The Right to Information Access in the Arab Region: Reality of Gains and Failures

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Abstract

This study explores the extent to which Arab countries have succeeded in enabling meaningful access to information and examines possible approaches to address the challenges hindering the development of information access systems. It evaluates the legislative and administrative frameworks aimed at enhancing public data transparency in Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, and Tunisia. The analysis highlights progress in transparency and openness indicators and examines their impact on public accountability and citizens' fundamental rights. Using a comparative approach, the study analyses similarities and differences across selected Arab experiences. In addition to a theoretical framework, the paper is structured around four key sections addressing references, practices, challenges, and strategies for advancing unrestricted access to information. The findings reveal a relative improvement in the rankings of most studied countries on international transparency indices. However, achieving the full potential of the right to access information requires comprehensive reforms. These include expanding mandatory publication areas, training specialised personnel, developing platforms for handling and tracking information requests, and fostering greater stakeholder involvement in information governance. Such measures are essential to ensure the anticipated economic, social, and cultural benefits.

Keywords: Right to Information; Open Data; Transparency; Arab Region; Public Governance Disclosure

Introduction

The codification of the right to access information in most Arab countries has progressed at a noticeably slow pace. While some legislation recognises citizens' right to access information held by public administrations and institutions, its implementation has often been delayed. This delay,

compounded by restrictive regulations, has resulted in a technical rather than legal approach to activating this vital constitutional right. In many Arab experiences, the late constitutionalisation of this right has led to an expansion, rather than a reduction, of exceptions to access.

From a procedural perspective, several factors have accelerated efforts to regulate the right to access public information in the Arab region. These include pressure from international financial institutions, which have become stricter in monitoring countries' compliance with publishing financial and monetary data to improve financial cooperation. Similarly, the United Nations and its partner networks have emphasised improving transparency indicators as a prerequisite for expanding partnerships. Societal demand for transparency has also grown, particularly in the wake of the Arab Uprisings, alongside increased use of information and communication technologies, which served as the technical backbone for a new wave of mass protests.[1] These internal and external contexts have supported efforts to democratise power and promote transparency in public administration, providing unprecedented momentum for political and administrative reform.[2] Civil organisations advocating for the dissemination of public data have gained influence, while social media networks have raised awareness about the right to information and its intersection with other rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, participation, and personal data protection. In response, specialised portals for open data have been developed and public administrations encouraged to proactively disclose information. These efforts align with new administrative reform priorities, including open government, digitisation of public services, simplification of procedures, investment stimulation, anti-corruption initiatives, and fostering participatory policymaking.

Preliminary outcomes indicate progress in establishing legislative and institutional frameworks and improving Arab countries' rankings in international openness and transparency indices. However, the practical realisation of the right to information remains a long and challenging journey. Legislative restrictions persist, and a political and administrative culture that values secrecy and withholding continues to prevail. Moreover, disparities exist between economic actors, who often receive high-quality, timely information, and the general public, who rarely access information that meets their needs.

This paper examines the extent of Arab countries' commitment to enabling the right to access information and evaluates the practical outcomes of this commitment. It raises key questions: To what extent have legislative, political, and administrative reforms strengthened the right to access information in the Arab region? What mechanisms have the studied Arab countries employed to promote transparency and provide economic and social actors with timely, actionable data? What approaches can address failures and overcome obstacles to the practical implementation of this right?

To answer these questions, the study begins with a theoretical review of prominent international literature and prior studies on the subject. It then evaluates the legal frameworks establishing the right to information in Morocco, assessing their alignment with international standards. The third section highlights gains made in Arab experiences and their developmental trajectories, while analysing shortcomings and barriers to actualising this right. The study also explores the political,

economic, social, and cultural implications of these challenges.

