

MEDIA

SUSTAINABILITY INDEX—

MIDDLE EAST AND

NORTH AFRICA



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2005

The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in the Middle East and North Africa

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USAID

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is an independent agency that provides economic, development, and humanitarian assistance around the world in support of the foreign-policy goals of the United States. The agency works to support long-term and sustainable economic growth and advances US foreign-policy objectives by supporting economic growth, agriculture, and trade; global health; and democracy, conflict prevention, and humanitarian assistance.

USAID provides assistance in four regions of the world: Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia and the Near East; Latin America and the Caribbean; and Europe and Eurasia.

With headquarters in Washington, DC, USAID's strength is its field offices around the world. They work in close partnership with private voluntary organizations, indigenous organizations, universities, American businesses, international agencies, other governments, and other US government agencies. USAID has working relationships with more than 3,500 American companies and over 300 US-based private voluntary organizations.

MEPI

The United States Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative provides tangible support to reformers in the Middle East and North Africa so democracy can spread, education can thrive, economies can grow, and women can be empowered. In four years, this presidential initiative has devoted \$293 million to more than 350 programs in 15 countries and the Palestinian territories to support the aspirations of those working to build a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. Examples of the initiative's work includes campaign schools, independent media training, civic education, entrepreneurship skill building, youth leadership development, trade transparency promotion, business hubs for women, and judicial and legal reform training.

UNESCO

UNESCO, the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, maintains a Communication and Information (CI) sector that is guided by the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of the press as basic human rights. Since 2003, the CI sector has supported the Iraqi people in their transition to democracy. Among other projects, UNESCO facilitated initiatives to develop a national media policy and provided practical guidance for journalists and civil society prior to the elections. Training and networking opportunities were made available to more than 550 media workers and professionals.

IREX

IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development.

Founded in 1968, IREX has an annual portfolio of \$50 million and a staff of over 500 professionals worldwide. IREX and its partner IREX Europe deliver cross-cutting programs and consulting expertise in more than 50 countries.

The first Media Sustainability Index for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) demonstrates several weaknesses—in particular, free-press protections in the law that are not upheld in practice, and pervasive self-censorship—that are common not only among the countries of the region but also in other parts of the world where media sectors are in transition. The assessment reveals another characteristic of MENA-region media systems, however, that is largely absent elsewhere: Money available for media business investment has allowed outlets to better professionalize and access new technologies, providing more sophisticated media products and a relatively higher degree of plurality of news sources, despite the other constraints.

The Media Sustainability Index (MSI), conducted by panels of media professionals in each of the 18 countries of the MENA region, showed profound underlying contradictions involving media law, journalism professionalism, and business management. These opposing trends are rooted partly in political cultures where many media professionals and some citizens look to global trends, new technologies, and the latest professional practices, while others lack much knowledge of what it means to live and work in a world of free speech and independent media and where governments only grudgingly begin to loosen their controls over information sources. At the same time, the development of satellite television and the increasing use of the Internet to disseminate news mean citizens in some of the most closed societies in the region increasingly are able to access information their governments may be seeking to limit. This struggle over control of the information space, as reflected in the progress of media sectors to be measured through successive applications of the MSI, will be a major factor determining how the countries of the region develop both politically and economically.

In many of the MENA nations assessed using the MSI, legal provisions protecting free speech and media exist in Constitutions and legislation but lack effective implementation. Other countries have adopted constitutional guarantees for freedom of speech but also have promulgated other laws that directly contradict these guarantees. As noted by a lawyer on the MSI panel in Morocco, one of the more progressive countries in the region in terms of media legislation, “the essential factor in assessing the validity of this legal setting remains the manner in which the government and the justice system apply the laws.”

Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria are among the countries with contradictory laws regarding media and free speech. Tunisia, for example, has constitutional protections for free speech and media freedoms, but the 1975 press code and the 1993 law guarding against terrorism constrain the broader constitutional provisions. In Jordan, the penal code allows authorities wide berth in prosecuting journalists for a variety of infractions despite Article 15 of the country’s Constitution, and Egypt has limitations due to an emergency law in force since 1981. In Bahrain, the new Constitution supported in a 2002 referendum mentions freedom of speech, but is contravened by the press law No. 47. And in Syria, the article noting free-

speech rights is superseded by the 1963 Emergency Laws that permit the jailing—without trial—of anyone deemed an enemy of the state. “Syria’s Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, but the state doesn’t practice it,” said a reporter for a major state-run newspaper. “It is obvious to everyone that the political and security authorities are above the Constitution. We’ve had instances where journalists have filed cases against the security authorities, and they’ve been banned from writing. In this climate it’s not really possible to talk about freedom of expression in Syria.”

