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The social contract in Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia: What do the people want?

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Abstract

This article investigates the demand side of social contracts. It asks what people expect from their governments. Drawing on original, nationally representative surveys in Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon, it explores popular preferences for the three possible government deliverables in social contracts: *provision* of social and economic services, *protection* from physical harm and political *participation*. Findings reveal that citizens expect governments to deliver all three 'Ps' (even if this costs a price), yet preferring provision over protection and participation if they have to prioritize. Findings do not show robust preferences among social groups identified by economic, gender, educational and communal differences.

KEYWORDS

Middle East and North Africa, public goods, social contract, survey research

1 | INTRODUCTION

It has been a decade since people across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—including in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya and Bahrain—rose against their authoritarian regimes in the quest for 'bread, freedom, and social justice' (Hinnebusch, 2019). Recalling the battle cry of the popular mass uprisings that came to be known as the 'Arab Spring', people expressed what they expected from their governments. And yet the post-uprising economic and political trajectories revealed that political leaders did not make good on their pledges. Quite contrary to people's aspirations, the MENA region has been thrown into a decade of crisis, evidenced by protracted social unrest amid uncertain transitions, civil wars and economic decline (Heydemann, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic not only catalysed some of these crises but also presented both the region's governments and its people with new challenges (Hoogeveen & Lopez-Acevedo, 2021).

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This article explores the social contract emerging from this decade of crisis. The research programme on the social contract has predominantly emphasized the political and economic context—authoritarian regime dynamics, state-led development models, rentier economies and corruption, to name but a few systemic context factors for state-society relations. This has prompted scholars to largely look at what governments offer to their citizens, that is, the supply side of the social contract (Brooke, 2019; Cammett, 2014; Eibl, 2020). We depart from this perspective, suggest taking seriously its demand side and ask the following questions: What do people want from their governments? What are people's priorities regarding different government deliverables in times of crisis? And, more precisely, which social groups and constituencies have which priorities regarding governments' allocation of goods and resources?

We adopt a concept of the social contract that emphasizes three constituent elements regarding what governments have to offer to citizens: *protection* from physical harm (individual and collective security against threats from within and outside of the country); the *provision* of material resources (social and economic benefits such as employment, education, health and sanitation services) and opportunities for citizen *participation* in political decision making (through elections but also informal and unconventional avenues such as street protests, hearings, trade unions and civil-society activism) (see Loewe et al., 2021). We conducted representative telephone surveys among adult respondents in Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon in late 2020 to gauge citizens' expectations regarding these different elements of the social contract. Our case selection allows us to test expectations across a range of different social and political contexts. Findings show that people across the board expect their governments to deliver in all three areas. It is only when asked to prioritize that citizens reveal preferences for the provision of material goods and security over political participation.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we lay out the conceptual framework upon which the article's argument is based. We then proceed to explain the empirical context factors underlying our case selection and expectations. In the article's fourth and fifth sections, we present the main findings from our empirical inquiry before concluding with some thoughts on our findings' theoretical and practical implications.

2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE SOCIAL CONTRACT FROM BELOW

The social contract is a key concept in social science treatments of government-society relations. It has its philosophical roots in the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th Centuries. Liberal state philosophers Hugo Grotius (1625), Thomas Hobbes (1651), John Locke (1689) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) used the term to compare a government-controlled setting with the 'natural state of anarchy'. In this perspective, the existence of a social contract implies a normative preference for political order over chaos and hence envelopes positive connotations. We follow more recent theoretical advancements in the social science research programme, which conceptualize the social contract purely analytically as the 'entirety of explicit or implicit agreements between all relevant societal groups and the sovereign (i.e. the government or any other actor in power), defining their rights and obligations towards each other' (Loewe et al., 2021, p. 3). Social contracts include implicit and explicit rules for government-society relations and thereby make politics more predictable. They increase the legitimacy of rule—including material legitimacy—by allowing society a voice in the allocation of state resources and regulatory power. In this view, the existence of a social contract is an empirical fact, rather than a normative judgement. Every country with a government has a social contract. However, some social contracts are more responsive to the demands of citizens than others; more balanced in terms of the gives and takes of the government and society; more or less egalitarian in the treatment of different societal groups and more or less sustainable. The analytical concept of the social contract allows us to compare government-society relations across time and between countries, to assess how beneficial they are for the different contracting parties, and which reforms would improve or reduce their benefits for the government and for different social groups.

Adopting the social contract as a conceptual framework has several advantages over other approaches merely focusing on governments' social service provision. For one, the concept encourages scholars to consider the reciprocal nature of government-society relations. It is not only the government that has something to give. In return for

the provision of public goods, governments expect citizens to provide them with legitimacy—at the ballot boxes and through tax payments, military service and law-abiding behaviour. It is this concept that encourages a view of the government as being embedded in society (Evans, 1995; Migdal, 1988). Second, the social contract allows for a broader perspective than accounts largely emphasizing the government's allocation of material resources—prominent in development studies and political economy. The social contract is as much about the protection of citizens against internal and external threats and about participation in decision making.

There are three constituent elements of the social contract (see Figure 1 below). The government can provide society with one or more of the following 'three Ps' (Loewe et al., 2021): *protection* refers to the government's guarantees of providing collective security against external threats and individual security against physical threats, such as alleged or real terrorist threats from non-state actors. This also includes criminal acts and legal security, such as the enforcement of human and civil rights and protection from government arbitrariness. The second constituent element of the social contract comprises the *provision* of basic services, such as citizens' access to resources, infrastructure, social services (e.g., health and education), social protection and economic opportunities. Finally, governments are expected to allow for meaningful and inclusive avenues of *participation* by society in political decision-making processes on different levels. This includes—most prominently—the organization of free and fair elections at regular intervals but also more informal ways of participation such as street protests, debates in the media, the formation of political parties, interest groups, civil society activism and public hearings.