The focus is limited to the experiences of Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, and Kuwait. Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan were among the first to constitutionalise and codify the right to information, implementing practical plans and mechanisms through international frameworks such as the Open Government Partnership and the Open Data Initiative. Kuwait, as the first Gulf country to codify this right, provides a complementary perspective. The study adopts a comparative approach to elucidate the intersections and differences among these Arab experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The right to access information occupies a central position in the literature on reforming public administration, particularly in the context of political and administrative changes aimed at restructuring administrative agencies to make them more transparent and responsive. This right has been approached from an array of disciplines, including administration, politics, sociology, and economics. From the perspective of administrative sciences, the literature on New Public Management (NPM)—which emerged in the early 1980s in Great Britain and the United States— underscores the integration of openness and transparency as core governance standards for public administration.[3] With the development of theories emphasising the value of transparency in administrative institutions, concepts like open system theory emerged. This theory highlights the importance of managing information flows to strengthen organisational structures, enabling institutions to remain responsive to their external environments and the expectations of their stakeholders.[4] Similarly, open administration theory posits that the availability of public information serves as a core metric for assessing the openness of political systems and the efficiency of state administrative bodies. Under this framework, the governance of public management is increasingly evaluated based on the extent to which financial and administrative data for public policies are disclosed. Greater administrative transparency correlates with more effective operations and an enhanced ability to meet the needs of employees and the public.[5]

In political studies, the theory of administrative democracy emphasises the transformative role of transparency and openness in redistributing power within and among public administration structures. Carl Schmitt argues that political representation can only achieve legitimacy by adhering to the principle of transparency, which mandates the disclosure of all public data.[6] Similarly, Hannah Arendt critiques secrecy and privacy as breeding grounds for authoritarianism, undermining the core values of representative democracy—publicity and deliberation.[7] She asserts that secrecy creates significant inequalities by restricting access to information, which becomes a source of power for those who possess it, allowing them to influence political and administrative decisions while leaving others powerless and vulnerable to exploitation.[8]

David Osborne and Ted Gaebler reinforce this view, identifying transparency in government data and activities as a cornerstone of democratic practice. Transparency not only provides citizens with a clear understanding of governmental actions but also enables the analysis of societal dynamics, fostering mechanisms that ensure access to information and public services. This, they

argue, empowers communities to reclaim ownership of their governments, freeing them from the dominance of bureaucratic elites.[9]

From this perspective, the right to access information is grounded in the notion that government agencies are custodians, not owners, of public data. This information belongs to the citizens, who have a right to obtain and utilise it to assert their rights and hold officials accountable. The human rights dimension of this principle suggests that effective access to information systems cannot coexist with secrecy or a lack of citizen participation. Many scholars contend that the right to information is inseparable from participatory rights, as only informed citizens can engage meaningfully in public discourse and advocate for their positions.[10]

Some theorists further argue that transparency is the essence of constitutional democracy, founded on the clarity of government actions, the exposure of public activities, and the cultivation of open debates that enhance public ethics.[11] According to the deliberative model proposed by Jürgen Habermas, universal and equitable access to information expands the public sphere, raising citizens' political awareness and interest in public affairs. This ensures that civic engagement is not confined to an elite minority but is accessible to all members of society.[12]

Legally, the right to access information is far from an intellectual luxury; it is a universal, inalienable right rooted in fundamental human rights principles such as equality, fairness, and justice. Often described as the 'oxygen of democracy', this right is essential for realising civil and political rights. It serves as a cornerstone for active participation in public life, enriches public debate, and supports the foundations of good governance while ensuring the proper implementation of freedom of expression.[13]

Its importance extends to economic and social rights as well. The right to education and knowledge depends on the free flow of information, while rights to a healthy environment and public health are tied to transparency in data concerning pollutants, water quality, and living conditions. Amartya Sen emphasises that the enjoyment of basic rights and equitable access to public goods are intrinsically linked to unrestricted access to information, as those who possess information are uniquely positioned to participate in decision-making processes and influence governmental policies.[14]