This combination of relatively progressive laws but poor implementation by the government and the courts was found to be typical in both the MENA region and the countries of Europe and Eurasia, where the MSI has been conducted for five years. Constitutions in the latter region also routinely promote freedom of expression and the rights of media to disseminate, but either the enabling legislation has not been enacted that would fully uphold the constitutional guarantees for broadcast and print media, or judicial systems are not independent and bend to interpretations that allow governments or special interests to control the media.

This lack of true freedom-of-speech protections throughout the MENA region is also damaging to media professionalism, according to the MSI panelists. Particularly evident is the high level of self-censorship that exists even in the more progressive media environments. For example, Qatar, home to satellite television’s Al Jazeera, has emerged as one of the most forward-looking Arab nations in terms of freedom of expression and quality media. Nevertheless, the MSI assessment found that significant numbers of editors and journalists—particularly the many who are expatriates—are reluctant to report critically for fear of losing the relatively highly paid jobs that brought them there. The unwritten “red lines” understood to circumscribe coverage apart from any legal process, the vulnerability felt by expatriate editors and reporters, and, in some countries, the fear of violence against journalists combine to limit the assertiveness of the media—far overshadowing traditional government censorship as a concern for the MSI panelists. According to a Lebanese MSI participant, journalists “live in total paranoia, and they fear losing their jobs and their lives.” Variations of this viewpoint were echoed by panel participants from Libya to Iran to Syria and Oman who used terms such as “endemic” and “infused” to describe self-censorship’s place in all layers of the media. Religion, terrorism, and the probity of the ruler and his family were among the topics considered taboo. And pressure from political and business interests, as well as the desire for self-preservation,

led many media professionals to find the limits within which they could operate and hold to them.

Self-censorship is not an issue facing the Middle East alone, however. As the Europe and Eurasia MSI demonstrates, editors and journalists exercise restraint even after the regulatory environment and the political climate loosen. Habit and fear linger to taint the media culture, MSI panelists say, and editors and owners continue to feel pressure from the government or the inclination to curry favor with those in power. This problem is seen worldwide—in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—and it is not unknown in Western Europe and North America, generally seen to have the highest levels of press freedoms.

Setting the media sector in the MENA region apart from others in transition, however, is the relative success of media businesses and the embrace of new technologies. Despite limits on media freedom and professionalism, domestic media in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain generally are doing well economically. A range of factors, including media “free zones,” the popularity of satellite channels growing from Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, rapidly increasing advertising revenues, and the ability of citizens to consume media in quantity, contribute to this. The wealth in the Gulf region also has allowed heavily subsidized media, such as some of the satellite channels, to play vital roles in the region.

This juxtaposition of political limits on free speech with significant financial investment in regional media and a successful domestic media business environment is clearly visible in Saudi Arabia. Despite rigid oversight of editors and media managers, news outlets in the kingdom are selling more advertising space than ever before, newspapers post healthy circulation rates, and international investment continues in the media market, MSI panelists report. Another example is the United Arab Emirates, home to both the rapidly expanding Dubai Media City, which boasts multiple local and international news outlets, and one of the most stringent media laws in the Arab world, the 1980 Printing and Publishing Law.

These oil-rich countries and their neighbors have demonstrated the ability to develop a media industry without loosening press freedoms beyond points that threaten the governing monarchies and regimes of the region. Whether they can maintain this balance remains to be seen, especially as the strong economies allow ever broader access to new technologies, such as Internet-based media, that can serve to counteract government restrictions on information. The satellite channels continue to open the Middle East media space

