

Greetings from Washington,

Bridging the Happiness Gap: A Closer Look at MENA

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, despite its rich history, cultural heritage, and significant natural resources, consistently ranks lower in global happiness indices compared to other regions. The World Happiness Report, published annually by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network since 2012, provides a detailed analysis of this phenomenon. The report uses Gallup's World Poll data to assign happiness rankings to countries, considering factors such as gross domestic product (GDP), life expectancy, having someone to count on, a sense of freedom, generosity, and perceptions of corruption.

The 2024 edition of the World Happiness Report provides an analysis of happiness trends across different ages and generations in 143 countries. It finds that the well-being of 15 to 24-year-olds has fallen in North America, Western Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia since 2019.

For the seventh year in a row, Finland is featured in the report as the "happiest" country, followed by Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden. Arab countries, however, score relatively modestly on the global happiness scale, with an average happiness score of 5.1. Within the Arab World, Lebanon ranks as the second unhappiest country worldwide, after Afghanistan, registering the 142nd position on the list. Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Jordan showed the steepest declines in well-being metrics since the 2008-2010 period. In contrast, countries including Serbia, Bulgaria, and Latvia registered the biggest gains. Meanwhile, Kuwait is the only Arab country that joined the top happiest countries, moving up to rank number 13 compared to 17 last year.

Challenges and the Path Forward

It is not particularly shocking to see MENA citizens lagging behind in terms of their perception of prosperity and self-satisfaction. The region has significantly struggled with long-term scarring from the pandemic crisis, ongoing inflation, and persistent unemployment among the youth (under the age of 30) who roughly represent 60 percent of the society. Inequality in the region, in terms of both income and gender, is one of the highest in the world. Arguably, challenges will add up as the world moves to a new digitized era, driven by integrative artificial intelligence which is expected to change the labor market landscape. MENA's readiness for the new digital transformation remains a work in progress, according to recent data revealed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s [AI Preparedness Index](#).

In middle-income MENA countries, limited fiscal space is a chronic barrier to social development and public satisfaction. For example, the fiscal deficit is estimated at 11 percent of GDP in Egypt and 10 percent in Jordan. Debt to GDP ratios are also on the rise, registering nearly 92 percent in Egypt, 91 percent in Jordan, and 193 percent in Lebanon.

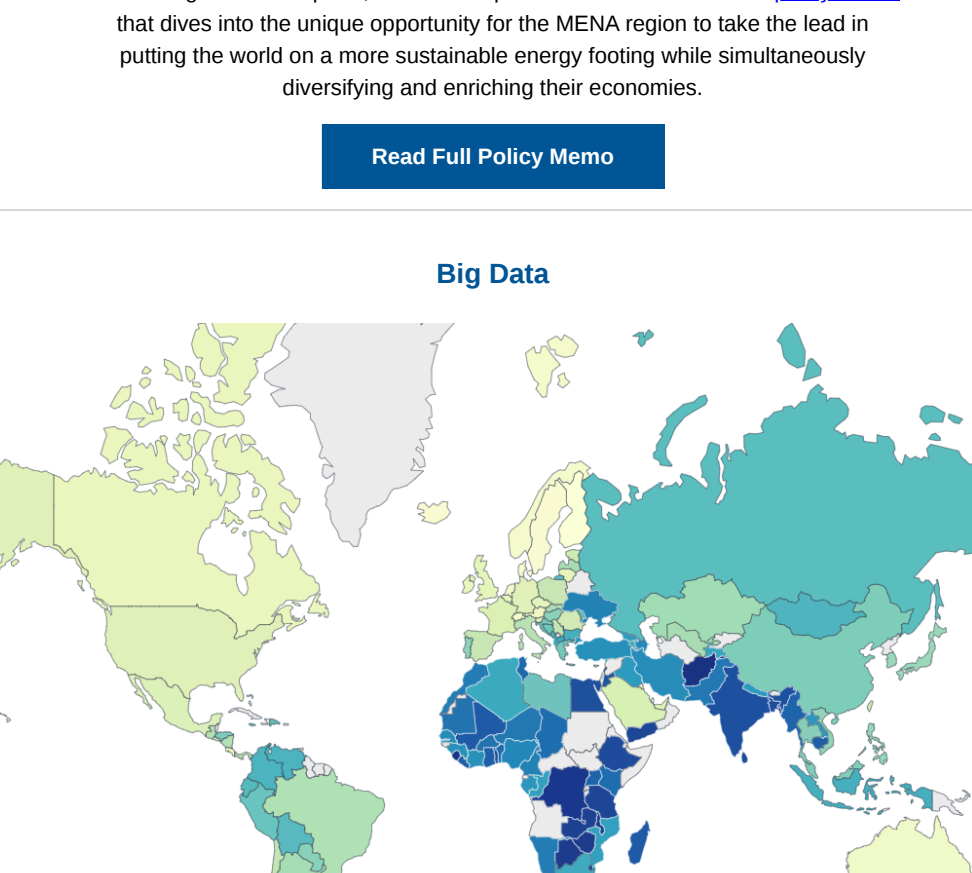
How Can the Region Secure a 'Happier' Future?

