attending classes in person. This plan was abandoned amid growing pressure from universities that earn millions of dollars in tuition fees from overseas students, and from the US companies that hire the newly qualified, highly skilled foreign workers who begin their careers in America after graduating from the nation’s top universities.⁹

The loudest and most influential voice in the Arab world, on all fronts, is arguably that of the region’s youth. They control the rhetoric, establish the priorities on the economic front, create new jobs and guide the direction of these new roles.

The Arab region has been drastically affected, socially and economically, by the

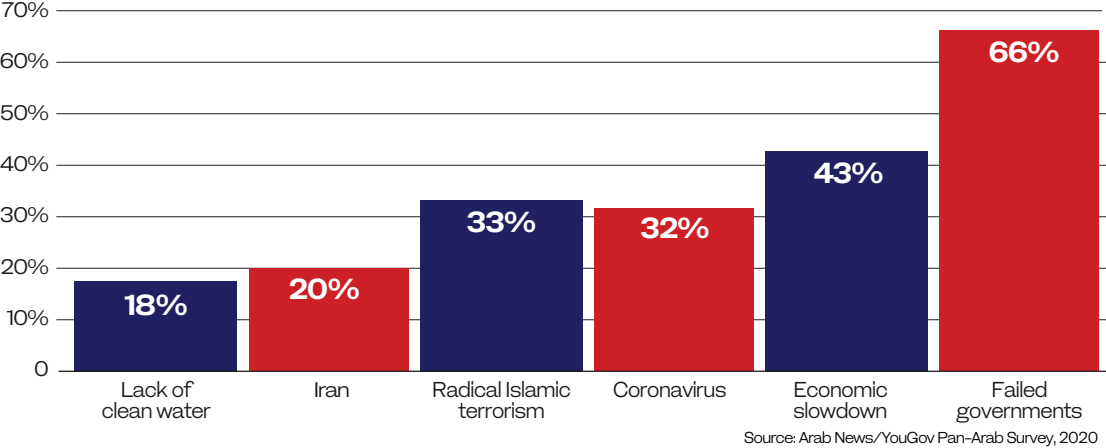
WISH LIST OF US PRIORITIES IN THE ARAB WORLD

What should the next US president focus on in the coming years?



MIDDLE EAST’S CLEAR AND BIGGEST DANGERS

What are the biggest threats facing the Arab world?



coronavirus pandemic, the sociopolitical ramifications of which have affected a large proportion of the region’s youth, increasing the willingness of many to emigrate from their home countries.

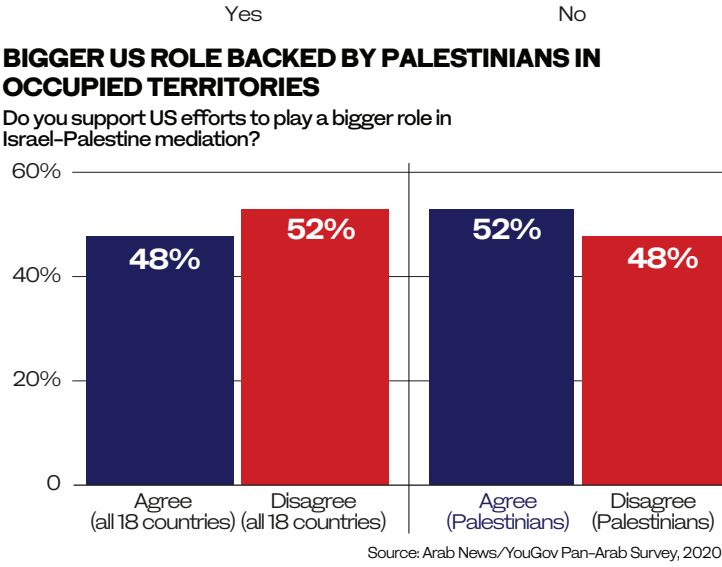
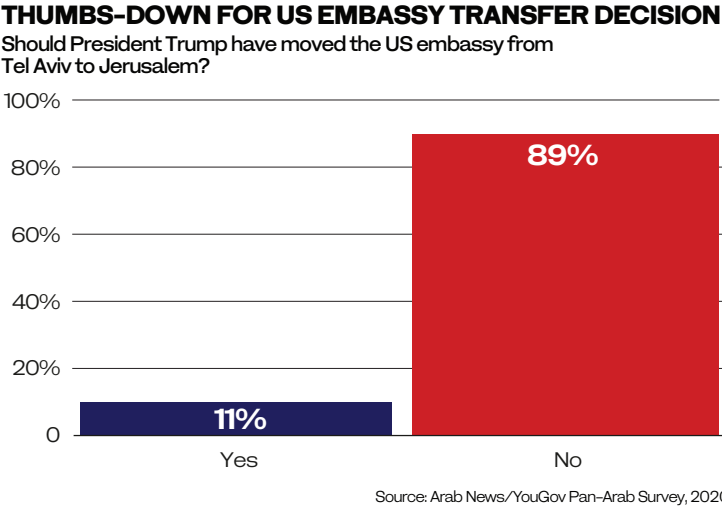
Retaining and encouraging the youth of Arab nations is a crucial factor in efforts to improve the stability and development of the region, but the opportunity to do so might be lost if US efforts are focused solely on counterterrorism initiatives.