Failing in the provision of any or several of these government responsibilities toward its citizens can lead to grievances, political instability and possibly state fragility (Grävingholt et al., 2015). Several MENA countries (such as Egypt, Saudi-Arabia and Morocco) fail, for example, in terms of allowing for meaningful political *participation* of citizens. And yet their respective governments still offer *protection* and *provision* in order to legitimize their rule. Other countries (such as Yemen or Libya), however, fail in all three 'Ps'. They no longer sustain nationwide social contracts; instead, the government and opposition armies try to build up social contracts as good as they can at the sub-national level in the territories they control (Loewe & Zintl, 2021).

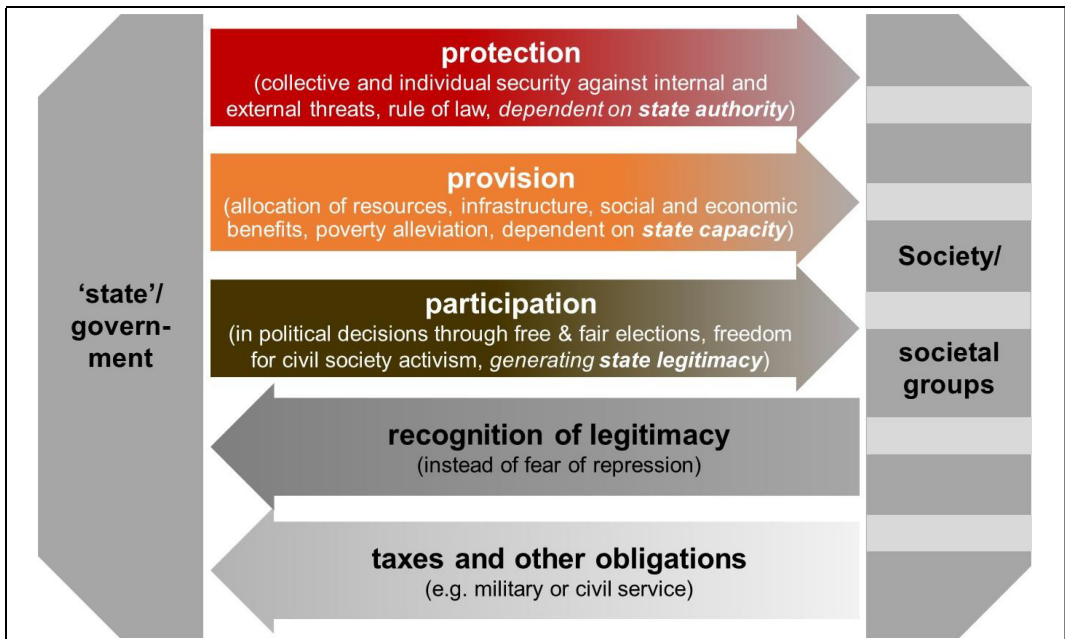


FIGURE 1 Deliverables in a social contract. Source: slightly adopted from Loewe et al. (2021)

Most contributions to extant scholarship on governments' service provisions—and the social contract more broadly—endorse a view 'from above' and emphasize the *supply side* of the social contract. Works in this research tradition have predominantly analysed systemic features and context factors determining what governments are able and willing to allocate to their citizens. This emphasizes, for instance, the authoritarian character of political regimes (Eibl, 2020; Henry & Springborg, 2010; Schlumberger, 2008), endemic social fabrics of favouritism (Cammatt, 2007; Heydemann, 2004; Loewe et al., 2008), declining governance capacities in neoliberal orders (Jones & Hameiri, 2021) and economic factors such as specific development models or rentier income structures (Cammatt et al., 2018; El-Haddad, 2020; Schwarz, 2008). The consequence is a somewhat one-sided view of the social contract, emphasizing what citizens across the region can expect to receive from their governments or societal groups (Brooke, 2019; Cammatt, 2014; Eibl, 2020), rather than what they need or want.

We aim to contribute to this research programme by emphasizing a view 'from below' and hence the *supply side* of the social contract. Specifically, we ask what people expect from their governments and if they develop any priorities regarding the allocation of goods and values from among the social contract's constituent elements. To begin with, we endorse a *macro-perspective* wondering broadly about people's perceptions of the three dimensions outlined above: *provision* (material resources), *protection* (individual and collective security) and *participation* (political accountability).

Adopting a *meso-perspective*, second, we are more specifically interested in whether citizens prioritize one or another of these constituent elements. This question is particularly pertinent during times of social and economic crises, where we assume people's needs are high, while statist resources to meet those needs are scarce. Studying priorities also drives our case selection, which is inspired by the degree to which governments make these constituent elements of the social contract available to citizens. Political participation is objectively present in democracies at a higher degree than in authoritarian regimes, and politically stable countries are able to generate security for its citizens more so than countries at the brink of war or civil war. From a broader, theoretical perspective, such an approach allows us to ask whether citizens demand what they have (e.g., participation in democracies) or what they do not, but inspire to, have (e.g., participation in authoritarian regimes).

Finally, we explore a *micro-perspective* to zoom in on specific social constituencies across multiple countries—and possible variation among social groups regarding priorities for deliverables embedded in the social contract. Empirically, we remain particularly intrigued with differences between social groups and constituencies with different material resources and immaterial capacities. More precisely, our expectations are inspired by differences among people along *gender*, *wealth*, *education* and *citizenship* status.