To reverse this low public satisfaction and improve happiness in the region, social and environmental policies need to take the highest priority on the reform agenda of the Arab World. Addressing income and gender inequality, introducing targeted social protection programs, and investing in healthcare and education are the primary recipes to turn around the low ranking of happiness in the Arab world. Additionally, fostering social support networks, enhancing trust in public institutions, and promoting mental health awareness can significantly enhance happiness levels in the region.

By tackling these challenges, MENA countries can pave the way for a happier and more prosperous future.

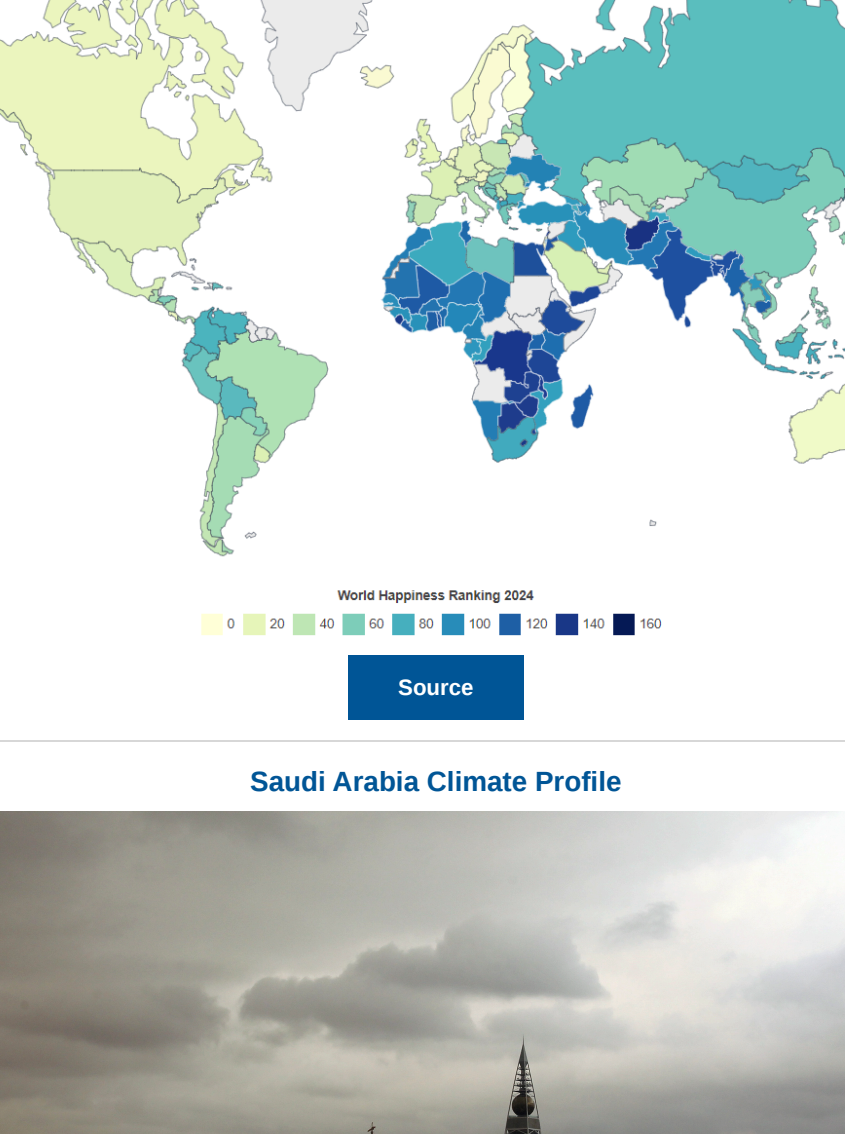
Sincerely,
Racha Helwa
Director, empowerME
Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East
Atlantic Council

New Policy Memo:
What will it take to make the MENA region a renewable energy powerhouse?