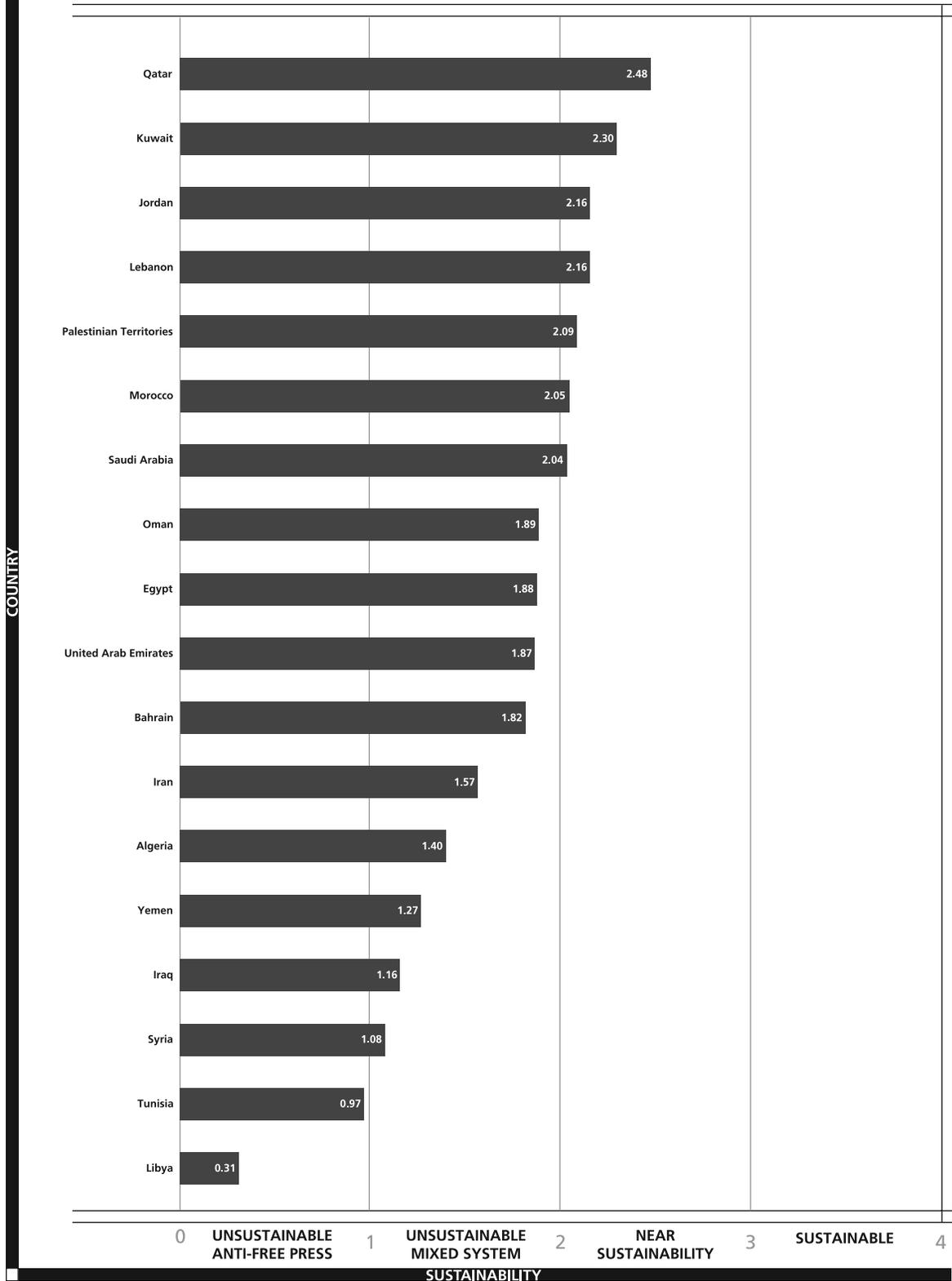
to differing opinions and information not vetted by viewers' governments. Increasingly receiving new notice is the impact of the Internet. In Iran, for example, print and broadcast media remain subject to control by the authorities, but MSI participants report that 63,000 weblogs are providing an expanding forum for information and discussion. In particular, these weblogs in Iran and elsewhere fill a need for local news unmet by satellite broadcasters or controlled indigenous media. Al Jazeera, for example, offers little programming focused on Qatar, the country where it is based, although MSI panelists agree that it has raised the bar generally for media there. Al Arabiya, based in the UAE, likewise offers little information on events in that country that is controversial or alternative to official viewpoints. Nevertheless, the MSI assessments found, satellite channels, weblogs, and Internet publications have expanded significantly the plurality of information sources for citizens throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

This success of media as businesses in parts of the Middle East and the emergence and rapid acceptance of new technologies against the backdrop of only gradually loosening restrictions on information and state-linked media is for the most part not mirrored elsewhere in the world. The wealth of the Gulf countries and the unifying language of Arabic contribute to this phenomenon. Without both there would have been no Al Jazeera, LBC, or Al Arabiya, and other regions have not shared in this trend due to lack of one or both of these elements. Latin America, the most homogenous region in terms of language, lacks