Accordingly, the Biden administration should seek to address the root causes of the radicalization of young people in the Middle East. A policy that prioritizes the enhancement of educational opportunities and fighting corruption and unemployment would best serve America’s interest in sustaining stability and peace in a region that is growing economically.

THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

In contrast to the attitudes of Arab youth toward Trump’s policies on Iran, his legacy regarding the Palestine issue did not receive the same level of positive traction. Youth in the Middle East expressed frustration with the blatantly biased US role with regard to Israel, and its disregard of Palestinian rights. With the Israeli-Palestinian conflict far from resolved, peace in the Arab region — a crucial concern for the new generation — remains far from being achieved.

A key factor in the clear lack of support among the Arab public for US efforts to play a bigger role in Israeli-Palestinian mediation was Trump’s 2018 decision to move the



US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This move, and the implied recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, was opposed by 89 percent of respondents.

In addition, 52 percent said they were opposed to the US playing a bigger role in mediation between the Israelis and Palestinians, with 67 percent between the ages of 18 and 24 even opposing a general US peace-brokering role. In contrast, 61 percent of people over the age of 45 supported a bigger role for Washington, indicating a stark generational divide.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The incoming Biden administration would be well advised to distance itself from the Obama era, particularly with regards

People in New York protest President Donald Trump’s Muslim ban. AFP

to Iran. This is significant as despite the unpopularity of many of decisions of President Trump in the region, his hard stance on Tehran stands out as a remarkable, popular exception.

The Biden administration might also want to tread carefully with regards to the Israel/Palestine issue, with the former administration’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem proving hugely unpopular and causing many Arabs to not favor American mediation in this particular conflict.

The incoming administration should also consider youth empowerment across the region and helping the most affected parts of the Arab World recover from the devastating effects of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

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APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted using an online interview administered among members of the YouGov panel of over 8 million individuals across the world who have agreed to take part in surveys.

An email was sent to panelists selected at random from the panel, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov.