3 | EMPIRICAL CONTEXT: THE SOCIAL CONTRACT AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

We remain particularly interested in the Middle East and North Africa as an empirical playing field for studying popular expectations in the social contract. This is in great part because of the dynamic state-society relations after the events in 2011 that witnessed people across the region mobilize against their governments *en masse* that came to be known as the 'Arab Spring'. Prior to these watershed events—particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya but also in Jordan, Morocco, Algeria and Lebanon—most MENA governments have relied heavily on *protection* as part of an authoritarian bargain of sorts and the delivery of *provision* as the core element of the social contract (Cammatt et al., 2018; Eibl, 2020; Hinnebusch, 2019; Schwarz, 2008). Drawing on narratives of state-led development, this has led to the allocation of public sector jobs, free public education and health services, generous social protection, procurement to private companies and so forth.

On the flip side, the authoritarian regimes across the MENA region have largely failed to establish meaningful avenues of political *participation* that would have allowed its citizens a say regarding the composition of governments and political elites. While elections have been held and limited participation was granted, regimes ultimately refused to be held accountable by its citizens (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004). In an authoritarian bargain of sorts,

MENA governments traded the *provision* of material goods for political acquiescence from their citizens (Galal & Selim, 2013). This authoritarian bargain characterized the social contract in the first few decades after independence from colonial rule (Schwarz, 2008), but it was not sustainable (Ehteshami & Murphy, 1996). Since the 1980s, many MENA governments reduced step by step the *provision* of benefits without increasing the possibilities for political *participation* through democratic elections.

With few exceptions—in particular in Tunisia and Turkey, where regimes have embarked on volatile political transition processes—democracy and meaningful *participation* in competitive elections have remained elusive for citizens across the Middle East and North Africa (Bayat, 2017; Brownlee et al., 2015; Josua & Edel, 2021). While characterized by authoritarian governance based on small ruling coalitions, MENA regimes have been unable—or unwilling—to eliminate all avenues of participation, leaving room for civil-society activism, political opposition and a degree of openness ultimately designed to keep autocrats in power rather than allow for meaningful contestation (Albrecht, 2013; Singerman, 1995).

Clearly, while democracy was largely absent across the MENA region, political participation was not, as it came about in forms other than the ballot box (Albrecht, 2008). Moreover, the absence of free and fair elections has been held responsible for the outbreak of large-scale protests in 2011 (Achcar, 2013; Beissinger et al., 2015; El-Haddad, 2020; Lynch, 2014). In some MENA countries—Syria, Yemen and Libya—protests have gradually transformed into armed revolts, ethnic conflicts and ultimately civil wars, severely undermining a social pact that allowed authoritarian regimes to claim a measure of legitimacy for providing security to its population (Falk, 2016; Furness & Trautner, 2020; Mundy, 2019). As a result, people throughout the MENA region (even in countries not affected by civil wars) may not take for granted any more the delivery of *protection* (individual and collective security).

And yet some governments have attempted to reinvent the social bargain to trade stability and social protection for political acquiescence. Egypt's government, in particular, routinely points to the example of war-affected MENA countries to present itself as the only guarantor of security, while at the same time cutting down on *provision* and *protection* (Loewe & Westemeier, 2018; Vidican Auktor & Loewe, 2021). Other governments have increased the overall level of spending on *provision* (public sector jobs, social assistance and minimum wages) in the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings, only to massively reduce it once the revolutionary dust had settled (ESCWA, 2017; Loewe & Zintl, 2021). What is more, the first decade after the uprisings has not witnessed substantial reforms—with the partial exception of Morocco—in economic policies, for example, to promote competition, the rule of law, innovation, structural diversification and service delivery. Hence, the past decade saw only limited improvements in well-being for large parts of the region's population (Arayssi et al., 2019; El-Haddad, 2020; Vidican Auktor & Hahn, 2017).

It is in this context of permanent crisis, where we remain interested in the reconfiguration of the social contract across the region as well as in people's preferences of what they would expect their governments to provide. Looking at the region at large, we witness an objective deterioration of governments' allocation of goods, services and values in all of these three constituent elements of the social contract. How do these post-2011 political dynamics play themselves out empirically regarding the expectations and priorities of citizens in the social contract? We selected three countries for our empirical inquiry—namely, Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon—and conducted nationally representative opinion polls on people's attitudes toward the social contract in late 2020. Our case selection leverages similarities and differences between the three countries, which will allow us to detect both broad patterns prevalent across the region (substantiating some of our findings' external validity) as well as specific observations.

Three important context factors stand out when juxtaposing our three countries. For one, all three countries share similarities regarding the general capacity of governments to deliver on the *provision* of social and economic goods and services, as well as the necessary authority to deliver *protection*: They are middle-income countries, where government income draws on a mixture of tax income and rents. Egypt and Tunisia are lower middle income countries with a 2019 gross domestic product (GDP) in purchasing power parities (PPPs) of US\$ 12,161 and US\$ 11,096, respectively. Lebanon saw its GDP per capita plummet from an upper-middle income level at US\$ 15,966 in PPPs

(2019) to US\$ 15,167 (2020).¹ These countries have higher capacities regarding the delivery of material goods to its citizens than most low-income countries in sub-Sahara Africa. And yet their provision of economic goods remains limited compared to OECD countries or predominantly rent-based economies, such as in the Gulf region.

Our second country-level context factor relates to the level of political and economic crises prevalent in our cases at the time our study was conducted. Awareness of these crises includes *generic* and *specific* elements. The generic source of social crisis emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic prevalent in all three countries. Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon share similarities regarding the dynamics of the Covid-19 pandemic throughout the first year of the disease's global prevalence: All countries have, during the early stages of the pandemic, applied restrictive government measures (Fakir & Werenfels, 2021; Koehler & Schulhofer-Wohl, 2022). Yet the three countries faced increasing infection rates along with adverse social and economic consequences by the time the survey was conducted in late 2020 and again in subsequent infection waves throughout 2021 (Abbouzohour, 2021). For our empirical inquiry, this means people most certainly have been cognizant of the social and economic crisis emerging from the health pandemic.