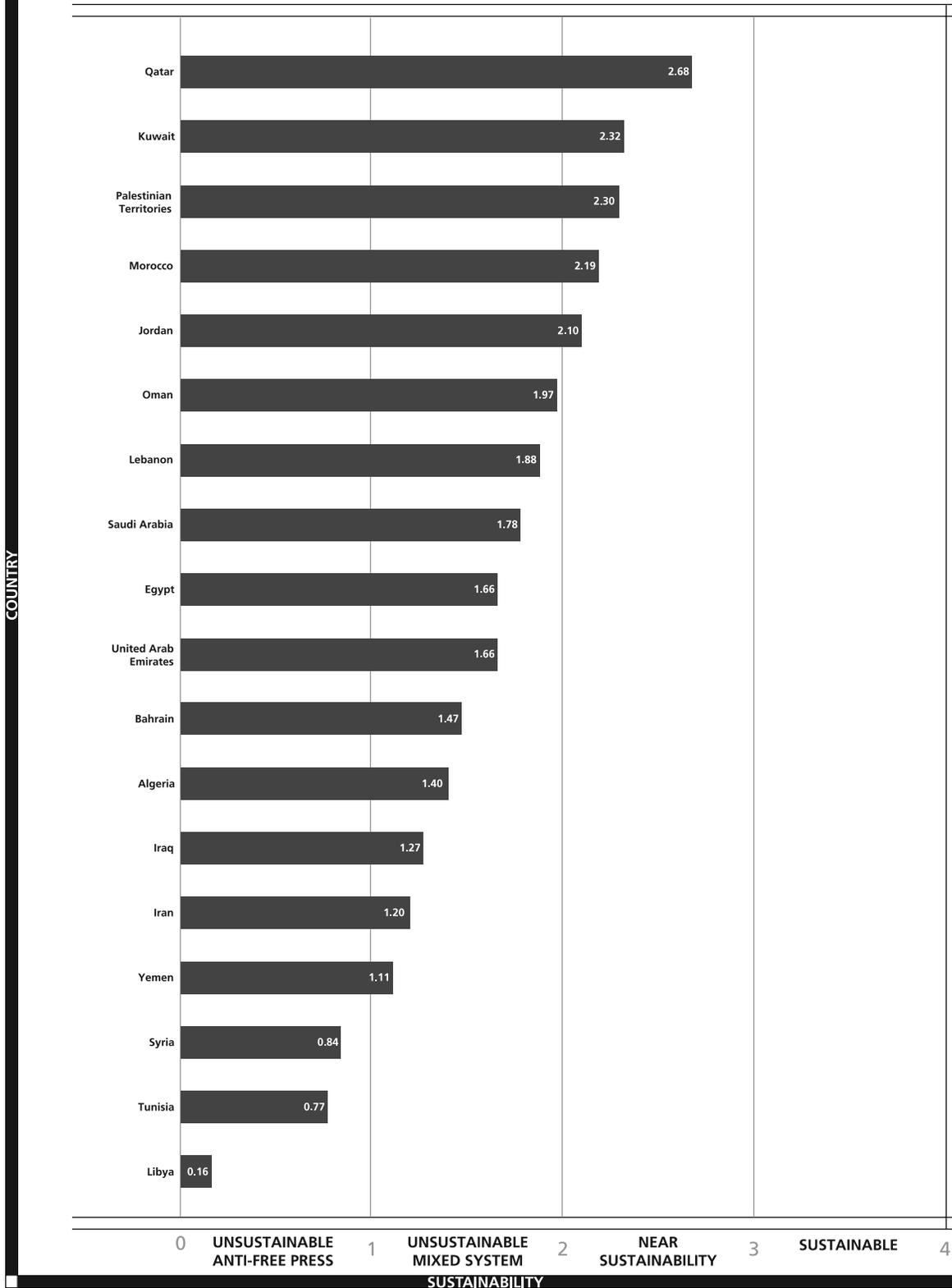
a comparison to the Arabic satellite channels. Asia is without any real unifying language, and Europe and Eurasia, large parts of which had Russian in common, have not had the resources to develop such media.

The first MSI for the Middle East and North Africa shows a region not yet advanced toward a robust, independent media sector, but it clearly detected the signals of change. The roadblocks are painfully evident in, as an example, the rebuilding of the Iraqi media. Although the absolute controls of the previous regime are gone, the MSI panelists said, not only do political leaders not understand the principles of media freedoms but citizens also do not understand the importance of media independence or act to defend it. In Libya, MSI participants said, ethical standards for journalists and supporting institutions are simply not part of the culture. However, in Egypt, panelists pointed to a degree of raised awareness of press freedom issues during the 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections, when abuses led to largely unprecedented public protests. Elsewhere, such as Kuwait and Morocco, previously off-limits topics are beginning to get coverage, and journalists have an increasingly broader range of information sources from which to choose. Governments, too, are reacting as competition from more open and professional trans-national media leave their own controlled outlets less and less relevant, and in Jordan and Oman, for example, are beginning to open the regulatory process to private ownership. This debut MSI for the region, the first time media professionals in each country assessed their own media sectors across such a wide range of criteria, represents a starting point for charting this evolution.