In discussing frameworks for understanding and advancing the right to access information, researchers highlight its multiple dimensions. The right encompasses the proactive and automatic disclosure of information by public administrations, the freedom to disseminate and share information through various channels, and the ability to request information from responsible authorities, who are obligated to provide it promptly and accurately.[15] Additionally, the outcomes of access-to-information systems are often analysed through three interconnected levels: the scope and quality of disclosed information and responsiveness to requests, the strategic application of information laws to improve public services, enhance accountability, and combat corruption, and the institutionalisation of information rights to dismantle secretive bureaucratic cultures and promote gender equality in accessing fundamental rights and freedoms.[16]

Previous Studies

Numerous studies have explored Arab experiences in the field of freedom of information, often focusing on comparative analyses of legislative and regulatory frameworks in relation to international standards. Some researchers argue that merely enacting freedom of information laws can stimulate administrative development by redefining the relationship between beneficiaries and public administrations, making the latter more transparent and accessible.[17] However, other studies highlight the shortcomings of Arab legislation in balancing security considerations with human rights requirements. These critiques emphasise the prevalence of unjustified exceptions that undermine the essence of the right to information.[18] In many cases, freedom of information is framed as an exception to the default rule of confidentiality, further constrained by ambiguous formal and substantive conditions that significantly limit the practical exercise of this constitutional right.[19]

From the perspective of tangible impacts, some studies analyse the political benefits of making public data accessible. They find that higher levels of transparency and access to information correlate with greater citizen acceptance of government policies and higher satisfaction with the performance of political and administrative institutions.[20] Building on this, some research has focused on the extent to which participatory approaches have been incorporated into the design of information access systems, arguing that such systems become more effective when shaped collaboratively by public authorities and civil society organisations. The effort to align national legislative frameworks with international standards presents an opportunity to bridge gaps between these stakeholders, fostering cooperation in diagnosing public issues and crafting appropriate solutions.[21] Other studies have examined the role of the free flow of information in enhancing the governance of public policies and increasing the efficiency of public administration. By improving transparency, accountability, and the rule of law,[22] access to information contributes to strengthening national integrity systems. Successful international experiences demonstrate that administrative transparency and access to official documents can significantly reduce corruption.[23] Moreover, access to government information promotes procedural transparency and ensures clarity in public decision-making processes. This, in turn, supports the principle of accountability, enabling citizens to trace decisions back to responsible government officials and assess the rationale behind public actions.[24]

Some researchers have also highlighted the potential impact of democratising internet access on the effective realisation of the right to information. Flexible, accessible, and low-cost technological tools have the potential to enable a wide audience to access vast amounts of public information and documents.[25] However, other studies caution against the risks posed by the digital divide, which threatens equality in accessing information. Increasing reliance on data openness in the digital age necessitates substantial investments in electronic infrastructure to ensure equitable access for all citizens.[26] Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the unintended consequences of digital transformation, such as the suspension of many government websites tasked with disseminating information and the technical challenges beneficiaries face in filing and

tracking requests and appeals electronically.[27] This widening gap in internet skills and access across social groups has broader implications for digital rights, including e-government services and access to critical information embedded in the development of economic and social policies.[28]

Overall, most previous studies have focused on analysing the contexts and implications of codifying the right to access information in the Arab region, primarily through legal textual analysis. However, they have often neglected to examine the practical impact of these legislative frameworks on the development of information access systems. In this paper, we aim to address this gap by analysing the guarantees for the right to information in both references and practices. This will involve comparing Arab legislation to international normative frameworks and assessing the effectiveness of information access systems in ensuring the practical realisation of this right. Our approach employs quantitative and qualitative indicators and adopts an intersectional perspective that explores the interconnectedness of the right to information with other rights. We will also examine the integration of political, legal, administrative, and technical conditions necessary for fostering transparency and openness at all levels of public administration.