Third, apart from the current health crisis, prevalent across the entire MENA region, specific sources of crisis exist in our countries. Tunisia, for instance, has undergone an uncertain political transition process from authoritarian rule to democracy that was associated with an economic downturn (Matta et al., 2019) and the increasing disillusionment of Tunisians with their political representatives and institutions, namely parliament and political parties (Albrecht et al., 2021). The country's political crisis culminated, on 25 July 2021, in the dissolution of parliament and dismissal of the government by president Kais Saied, which observers have interpreted as a 'power grab' (Grewal, 2021). As these events took place about 1 year after we conducted our survey in Tunisia, they did not influence survey responses. Yet they remain indicative of the looming political crisis in Tunisia.

Citizens in Lebanon, in turn, have become equally disillusioned with their political elites whom they held responsible for the Beirut port explosion of an abandoned stockpile of ammonium nitrate on 4 August 2020, just a few months before we started our telephone interviews in Lebanon. The incident revealed not only the endemic corruption among the country's political and administrative authorities but also the limitations of a strained health system (Landry et al., 2020). In conjunction with its political crisis, which manifests itself in an active protest movement (Geha, 2019), Lebanon has experienced a major economic down-turn evidenced in substantial inflation rates, economic decline and loss of income and savings (Bisat et al., 2021). Finally, Egypt has dealt with its very own political crisis largely inspired by the heavy-handed authoritarianism of President Sisi, which has effectively resulted in the repression of political participation demands in particular from parts of society critical of the Sisi regime, namely, Islamists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and liberal pro-democracy activists (Josua & Edel, 2021; Nugent, 2020).

Apart from apparent similarities, we observe significant differences regarding the context factors for citizens developing expectations in the social contract. Two differences stand out. For one, the three countries represent different systems of government, with Tunisia by the time of the survey emerging as an—albeit fragile—democracy, while Egypt took a different path of post-Arab Spring transformation reverting back to quite repressive authoritarian governance (Bellin, 2018; Hassan et al., 2021). Lebanon, in turn, represents a hybrid regime with its consociational power-sharing elite arrangements drawing on elements from both democracies and autocracies (Salamey & Payne, 2008). These differences between the countries are consequential for one of our three elements of the social contract: the *objective presence* (rather than subjective perception) of participatory dynamics in government-society relations—and we remain intrigued to see whether *subjective attitudes* toward participatory opportunities reflect those differences as well.

A second prominent difference refers to the legal status of individuals responding to our survey, namely, the distinction between citizens and non-citizens, aka refugees and migrants. This should influence our expectations about people's preferences for the *provision* of economic goods. Empirically, the distinction between citizens and

¹Data are based on estimates for 2020 by the World Bank: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ny.gnp.pcap.cd?year_high_desc=true (last accessed: 12 September 2021).

TABLE 1 Survey questions along constituent elements of social contract

Social Contract	Government Duties
Provision	Provide education, health and sanitation to all citizens Create employment opportunities
Protection	Guarantee safety of citizens Defend the country against neighbouring countries
Participation	Enable citizens to participate in political decisions Allow citizens to elect the government

refugees is particularly relevant for Lebanon that has, throughout its modern history, witnessed the influx of refugees from both Palestine (in the 1970s) and Syria (in the past decade). While Egypt hosts migrant communities from Sudan and Syria, and Tunisia became home to Libyans (Alcaraz, 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2014), these respective migrant communities remain small in comparison to Lebanon, where the influx of Syrian refugees in particular has contributed to the country's current social and economic crisis (el Khazen, 1997; Kikano et al., 2021).

4 | DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to gauge people's perception on the social contract, we commissioned a survey firm based in Tunisia and operating across the MENA region to conduct nationally representative telephone surveys among adult Egyptians (1,003 respondents), Tunisians (1,003 respondents) and people in Lebanon (1,503 respondents including 500 non-nationals, mostly of Palestinian or Syrian origin). All interviews were conducted by telephone calls in order to protect the health of interviewees and interviewers against Covid-19 infections. The surveys were conducted between September and November 2020. The survey instrument consisted of 43 questions and was administered by local enumerators in the respective Arabic dialects of the three countries.²

We leverage empirical findings from two types of questions that we integrated in our survey instrument: *direct* and *indirect* questions on people's preferences regarding social contract deliverables. As to the former, we asked questions designed to gauge people's preferences regarding deliverables from the three constituent elements of the social contract, that is, *provision*, *protection* and *participation*. For instance, we asked people about their opinions of the numbers 1 and 2 duties of the government, with six answers determining preferences regarding our three core elements of the social contract (Table 1).³

In order to corroborate findings from these core questions, we asked a battery of additional questions about people's satisfaction with government institutions, policies and performances associated with our three constituent elements of the social contract.

Moreover, in our indirect questions, we tested if citizens recognize the existence of a social contract and its reciprocal nature of give and take; across our three countries, we asked to which degree they were ready to pay a price for government delivery of protection, provision and participation. Empirically we remain interested in people's loyalty to the government (Table 2) as well as their readiness to pay taxes conditioned by the government's deliverables (Table 3). Our questions about attitudes toward loyalty and tax payments again relate to our three constituent elements of the social contract and measure Likert-scale responses prompting interviewees to strongly agree, somewhat agree, rather disagree or strongly disagree.

²The survey was conducted by *One-to-One for Research and Polling* (www.121polling.com/). It represents a national quota sample of adults 18 years and older. Respondents were selected proportionally to population size according to the following quotas: governorate, urban/rural, gender and age.

³For practical reasons, we were unable to differentiate fully between the expectations of respondents in their government respectively the state as whole. We used the word 'government' in many of our question but are aware of the fact that many people in the three surveyed countries consider the doing of most state organs to be intended by the government.