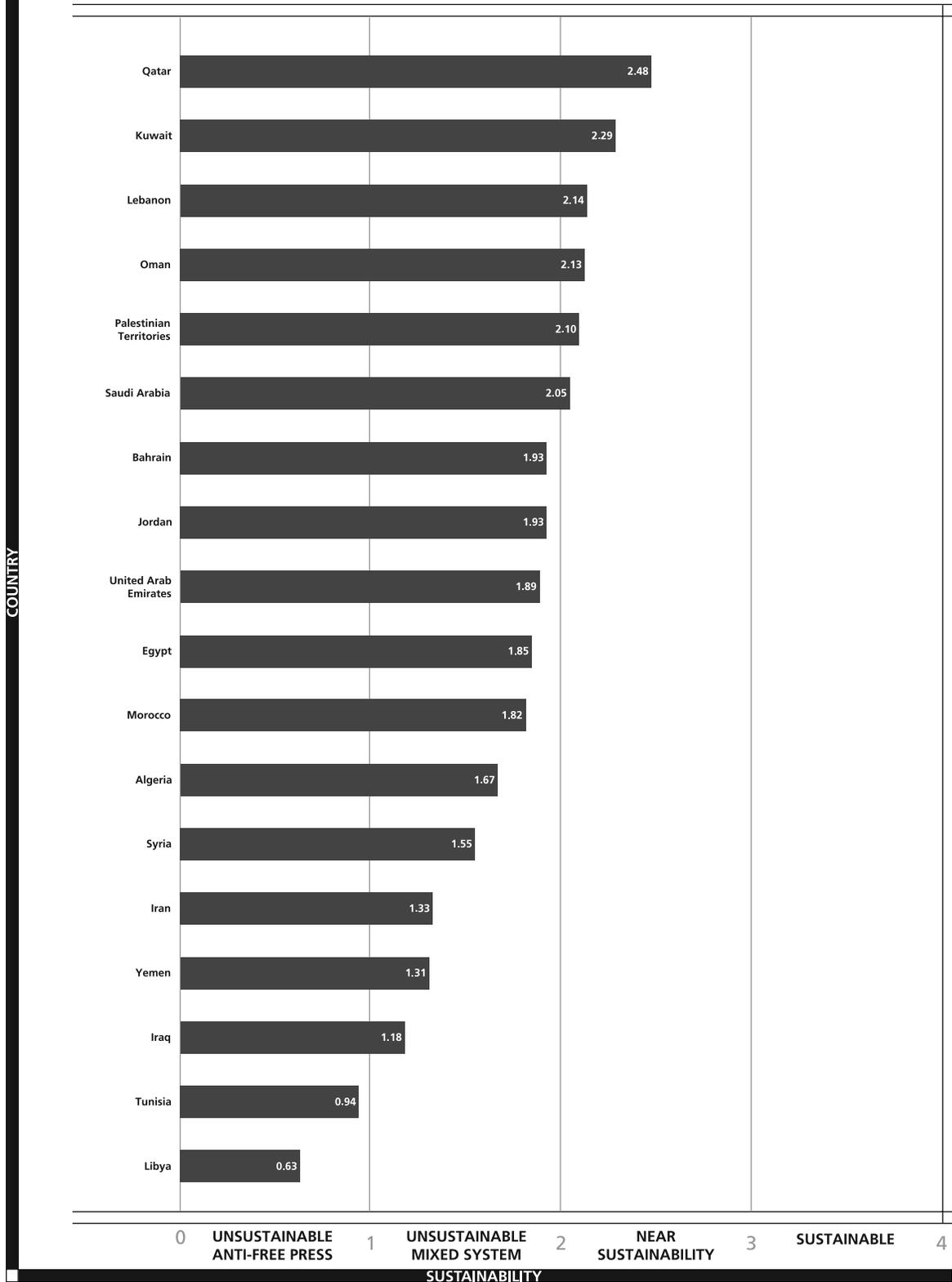
AVERAGE SCORING FOR ALL OBJECTIVES, 2005