Legislative and Institutional Framework for Accessing Information

Jordan was the first country in the Middle East and North Africa to enact specific legislation protecting the right to access information.[29] Law No. 47 of 2007 recognised every citizen's right to obtain government-held information and established procedural mechanisms to enforce this right. These mechanisms included creating an information council tasked with managing access requests and providing citizens with the option to appeal rejection decisions before the council and the Supreme Court – the Supreme Judge Department.[30] Although successive attempts were made to amend the law to align with Jordan's commitment to the Global Partnership for Open Government, a revised version was only ratified by the National Assembly in March 2024. The updated law obliges all government departments to proactively disclose information, index and organise data systematically, and appoint qualified personnel to handle and follow up on information requests. It also emphasises transitioning away from reliance on paper records, a longstanding technical barrier for those seeking public information.[31]

Tunisia, historically, was the second Arab country to codify the right to access information. This began with Decree No. 41 of 2011 on access to administrative documents and was reinforced by the 2014 Constitution, which, in Chapter 32, emphasised the state's role in guaranteeing the rights to information and communication networks. These constitutional provisions laid the groundwork for Basic Law No. 22 of 2016, which introduced several measures to regulate the exercise of this right.[32] These measures included requiring public administrations to organise and update information in a user-friendly format, make it accessible to the public, and simplify procedures for requesting and tracking information. The law also shortened response deadlines, clarified appeals processes, and recommended the establishment of an independent public body to oversee the enforcement of the right to information. Tunisia's commitment to this right was reaffirmed in the 2022 Constitution, under Chapter 38, which again emphasised the state's

responsibility to ensure access to information. This made Tunisia the second Arab country, after Morocco, to constitutionalise the right to access information and address its central role in fostering transparency and accountability.

Within the Arab region, Morocco was the first to constitutionalise the right to access information, under Chapter 27 of the 2011 Constitution. This move sought to align with global trends advocating for transparency in public affairs for the benefit of all citizens.[33] Building on this constitutional foundation, Law No. 31.13 was enacted to provide guarantees for public access to information. The law obliges public bodies to disclose all information in their possession, limiting exceptions to very narrow circumstances.[34] It distinguishes between proactive publication—where public administrations are required to publish as many documents and pieces of information as possible—and reactive publication, which involves responding to requests for information through designated processes. To support these measures, specialised platforms were created and personnel were appointed to receive, study, and process requests. Additionally, the law established a specialised committee under the supervision of the Prime Minister to ensure effective implementation of the right to information. This committee handles appeals and complaints, issues recommendations to improve procedures, and provides advice and expertise to concerned institutions and bodies.

Kuwait, meanwhile, was the first Gulf country to regulate the right to access information, enacting Law No. 12 of 2020. This law defined the procedures for accessing information and administrative documents, from submission to decision-making and appeal processes. It expanded the scope of beneficiaries by not requiring citizenship status for information requests and by treating legal entities equally with natural persons, provided that the requester demonstrates a legitimate interest.[35] However, unlike other Arab countries that have institutionalised access-to-information systems, Kuwaiti legislation does not mandate the establishment of a specialised oversight body. Instead, the Ministry of Information is tasked with supervising all related measures.[36]

An analysis of the legislative frameworks in these countries reveals attempts to comply with international obligations, particularly in expanding automatic publication. This is a tangible indicator of public authorities' respect for the free flow of information and includes mechanisms to support information seekers and encourage public administrations to disclose data through various channels. However, a significant gap remains between Arab legislation and the international normative framework or best practices globally. This disparity is evident in classifications that evaluate the alignment of national laws with international freedom-of-information standards, such as the RTI Rating.[37] Managed by the Centre for Law and Democracy in collaboration with Access Info Europe, this rating system is widely recognised by international institutions, including the United Nations and donor networks.

Table 1: Classification of Arab Countries According to the Right to Information (RTI) Rating

	Full Grade	Jordan	Tunisia	Morocco	Kuwait
Access Right	6	0	4	4	3
Scope of Application of the Law	30	26	28	20	17
Procedural Procedures for the Application	30	6	22	12	11
Exceptions and Rejections	30	10	25	15	10
Possibilities for Remedy and Appeal	30	9	23	12	5
Penalties and Protection	8	0	2	3	3
Motivational Measures	16	5	15	8	5
Final Total (Score)	**150**	**56**	**119**	**74**	**54**

Source: Global RTI Rating database (rti-rating.org/country-data).