TABLE 2 Importance of government deliverables as conditions for citizens' loyalty

Social Contract	Loyalty to the State
Provision	Citizens should be loyal to the government if it provides social and economic services that citizens need
Protection	Citizens should be loyal to the government if it provides for security
Participation	Citizens should be loyal to the government only if it has been elected in a transparent and fair manner
Dismiss social contract	Currently, there is no reason to be loyal to the government

TABLE 3 Importance of government deliverables as conditions for citizens' readiness to pay taxes

Social Contract	Paying Taxes to the State
Provision	Citizens have to pay taxes because the government is providing useful services I would be ready to pay more taxes if the government provided better public services
Protection	Citizens have to pay taxes because the government defends their security I would be ready to pay more taxes if the government did more for the security of citizens
Participation	Citizens have to pay taxes because the government acts on their behalf I would be ready to pay more taxes if I could participate better in decision making on fund allocation

In the following empirical discussion, we report findings from our survey using descriptive statistics. To gauge the robustness of our findings, we also measure probit regression models using a battery of control variables from our survey capturing gender, age, country of origin (only in Lebanon), marital status, education, employment status, income bracket, self-perception of affluence, religion, dominant values and primary group of orientation. We report the main results from these models here, while the complete models are in the [supporting information](#) appendix.

5 | EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The evaluation of our data prompts us to report three main findings. For one, despite wide-spread disillusionment with governments and their capacities, a very large number of people in all three countries recognize the existence of a social contract between the government and themselves. For one, they expect the government to deliver protection, provision and participation. At the same time, they are ready to pay a price for the delivery and thereby recognize the reciprocal nature of government-society relations. The large majority of respondents in all three countries confirmed their readiness to be loyal to governments and pay taxes if governments effectively provide either of the three Ps. Even more so, they would be ready to give more for more: pay higher taxes in return for more protection, more provision or more participation.

Second, when prompted to prioritize between those deliverables, the largest share of people in all three countries emphasizes the government's duty to deliver *provision*, followed immediately by *protection*, while a somewhat smaller share insists on *participation*. This is noteworthy in particular regarding people's perception of political participation. People across our three countries appear to relegate the importance of this element of the social contract to third place despite the fact that these countries have recently experienced large-scale contentious movements amid the 'Arab Spring' protests. Moreover, our three cases vary regarding the objective presence of avenues for political participation at the time of our survey, which leads us to disregard political regime type as a major driver for such social contract preferences.

Third, an intriguing pattern emerges when considering country-specific factors and hence differences between our three countries: On the one hand, citizens across our countries are united in their general prior-

itization of *provision* over *protection* and *participation*. On the other hand, however, country-specific factors appear to remain more consequential for people's different priorities than variation across distinct social groups.

People in Lebanon, for instance, endorse preferences for protection over participation much like in Egypt and Tunisia. Yet they appear to value political participation more so than people in both democratic Tunisia and authoritarian Egypt. We interpret this observation as a consequence of various waves of anti-government protests in the country, in particular in the 2 years preceding our survey (Geha, 2019). The finding is indicative of the impact of current conflict dynamics for popular preferences in the social contract. Egypt is another example, where people overwhelmingly emphasize their preferences for protection, at an even higher degree than in the two other countries. While we cannot rule out a measure of misreporting in our survey—inspired by preference falsification in a highly repressive political context—there is reason to believe that Egyptians do give credit to a renegotiated authoritarian bargain of sorts where the Sisi regime receives support for political stability (Albrecht & Loewe, 2022).

We will show in the following empirical discussion that country-level differences drive variation in preferences for elements of the social contract more so than differences on the level of social groups. Safe for some exceptions that we report below, the share of people emphasizing the three Ps is quite similar across social groups such as women and men, rich and poor, well and less educated, different ages, nationals and refugees.

5.1 | Recognition of the three elements of the social contract

To begin with—and perhaps not surprisingly—respondents in all three countries express wide-spread disillusionment with their governments. Such disillusionment is particular prominent in Tunisia and Lebanon: 42% in Egypt, 56% in Lebanon and 55% in Tunisia agree with the statement that there is currently no reason to be loyal with the government (see Table 4 below). Here, the differences are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (Table S1). These findings can be interpreted not only as a general disillusionment with the political elites in government but also with governments delivering insufficiently on the three Ps: *protection*, *provision* and *participation*.

At the same time, negative views on government performance do not moderate people's expectations in what they see as the government's job in the social contract. Citizens in all three countries consider all three government deliverables as very important for them. A very large share of respondents in all three countries agrees that citizens should be loyal with the government if it delivers (i) security (weighted average: 89%), (ii) social and economic services that citizens need (89%) or (iii) guarantees of fair and transparent procedures in elections (82%) (Table 4).

The differences between the three countries are not very large but still statistically significant at least at the 90% confidence level (see Table S1). The share of respondents stating that citizens should be loyal if the government delivers security is above-average in Egypt (91%) and below-average in Tunisia (87%), while the share of respondents saying that citizens should be loyal if the government has been elected in a fair and transparent manner is below-average in Egypt (74%) and above-average in Tunisia (84%) and Lebanon (87%).

A similar picture emerges if citizens are asked about the reasons why they should pay taxes. 78% of all interviewees agree that citizens should pay taxes as a quid pro quo for the *provision* of useful services by the government; 71% agree that taxes should be paid because the government defends the security of citizens and 63% agree that taxes should be paid if the government acts on behalf of citizens. Agreement was highest among Egyptians for all three items, in particular for the last one. Agreement was lowest among Tunisians for all three items, yet again in particular for the last item (see Table 5 below). Surprisingly, the differences between the three countries are somewhat smaller—yet still statistically significant—when citizens were asked if their own readiness to pay higher taxes depended on better government delivery of *protection*, *provision* and *participation* (Tables 5, S1 and S2).