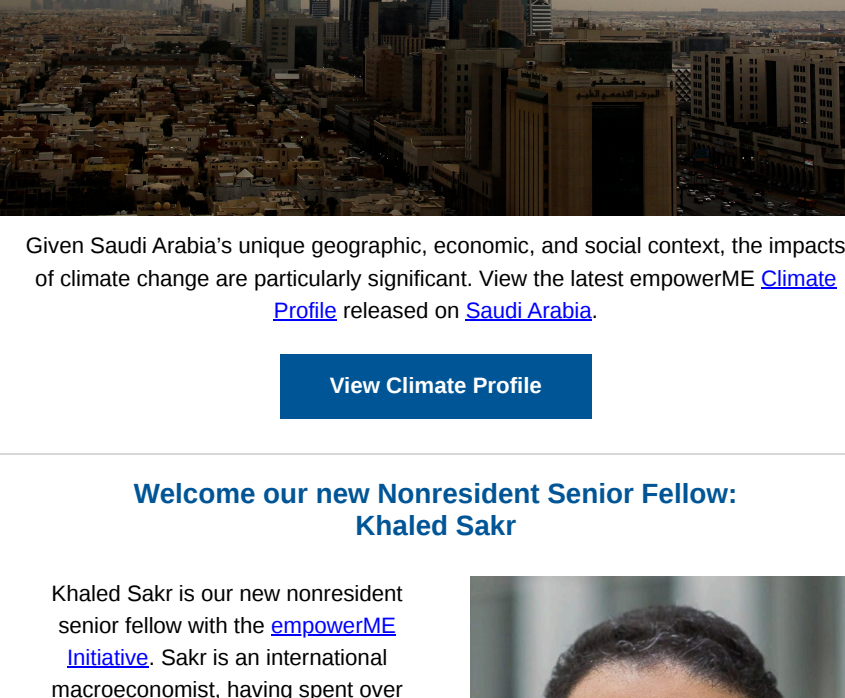


Authored by StrategyX Middle East Partners Shihab Elborai, Anthony Yammine, and Manager Pavel Popkov, read the empowerME Initiative's newest [policy memo](#) that dives into the unique opportunity for the MENA region to take the lead in putting the world on a more sustainable energy footing while simultaneously diversifying and enriching their economies.

[Read Full Policy Memo](#)



Saudi Arabia Climate Profile

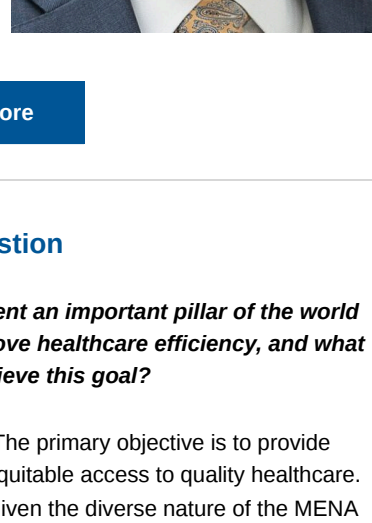


Given Saudi Arabia's unique geographic, economic, and social context, the impacts of climate change are particularly significant. View the latest empowerME [Climate Profile](#) released on [Saudi Arabia](#).

[View Climate Profile](#)

Welcome our new Nonresident Senior Fellow:
Khaled Sakr

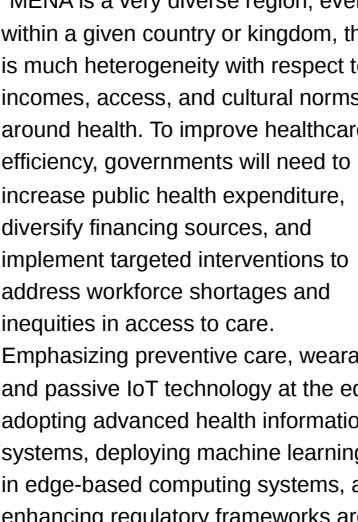
Khaled Sakr is our new nonresident senior fellow with the [empowerME Initiative](#). Sakr is an international macroeconomist, having spent over twenty-eight years at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and having worked in various senior corporate positions, including mission chief for several developing, emerging, and advanced economies and senior advisor to the dean of the executive board. He has extensive experience working with the economies of the Middle East and North Africa region.