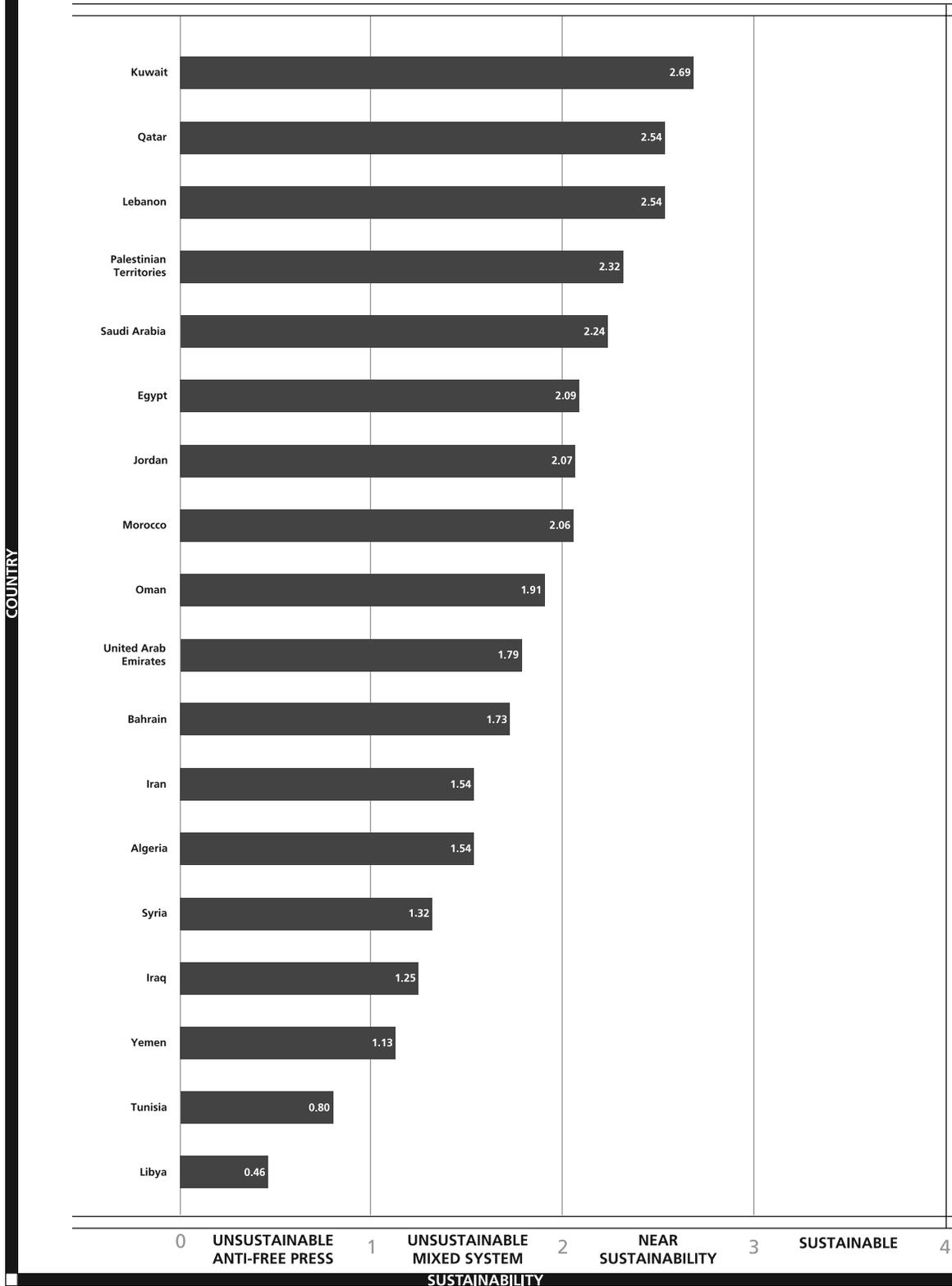
OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH, 2005



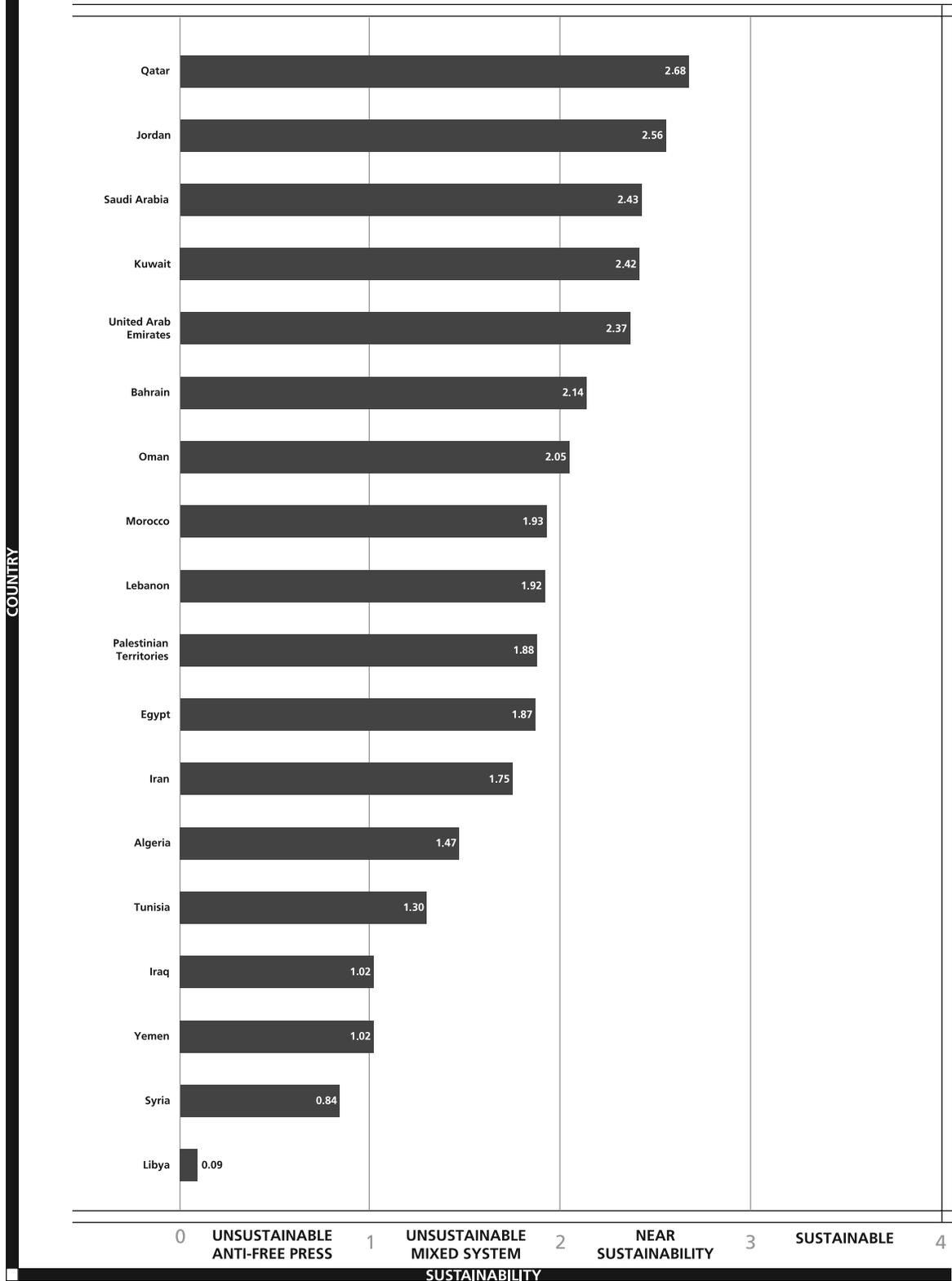
OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM, 2005