In Egypt, the share of respondents agreeing on the statements suggested by the second set of questions (referring to the individual willingness to pay taxes) was lower than the share agreeing with the first set of statements for all three conditions: more *protection*, more *provision* and more *participation*. In Lebanon and Tunisia, however, it was

TABLE 4 Government deliverables that citizens consider important for their loyalty

	Mean	Egypt	Lebanon	Tunisia
'Citizens should be loyal if the government provides for security' (<i>protection</i>)				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	89.3%	90.9%	89.8%	87.1%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	8.7%	7.0%	7.0%	12.1%
Do not know/refuse to answer	2.0%	2.1%	3.2%	0.8%
'Citizens should be loyal to the government if it provides social and economic services that citizens need' (<i>provision</i>)				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	89.3%	89.5%	91.6%	89.2%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	8.7%	6.8%	5.2%	9.8%
Do not know/refuse to answer	2.0%	3.7%	3.2%	1.0%
'Citizens should be loyal if the government has been elected in a fair and transparent manner' (<i>participation</i>)				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	81.5%	74.0%	86.7%	83.7%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	14.0%	19.5%	7.9%	14.6%
Do not know/refuse to answer	4.6%	6.6%	5.4%	1.7%
'Currently, there is no reason to be loyal with the government'				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	50.9%	41.5%	56.3%	54.9%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	41.4%	50.9%	31.0%	42.2%
Do not know/refuse to answer	7.6%	7.5%	12.6%	2.8%

higher at least for two conditions: more *protection* and more *provision* (for more *participation* higher in Tunisia but lower in Lebanon, see Table 5).

5.2 | Prioritization of the three government deliverables

A somewhat different picture emerges, however, when citizens had to prioritize among the most important deliverables of governments (see Table 6 below). In our survey, respondents were asked to select a numbers 1 and 2 duty of the government out of a list of six options – two representing each of the three Ps (see Table 1 above). Results indicate a clear hierarchy with people prioritizing *provision* over *protection* and *participation*.

On average, 87% selected at least one of the two options representing *provision* (85% in Egypt, 82% in Lebanon and 93% in Tunisia); 32% selected even both options representing *provision* (29% in Egypt, 30% in Lebanon and 37% in Tunisia). In contrast, only 55% of respondents prioritized either one of the two duties representing *protection*. Here, the percentage was, however, much higher in Egypt (63% against 50% in Lebanon and 52% in Tunisia), while just 5% selected both duties representing *protection* (9% in Egypt, 2% in Lebanon and 3% in Tunisia). Finally, the share of respondents selecting at least one of the two possible answers representing *participation* was even lower. The average for all three countries was 18% (13% in Egypt, 27% in Lebanon and 14% in Tunisia). A mere 1% selected both possible answers representing *participation* in Egypt and Tunisia, 2% in Lebanon (Table 6). For all the results, there was no significant difference between the items identified as Number 1 or Number 2 duty of the government (see Table S4).

For any one of our three Ps, we observe a strong correlation in people ticking both possible answers. In particular, a significantly above average share of those who consider 'create employment opportunities' or 'provide education, health and sanitation to all citizens' as the number 1 or 2 duty of the government consider the other as a second priority. In addition, the selection of either one of these dimensions of *provision* correlates significantly with the selection of 'guarantee safety of citizens' as the other main duty. Likewise, 'provide education, health and sanitation to all citizens' correlates significantly with 'defend the country against neighbouring countries', while the correlation

TABLE 5 Government deliverables as reasons why citizens should pay taxes

	Mean	Egypt	Lebanon	Tunisia
'Citizens have to pay taxes because the government defends their security' (protection)				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	71.1%	77.7%	70.1%	65.4%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	26.1%	19.1%	25.9%	33.2%
Do not know/refuse to answer	2.9%	3.2%	4.1%	1.4%
'Citizens have to pay taxes because the government is providing useful services' (provision)				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	78.9%	86.1%	79.4%	71.1%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	18.7%	12.1%	16.2%	27.8%
Do not know/refuse to answer	2.5%	1.8%	4.4%	1.2%
'Citizens have to pay taxes because the government acts on their behalf' (participation)				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	63.2%	77.5%	61.1%	51.0%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	33.2%	19.5%	33.5%	46.6%
Do not know/refuse to answer	3.6%	3.1%	5.3%	2.3%
'I would be ready to pay more taxes if the government did more for the security of citizens' (protection)				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	74.6%	75.5%	76.3%	72.0%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	22.2%	19.6%	20.0%	27.1%
Do not know/refuse to answer	3.3%	5.0%	3.8%	1.0%
'I would be ready to pay more taxes if the government provided better public services' (provision)				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	79.7%	83.7%	82.5%	73.0%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	17.9%	13.2%	14.2%	26.2%
Do not know/refuse to answer	2.4%	3.1%	3.2%	0.9%
'I would be ready to pay more taxes if I could participate better in decision making on fund allocation' (participation)				
Agree somewhat/agree strongly	59.0%	64.8%	59.0%	53.1%
Disagree somewhat/disagree strongly	33.4%	25.3%	31.5%	43.3%
Do not know/refuse to answer	7.7%	10.0%	9.5%	3.5%

between 'create employment opportunities' and 'defend the country against neighbouring countries' was significantly negative (Table S4).

It is noteworthy that the preference order of the three Ps is the same for all three countries, and even the relative position of the six possible answers is not very different. Nevertheless, there are large differences in the absolute positions of the six answers, which are statistically highly significant and even much larger than the differences between the results for the three countries with respect to the questions mentioned before. In particular, a significantly above-average share of Egyptians gives priority to *protection*, which is mainly because 29% of them selected 'defence of the country' as one of the two main duties of the government as opposed to 18% of Tunisians and 11% of people in Lebanon.