A general analysis of this classification reveals that some Arab countries have achieved scores comparable to those of developed nations in terms of freedom of information. Morocco is ranked alongside Spain and Turkey, while Jordan and Kuwait are nearing the level of France. Notably, Tunisia surpasses Japan on this indicator, despite Japan having constitutionalised the right to information as early as 1974. However, a closer examination shows that this progress is primarily attributable to specific sub-criteria used in calculating the overall index for the quality of access-to-information legislation. These include factors such as the independent nature of information authorities, narrowing of exceptions, procedural clarity in Tunisia, the expanded scope of application in Jordan and Kuwait, and Morocco's early constitutional recognition of the right to information.

Despite these advances, most Arab countries lag significantly in procedural aspects that measure the quality and fairness of their legislative frameworks for access to public information. Common deficiencies include the lack of a sanctions system, weak coordination among relevant authorities, and ambiguous standards for classifying information.[38]

Another critical shortcoming is the broad scope of exceptions to the right to information. In Morocco, for instance, the law excludes not only information related to national defence and state security but also adds constraints such as potential harm to the state's monetary, economic, or financial policies.[39] It also requires that information not be used for illegal purposes or distorted, without providing clear guidelines for framing such exceptions. The National Council for Human Rights, in its memorandum on Draft Law No. 31.13, recommended defining these exceptions more rigorously.[40] The absence of objective criteria for determining harm or abuse grants public

administrations broad discretion, enabling them to evade their responsibility to disclose information. Furthermore, the law does not provide for judicial or disciplinary mechanisms to hold officials accountable for failing to supply information.[41]

Similarly, Jordanian legislation introduces extensive exceptions. In addition to exemptions aimed at safeguarding public interest and security, Article 7 of Law No. 47 gives precedence to existing legislation over the right to access information. This includes laws enacted both before and after the adoption of the Access to Information Law, such as Law No. 50 of 1971 on the protection of state secrets and documents. This law significantly restricts the free exchange of information in the absence of mechanisms for classifying documents and data as 'confidential'.[42] Moreover, nearly forty legislative texts impose broad restrictions on access to information, promoting secrecy and confidentiality. These include the Publications Law, the General Statistics Law, the Cybercrime Law, and laws regulating security institutions.[43]

Kuwaiti legislation similarly maintains provisions that prioritise existing laws enshrining the confidentiality of public data, either explicitly or implicitly.[44] Law No. 12 enumerates exceptions so extensively that they almost render publicity the exception and confidentiality the rule. Article 12 alone lists ten exceptions, excluding information related to national security, personal data, and commercial and industrial secrets. Additionally, the law grants the Council of Ministers the authority to classify any information as confidential through an administrative decision, based on the recommendations of the relevant minister and justified with stated reasons.[45] While Tunisian legislation aligns more closely with international standards compared to other Arab countries—limiting exceptions to areas such as national security, defence, foreign relations, and personal data—it too falls short in practice.[46] The lack of clear definitions for key conditions, such as public interest and harm, undermines the reformative potential of the legislative framework. These ambiguities risk providing authorities with justification to deny access to information, thereby weakening the practical application of freedom of information.[47]

The expansion of exceptions can, in part, be attributed to the manner in which right-to-information legislation is formulated, often under the control of executive authorities. In all Arab countries, such laws originated from government initiatives rather than parliamentary efforts. For example, in Morocco, despite a proposal from the socialist bloc in the House of Representatives, the government was solely responsible for legislating access to information.[48] Elsewhere, parliaments played a negligible or even counterproductive role. In Jordan, amendments introduced by the House of Representatives worsened the restrictions in the draft law.[49] The rushed legislative process saw some laws debated and passed in under thirty minutes. Similarly, the Tunisian legislation received little detailed discussion, preventing representatives from strengthening safeguards or clarifying ambiguities, or even attempts at legislative consolidation accompanied by any in-depth public debate.[50] Moreover, some laws, such as Article 12 of the Kuwaiti law, empower the executive authority to interpret and expand certain provisions through regulatory texts, granting broad discretion over what qualifies as confidential information.[51]