[Read More](#)

Big Question

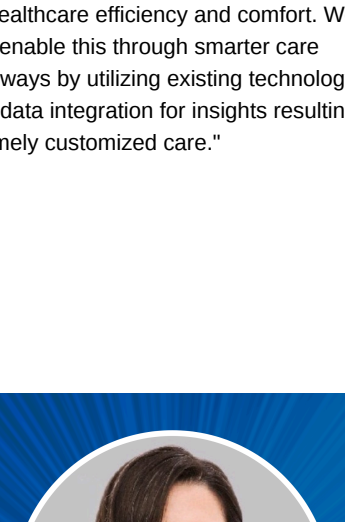
Healthcare and life expectancy represent an important pillar of the world happiness index. How can MENA improve healthcare efficiency, and what does it take to achieve this goal?




Dr. Wael Abdelaal
Chief Medical Officer
Mugd Yacoub Global Health Foundation

"The MENA region, despite progress in basic health outcomes, faces a significant challenge in achieving SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) for all. Climate change amplifies this concern, as the region is particularly vulnerable to its effects. Limited adaptive capacity, especially in conflict zones and the least developed countries, makes healthcare systems even more susceptible to issues like extreme weather, water scarcity, flooding, and air pollution. These transboundary challenges can exacerbate existing health problems, leading to the spread of disease and premature deaths. To navigate these challenges, the region must strengthen healthcare systems, proactively address climate risks in healthcare policies, and prioritize the needs of vulnerable populations."

"The primary objective is to provide equitable access to quality healthcare. Given the diverse nature of the MENA region, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely. It's essential to map and understand the unique deficiencies and strengths of each area, allowing for data driven tailored models in each region. Invest in young caregivers while harnessing the expertise of seasoned professionals, provide a supportive and conducive environment, and diversify funding sources to ensure financial stability and sustainability. Gain insight from others, leverage innovation and technology, remain agile and maintain smart oversight."

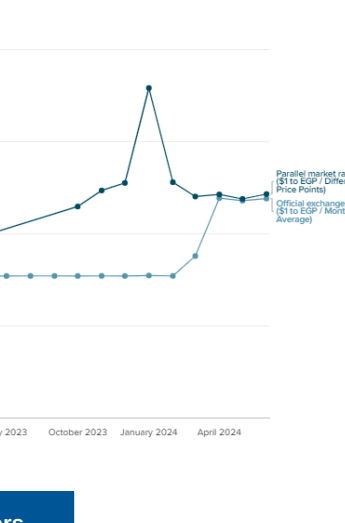


Dr. Divya Chander
Faculty Chair
Healthcare
Srinivas University



Mona Habib
Director of Customer Success
Toopad

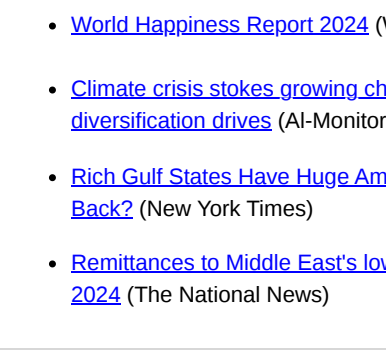
"A holistic ecosystem (government, private and research) and proactive (preventive and monitoring) disease management care approach and home care are both critical pillars contributing to healthcare efficiency and comfort. We can enable this through smarter care pathways by utilizing existing technology and data integration for insights resulting in timely customized care."



Lama Zakzak
PhD Researcher
Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government



In Case You Missed It



Five Impacts of the Gaza war to watch

Stefanie Hausheer Ali

[Read More](#)

- The MENA Economic Digest**
- [World Happiness Report 2024](#) (World Happiness Report)
 - [Climate crisis stokes growing challenges amid Middle East economic diversification drives](#) (AI Monitor)
 - [Rich Gulf States Have Huge Ambitions. Will Extreme Heat Hold Them Back?](#) (New York Times)
 - [Reimprances to Middle East's low-income countries to grow at fastest pace in 2024](#) (The National News)

Subscribe to learn more about our latest events and publications!

[Subscribe](#)

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

Connect with #ACMidEast!

[Twitter](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Facebook](#) [Instagram](#)