In turn, a significantly below-average share of Egyptians prioritizes *provision*; in particular, just 46% of the respondents in Egypt ticked 'employment creation', as opposed to 60% in Tunisia and 62% in Lebanon. At the same time, the share of people giving priority to *participation* is significantly higher in Lebanon than in the two other countries; 14% of the respondents in Lebanon prioritize citizen *participation* in political decision-making (8% in Egypt and 10% in Tunisia), and 15% prioritize the election of government (6% in Egypt and 5% Tunisia). In turn, a significantly below-average share of Lebanese prioritizes the defence of the country (see above) or the *provision* of education, health and sanitation (50% as opposed to 68% of Egyptians and 70% of Tunisians). All these differences are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (see Table S3).

TABLE 6 Citizens' opinions on the first and second duty of the government

Number 1 or 2 Duties of the Government	Mean	Egypt	Lebanon	Tunisia
Protection				
Guarantee safety of citizens	40,5%	42,9%	40,4%	38,1%
Defend country against neighbours	19,5%	29,4%	11,4%	17,7%
Either of both options	55,1%	63,1%	49,7%	52,4%
Both options	4,9%	9,2%	2,1%	3,4%
Provision				
Provide education, health and sanitation	62,6%	68,1%	50,2%	69,6%
Create employment opportunities	56,1%	46,1%	62,4%	59,9%
Either of both options	86,7%	85,0%	82,4%	92,6%
Both options	32,1%	29,1%	30,2%	36,9%
Participation				
Enable citizens to participate in political decisions	10,3%	7,6%	13,8%	9,6%
Allow citizens to elect the government	8,7%	6,0%	15,1%	5,1%
Either of both options	17,9%	12,9%	26,9%	14,0%
Both options	1,1%	0,7%	2,0%	0,7%

5.3 | The social determinants of priorities

In this section, we aim to explore if *social factors*—in addition to, or contradiction of, such institution-level factors—influence people's priorities in the social contract. To this aim, we operationalize core elements of specific social constituencies—namely *gender*, *wealth*, *education*, and *citizenship* status—to see if such social factors emerge significantly across our range of countries. Surprisingly or not, we do not find robust evidence for priorities in the social contract shared by social groups across our countries. Results from our empirical inquiry are noisy at best and show the strong impact of country dummies in our probit regression models, hence pointing yet again at differences between countries, rather than social groups (see Table 7 below).

Gender: We began looking at gender premised by our assumption that women might have an above-average interest in the provision of social services and protection from physical harm because they have remained more vulnerable to social, political and economic crises than men.

We find no evidence for this assumption regarding the *provision* of social services. Women do not have a particularly strong interest in government provisions of education, health, and sanitation. Correlation coefficients remain statistically insignificant and even point to the opposite direction in Egypt. In Tunisia, the preference for employment creation is also negatively correlated with females (Tables 7 and S6).

In contrast, our data do contain some evidence that women value internal security more so than men. In Tunisia, a significantly above-average share of females prioritizes the government to guarantee the safety of citizens. However, the same measure does not show any level of significance for Egypt and Lebanon. In turn, the share of females emphasizing priority for the defence of the country is lower than the respective share of men (statistically significant for Egypt, not significant for the other two countries; see Tables 7 and S5). Likewise, the preference for political participation correlates negatively with females in Tunisia, while the preference for the election of government correlates negatively and significantly with females in Lebanon (Tables 7 and S7).

These findings about preferences regarding the government's deliverables are corroborated by the results from our questions on people's readiness to pay higher taxes: A significantly above-average share of women is ready to do so if the government does more for the protection of citizens, while a significantly below-average share of women

would pay higher taxes if the government were to just guarantee possibilities for political participation (see Table S2). Meanwhile, the degree of frustration with the government appears to be lower among women than men: a significantly below-average share of females in our total sample agreed on the statement that ‘currently, there is no reason to be loyal with the government’ (see Table S1).

Wealth: Much like for women, we assumed poor people to be particularly vulnerable in times of crisis. We therefore premised poor people to be predominantly interested in the *provision* of social services, such as health care, education and sanitation. In turn, affluent people would be interested in *protection*, and possibly political *participation*, more so than in the provision of services.

Surprisingly or not, we find no evidence regarding differences between effectively rich and poor people in terms of their priorities for *protection* or *provision*. There is no significant correlation between people belonging to the top income quartile of our sample and their preference for either internal or external security, respectively the delivery of jobs or education, health and sanitation.

However, we do report some intriguing country-level variation in these preferences regarding the subjective assessments of poverty and affluence. For Egypt, we found that people who believe that their own economic situation is above-average are significantly more likely to prioritize external security (see Table S5), which supports our initial hypothesis. At the same time, we find that a significantly above-average share of the same category of people in Tunisia (believing that their own economic situation is above-average) prioritizes the government's *provision* of education, health, and sanitation, which contradicts our initial expectation. In Lebanon, in turn, we find that a significantly lower share of the same category of people prioritizes the provision of jobs by the government, which again supports our hypothesis.

With regards to participation, the picture is equally inconsistent, at least if one were to expect different social strata to share similar views across our three countries. On the one hand, for the whole sample we find that a significantly above-average share of people from the top income quartile prioritizes political participation (holds also for the Egypt sub-sample but is not significant for the other two countries), while a below-average share of people from the top income quartile prioritizes the government to be elected by citizens (but no significance at the country level for any of the three countries; see Tables 7, S3 and S7). The last finding might be owing to the fact that affluent people share greater belief in the possibilities that political participation brings about. They possibly believe that avenues of

TABLE 7 Differences in preferences for government delivery by social group (gender, objective and subjective affluence, education and citizenship)

	Among the two main duties of the government is to					
	Guarantee the safety of citizens	Defend the country against other countries	Provide education, health and sanitation to all citizens	Create employment opportunities	Enable citizens to participate in political decisions	Allow citizens to elect the government
	[Protection]		[Provision]		[Participation]	
Female	+(TUN)	-(EGY)		-(TUN)	-(TUN)	-(LBN)
High income (top income quartile of sample)					+(LBN)	
Subjective well-being (considers own situation above-average)		+(EGY)	+(TUN)	-(LBN)	-(EGY)	-(EGY)
Higher education (Tertiary school exam)		-(TUN)	+(TUN)			-(TUN)
Refugees (only Lebanon)	+(Syrians)	-(Palestinians)				

Note: + means significantly positive correlation. – means significantly negative correlation.

inclusive political participation open doors for them to have their interests being taken into consideration. This interpretation is backed by the finding that an above-average share of interviewees saying that business opportunities are among the two main values deciding on their political opinions also prioritizes political participation and the election of government (see Tables S1 and S3).