Additional barriers stem from inadequate promotional and educational efforts, leading to limited public awareness about the right to information. A survey in Jordan revealed that half of

government employees were unaware of the law's requirements, and over forty per cent of journalists did not know the law existed, even three years after its enactment.[52] Other studies have also shown the direct impact of marginalising media and civil society organisations, as well as the failure of the relevant authorities, on the decline in popular awareness of the culture of access to information.[53] In Morocco, a recent field study found that approximately seventy per cent of citizens were unaware of the existence of a law on the right to access information, while twenty-eight per cent had only limited knowledge. Alarmingly, only two per cent were familiar with the provisions of Law No. 31.13.[54] This lack of awareness indicates clearly the elitist framing of the right to access information, which should be a universal constitutional right. It also raises questions about the adequacy and effectiveness of communication efforts, which directly impact the extent to which citizens can exercise this right.

Empowering the Right to Information: Mechanisms and Outcomes in the Arab Experience

The challenge of disclosing public data in Arab countries has been integrated into new policies and programmes aimed at modernising public administration through digitalisation. Initiatives such as electronic administration, open government, citizen budgets, and anti-corruption strategies based on transparency have become central to this effort. The countries under study have relied on internet technologies to facilitate access to public information, adopting advanced applications for proactive and interactive publishing to improve citizens' access to open government data.

In terms of interactive publishing, mechanisms have been developed to streamline the filing and tracking of information requests. In Tunisia, the establishment of the Information Access Authority (INAI) in 2017 has led to a steady increase in requests, reaching over three thousand by September 2024. The rate of processing requests has stabilised at eighty per cent, with a fulfilment rate of seventy per cent.[55] In Morocco, the transparency portal Chafafiya.ma now connects over 1,700 departments and institutions committed to responding to information requests. By October 2024, the portal had processed more than half of the submitted requests, with an average response time of thirty-five days.[56] Similarly, Jordan has seen improved contributions from government agencies, particularly the General Department of Statistics, where requests for statistical data doubled to six hundred in 2023, with data availability to the public reaching ninety-six per cent according to the annual monitoring report.[57] In contrast, Kuwait lacks a unified central platform for managing access to information requests. Instead, each administrative body is responsible for maintaining its own portal. While this decentralised approach limits transparency, some agencies have developed individual electronic windows for responding to requests.

Efforts to enhance human resource capacity in managing information requests have also shown progress. Morocco has appointed 1,850 individuals tasked with processing requests, with initial indicators suggesting that departments with dedicated, well-trained personnel and appropriate equipment were most effective in responding promptly.[58] Similarly, Tunisia has designated employees in over seven hundred administrative structures to handle information requests, significantly improving the efficiency of public administration responses.[59]

Proactive publishing has also seen significant advancements across the region. Specialised websites have been developed to continuously publish, classify, and update permissible public data. For example, Kuwait's Ministry of Justice leads in open justice by publishing legislative texts and detailed information on trials and judicial procedures. Similarly, Morocco and Tunisia have introduced platforms for managing public contracts digitally, offering comprehensive information on tender requests.