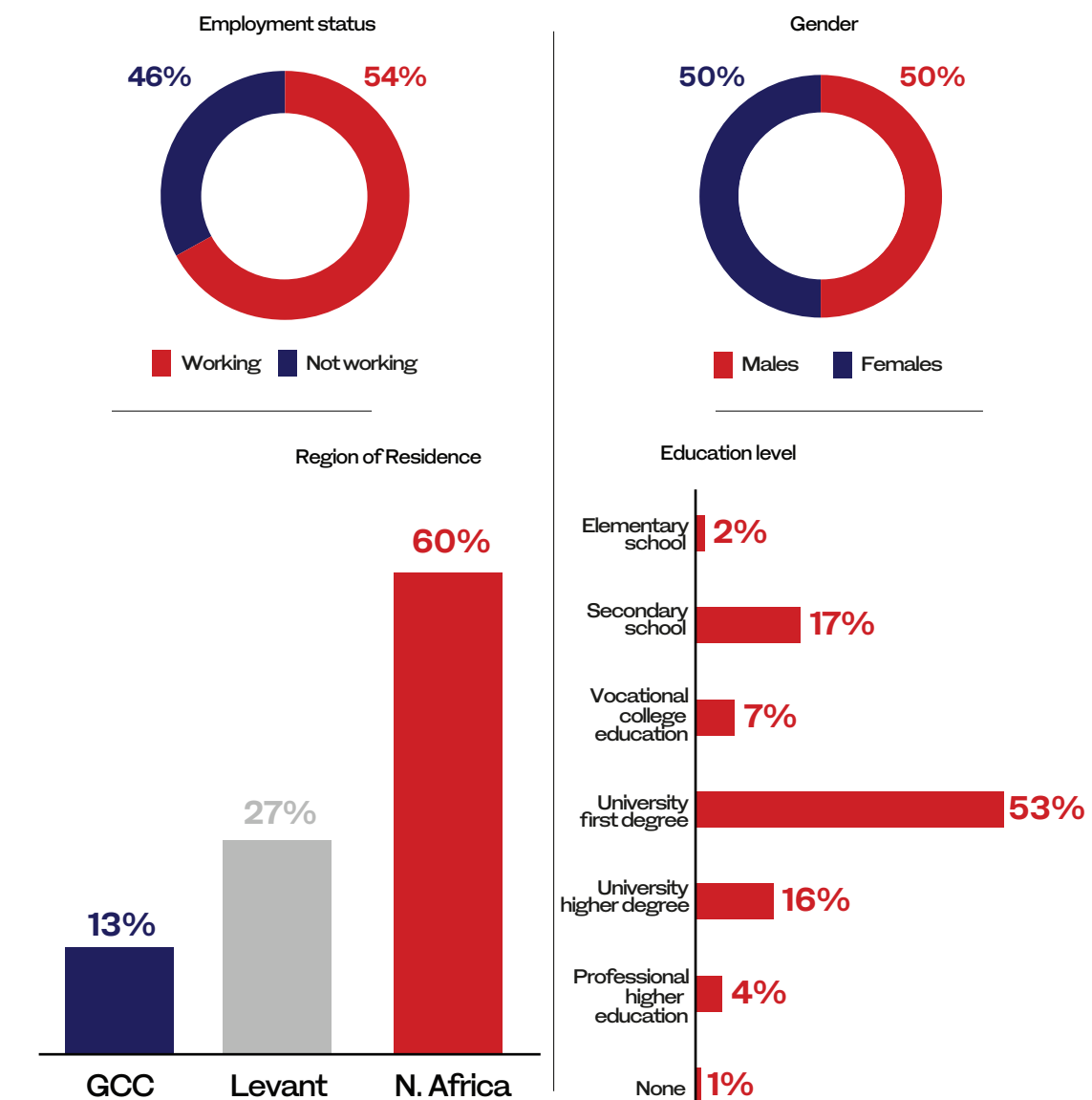
The total sample size was 3,097 Arabic

speakers, aged 18 years or above, residing across 18 countries in the Arab world.

Fieldwork was undertaken between 21st and 27th of September 2020. The overall margin of error is $\pm 1.761\%$. The sample was weighted as per the population distribution of all the countries covered. Weights were also added in line with regional distribution of age groups, and for equal representation of men and women..

Below is a detailed breakdown of the sample by demographics.

DEMOGRAPHIC SAMPLE OF THE ARAB NEWS/YOUGOV PAN ARAB SURVEY



ARAB NEWS/YOUGOV POLL “THE 2020 US ELECTION - WHAT DO ARABS WANT?” QUESTIONS:

1 What impact do you think the next US president will have on the Arab World in 2021?

Options:

- The next US president will have significant impact on the direction of the region
- The next US president will have moderate impact on the direction of the region
- The next US president will have little impact on the direction of the region
- The next US president will have no impact on the direction of the region

2 How would you describe the policies that were implemented in the Middle East region under the administration of Barack Obama (the previous US president)?

Options:

- They left the region better off
- They did not leave any significant impact on the region
- They left the region worse off

3 Do you think it will be in the best interest of Joe Biden to associate himself closely with the administration of Barack Obama or to distance himself from them?

Options:

- It will be better for Biden if he associates himself closely with the Obama administration
- It will be better for Biden if he distances himself from the Obama administration
- It will not affect Biden whether he associates or distances himself from the Obama administration

4 What do you believe are the THREE biggest threats facing the Arab World? Please select up to three options.

Options:

- Coronavirus
- Iran
- Radical Islamic Terrorism
- Failed Governments
- Climate Change
- Islamist parties
- Economic slowdown
- Lack of clean water
- Other threats

5 What would you want the next US president to focus on in coming years? Please select up to 3 options.

Options:

- Containing coronavirus
- Containing Iran and Hezbollah
- Solving the Arab/Israeli conflict
- Weakening Islamist parties
- Quashing radical Islamic terrorism
- Climate change
- Empowering young people
- Other issues

6 Do you support US efforts to play a bigger role in mediating between Israelis and Palestinians?

Options:

- Yes, the US should play a bigger role
- No, the US should not play a bigger role

7 The current US president Donald Trump has moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Would you say that President Trump was right to move the embassy?

Options:

- Yes
- No

8 In recent years, the US has withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal and increased sanctions on Iran. Would you say that these steps have made the Middle East region safer?

Options:

- Yes, it made the region safer
- No, it did not have any impact on the safety of the region
- No, it made the region less safe

9 In your opinion, what should the next US president do about US relations with Iran?

Options:

- Continue strict sanctions on Iran and lead a war posture
- Revive the nuclear agreement with Iran
- Negotiate a toughened nuclear agreement with Iran

10 Under President Trump, the US killed General Qassem Soleimani, a powerful Iranian commander. How do you view the impact of this incident for the Middle East region?

Options:

- A positive move for the region
- A negative move for the region