And yet stark differences prevail between the three countries—particularly between Egypt and Lebanon (see Table S7). In the former, a particularly low share of those who believe that their economic situation is above-average (subjective assessment of affluence) prioritizes political participation and the election of the government. In Lebanon, in turn, a significantly above-average share of people belonging to the top income quartile of our sample (objective presence of affluence) has a particularly strong interest in political participation.

Education: much like gender and wealth, education remains a weak predictor for people's preferences across the board, and we report only significant findings for Tunisia. In this country, there is some evidence in support of our hypothesis that people with higher education are mainly interested in the provision of education, health and sanitation. A significantly above-average share of people with tertiary education emphasizes the government's duty to provide education, health, and sanitation, while a significantly below-average share of the same group prioritizes the defence of the country and the election of the government by citizens (see Tables S2, S3 and S5–S7).

Citizenship: finally, we empirically isolate Lebanon as a country with a substantial share of non-citizens among the people living within its borders, namely Palestinian and Syrian refugees. Our premise here was that non-nationals were particularly interested in security and protection from physical harm. In turn, refugees would not have strong opinions about social service provision and political participation as they often remain excluded from these deliverables.

Our data contain evidence for differences between the opinions of nationals and non-nationals in Lebanon; and yet, some results remain inconsistent between refugee groups. A particularly high share of Syrians puts emphasis on internal security, while a particularly low share of Palestinians prioritizes the defence of Lebanon (see Tables 7 and S5). In turn, as expected, the preferences for *provision* and political *participation* of our interviewees in Lebanon are not significantly correlated with their origin (Tables S6 and S7).

6 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we set out to study the social contract 'from below', that is, to generate insights into people's expectations in the allocation of goods, resources and values. Empirical findings show that a very large majority of people in all three countries under investigation—Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia—value highly the delivery of *protection*, *provision* and *participation* by the government. This general finding may not be particularly surprising, and yet it remains noteworthy considering the large extent of frustration prevalent among the population across our three cases: People find that governments do not make good on their promises in times of crisis, which gives rise to the interpretation of a large extent of relative deprivation—and, hence, possibly the social foundations for future contentious mobilization (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1970).

Our second finding refers to people's priorities regarding the social contract—a matter equally interesting for academics and policy makers alike. If people in the three countries have to choose between the three Ps, they tend to prioritize *provision* over *protection*—with *participation* coming at a distant third priority across the board. This is noteworthy because—a decade after the Arab mass uprisings—the region has been suffering from a lack in all of these elements of the social contract, owing to economic crises, substantial security concerns and failed transitions toward democratic governance.

People appear to be particularly disillusioned with enhanced avenues of *participation*. Many Egyptians perceived the short democratic period in their country between 2011 and 2013 as chaotic and counterproductive, and today's president Al-Sisi is a master in the exploitation of these perceptions for the legitimization of his own authoritarian rule. Tunisia has embarked on a protracted period of political transformation, only to witness the rise of popular disil-

lusionment with its political institutions and elites. Those elites have promoted democratic principles in the country perhaps at the expense of urgently needed economic and social reforms. Lebanon's specific form of political *participation* manifests itself in an urban protest movement and has sustained the benefits of a small political and business elite rather than those of the impoverished mass of the population.

Against the backdrop of disillusionment with political participation, all three countries suffer from low growth rates, high levels of underemployment and unemployment, and low quality of public education and health systems to the effect that an increasing number of households resort to expensive private providers of education and health. If these problems persist, more political *participation* may seem desirable but secondary in importance compared to better *provision*.

We also note that *protection* does not appear to be the highest priority among people in our three countries. Here we shall highlight a caveat to our empirical findings, which remain highly context-specific—at least from a broader view at the MENA region. All three countries covered in our research are middle-income countries with governments enjoying a measure of legitimacy in the population, authority to control most of the country and extant capacities to deliver social and economic services to most of its citizens. Our findings would likely be quite different, for example, if we were to look at MENA countries suffering from civil war or terrorist threats, such as Yemen, Syria and Libya, but also Iraq and Sudan. In those countries, many people suffer every day from personal and collective insecurity. Following Maslow's idea of a hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), we would expect people in those countries to value *protection* against internal and external threats much higher than both *provision* and *participation* compared to Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia. This shows that people tend to forget about the importance of *protection* when they enjoy it and that many people value political *participation* only if it comes along with the *provision* of improvements in socio-economic well-being.

Finally, we note that priorities regarding the social contract are shaped much more so by country-level factors rather than what we expected to be shared experiences among social groups and strata. Finding no obvious general patterns along gender, economic status, education and citizenship severely undermines general arguments and the external validity of country-level findings. Scholars will need to pay close attention to specific political and economic dynamics in order to gauge people's perceptions of government-society relations.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of the article draft declare the following: We have no affiliations with or involvements in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria, educational grants, participation in speakers' bureaus, membership employment, consultation, stock ownership or other equity interest and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements) or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationship, affiliation, knowledge or belief) in the subject matter or materials discussed in the draft article submitted. The article draft has not been published or submitted for publication to any other journal or book, neither in full length, nor in parts.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The full dataset used by the article will be published in early 2023 on the IDOS website.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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