Arab countries have further demonstrated commitment to the Open Government Data Initiative by designing thematic portals to publish official data from legislative, executive, and judicial bodies. Tunisia launched the Arab region's first open data portal in 2012, which has since evolved into an integrated platform housing approximately 2,500 datasets supervised by 193 public institutions as of September 2024.[60] Morocco's open data platform, launched in 2021, now provides users with advanced search capabilities and interactive formats,[61] featuring around 612 datasets and forty data sources.[62] Meanwhile, Jordan's National Open Data Platform hosts approximately 2,700 datasets managed by over one hundred public bodies, with accelerated efforts by the General Statistics Department to improve open data dissemination.[63]

Unlike its peers, Kuwait has not established a dedicated open data platform. Instead, it relies on an electronic window within the official Kuwaiti Government Online portal (KGO) to publish periodic reports and statistical data.[64] These are primarily issued by key agencies, including the Central Bank, the Central Administration of Statistics, the General Authority for Civil Information, the Supreme Council for Planning and Development, and the Central Agency for Information Technology.[65]

Table 2: Classification of Arab Countries According to the Open Data Inventory (ODIN)[66]

	General Indicator (100/)	Openness Index (100/)	Coverage Index (100/)	Rank (195/ Countries)
Morocco	69	71	66	35
Tunisia	57	69	43	72
Jordan	66	72	62	41
Kuwait	40	40	41	138

Source: Researcher compilation based on the Open Data Inventory (ODIN) database.

Data from the Open Data Inventory (odin.opendatawatch.com) between 2020 and 2023 reveal significant disparities in the performance of Arab countries regarding the openness of public data. Kuwait experienced a sharp decline, dropping over thirty ranks due to its limited alignment with international standards for public data openness. In contrast, the rankings of other countries improved to varying degrees. Morocco advanced from 41st to 35th place, while Jordan made a significant leap from 82nd to 41st. Tunisia also moved up one rank, reflecting modest progress. These improvements are largely attributed to participation in international cooperation

programmes, particularly the International Partnership for Open Government, which consistently encourages member states to enhance their transparency indices.

The interim outcomes also highlight that Arab experiences have gained regional and international recognition for their efforts in making public information accessible. Tunisia received the second-place award among leading countries supporting access to information in Africa and East Asia.[67] Morocco has been acknowledged by the organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as a notable example among Third World countries, with the OECD dedicating special programmes to improve information access systems for member and partner countries.[68] Domestically, these advancements have led to greater integration of openness and transparency standards into public policy design. In Morocco, the right to information has become a cornerstone in initiatives such as the National Plan for Democracy and Human Rights, which includes measures to establish legal protections for freedom of expression, opinion, and information.[69] The National Strategy for Sustainable Development has prioritised enhancing the national system for public information access and reducing corruption by up to ninety per cent. [70] Similarly, development strategies in Jordan have emphasised policies responsive to the right to information, aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 16.10, which aims to ensure public access to information.[71] In Kuwait, the anti-corruption strategy incorporates measures to guarantee access to information, encouraging state institutions to improve their information access systems and urging government agencies to periodically publish information related to their activities.[72] Recognising the structural role of public information in combatting corruption, Tunisia has intensified efforts to protect the free flow of information and publish administrative documents. These measures include releasing data on corruption cases,[73] requiring public officials to declare assets and interests both before and after assuming office, and advancing open and participatory budget mechanisms. Tunisia has achieved notable success in the Arab region, particularly in facilitating citizen participation in the general budget.[74]

At the economic level, the gradual improvement in data transparency has enhanced the clarity of public policies and facilitated access to monetary and financial information. This is evident in initiatives like Tunisia's public procurement transparency applications, which have positively impacted economic accountability.[75] In Kuwait, the increased use of open data technology in the business sector has fostered transparency in economic activities, improving the business environment and boosting investment appeal.[76] Morocco has also implemented measures to enhance the transparency of economic information, strengthening its appeal to foreign investors. These include mandatory publication of financial data underpinning the annual finance law, such as statistics on public debt, public property, human resources, and state-owned enterprises. Investors seeking information are granted specific advantages, including expedited responses and comprehensive data. Similarly, in Jordan, advancements in information technology infrastructure have made economic data more accessible to entrepreneurs, contributing to a revitalised investment climate.[77]