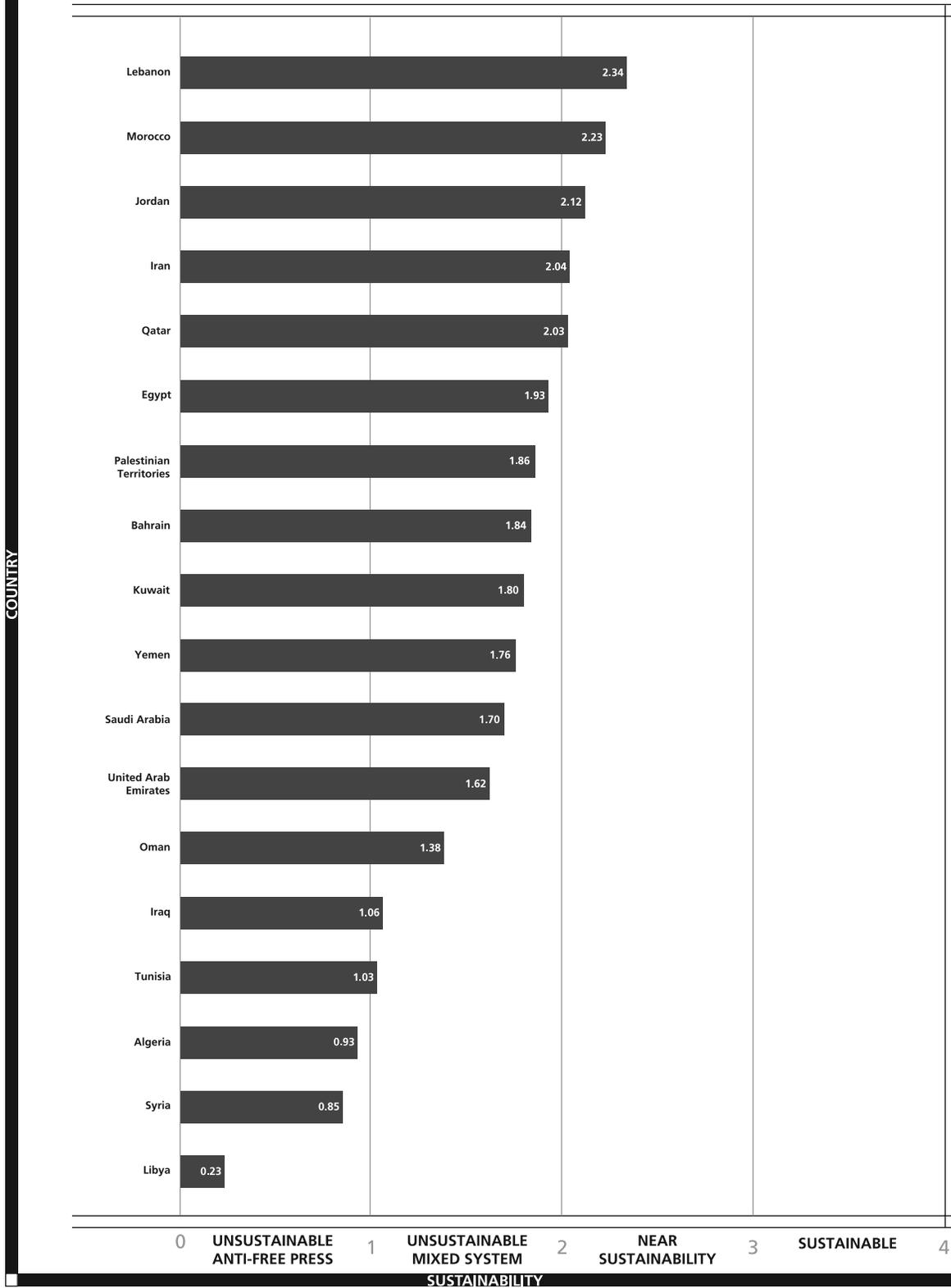
OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES, 2005



OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT, 2005

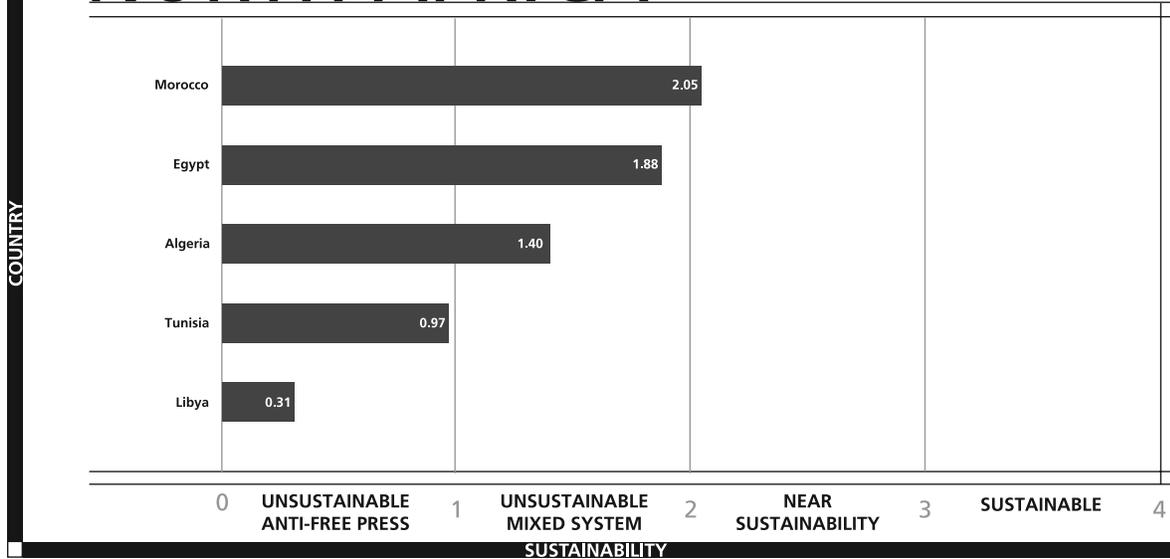


OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS, 2005



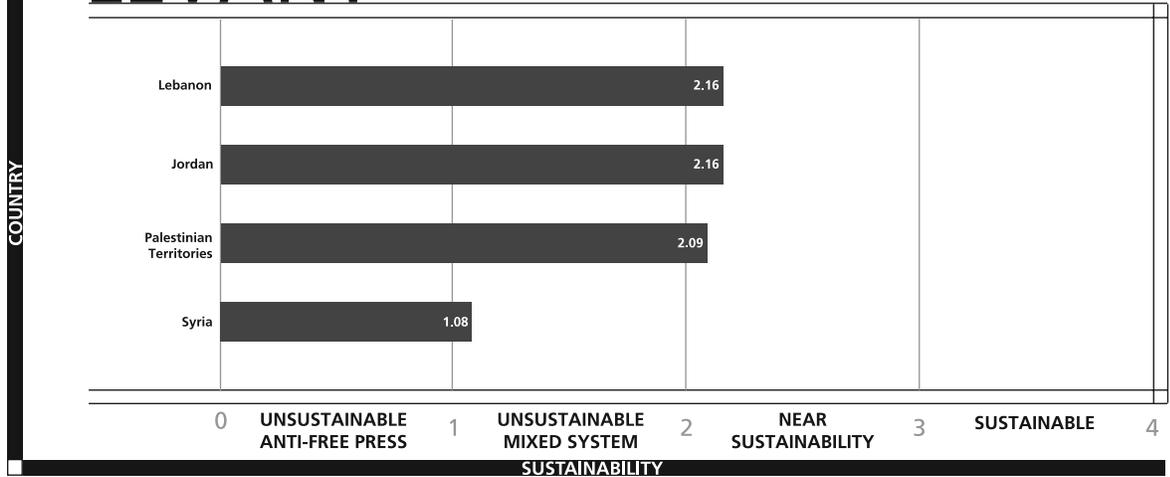
AVERAGE OBJECTIVE SCORES, 2005

NORTH AFRICA



AVERAGE OBJECTIVE SCORES, 2005

LEVANT



AVERAGE OBJECTIVE SCORES, 2005

GULF