From a social perspective, the digitisation of social safety networks in Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan has improved the transparency of social protection systems. This transparency strengthens

the readability of social data, revealing the extent to which principles of equality, fairness, and merit are upheld in designing and implementing social programmes.[78] Since 2023, the Moroccan government has regularly published results from the Unified Social Register (RSU), an information base for registering underprivileged families eligible for social programmes. This includes data on the number of beneficiaries, direct social support recipients, free health insurance enrollees, and allocated budgets. In Jordan, the National Aid Fund platform (naf.gov.jo) provides open and statistical data on groups benefiting from conditional cash transfers. In Tunisia, the Information Centre at the Ministry of Social Affairs publishes documents and data on the design, budgeting, and evaluation of social programmes, with a focus on gender, sustainability, and effectiveness indicators.

The empowerment of the right to information has also created unprecedented opportunities for civil society to advocate for rights and freedoms. Citizen initiatives have emerged to expand public space by strengthening transparency and access to information. For example, in Tunisia, the 'Compass' and 'Nawaat' associations appealed a decision by the National Constituent Assembly in 2015 to withhold voting records and parliamentary committee reports. The administrative court ruled in their favour, overturning the Assembly's decision. The Tunisian Association also launched a website to evaluate the responsiveness of administrative agencies to information requests.[79] In Morocco, the association 'Simsim – Citizen Participation' developed an interactive platform (article27.ma) to monitor the authorities' commitment to implementing the right to information and to assist citizens in drafting requests and submitting complaints.[80] The Moroccan Transparency Association and the Moroccan Association of Communication Technology Professionals (APEBI) have worked since 2011 to develop indicators measuring public authorities' responsiveness, such as the index of public information availability and the openness of government websites.[81] In Kuwait, the Kuwait Transparency Society has conducted activities to promote the right to access information, aligning with international standards and advocating a human rights approach to information. Similarly, in Jordan, civil organisations such as Rasheed for Integrity and Transparency and the Jordan Transparency Centre (JTC) have supported official efforts to empower the right to information.[82]

Limits and Restrictions: Gaps Between Text and Practice

International classifications measuring freedom of expression, internet access, and information systems consistently rank Arab countries low in access-to-information indicators. Recent data from Article 19's assessment of the free flow of information place Arab countries in the category of restricting access, [83] with no Arab nation classified within the circle of 'open access'.

Table 3: Global Index of Freedom of Information

	Total		Ranking		Degree of Restriction
	2024	**2019**	**International (162 Countries)**	**Arab (18 Countries)**	
Tunisia	53	75	81	1	Restricted
Morocco	36	37	104	3	Very restricted
Kuwait	36	28	106	4	Very restricted
Jordan	28	31	114	7	Very restricted

Source: Researcher's compilation based on ARTICLE 19's database.

With the exception of Kuwait, Arab countries under study have seen a decline in their rankings between 2019 and 2024, as implemented measures failed to move the region out of its status as a restrictor of freedoms related to expression, media, and information access. According to Article 19's classification, variations exist among Arab countries, ranging from 'Less Restricted' (e.g., Lebanon and Tunisia) to 'Restricted' (e.g., Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Libya, and Palestine), and 'Highly Restricted' for most remaining Arab countries.[84] Over the period from 2010 to 2025, Arab countries consistently remained within the 'restricted' category, with the sole exception of Tunisia, which emerged from the 'In Crisis' classification in 2011.[85]

This situation persists due to myriads of legislative and administrative obstacles facing information seekers. In Morocco, responses to information requests often fall short, with delays exceeding specified deadlines and poor-quality replies. Data provided tends to be generic or 'robotic' and fails to meet the requestor's needs, often comprising raw, unprocessed information that is difficult to use effectively.[86] In Tunisia, despite significant legislative guarantees, implementation remains weak. Administrative structures exhibit limited responsiveness to requests, and delays in decisions by the Information Access Authority undermine the utility of appeals. This is particularly problematic for journalists, who serve as a critical bridge for public access to data.[87] Unlike countries with strong freedom-of-information frameworks, such as Spain, where journalists account for approximately seventy-five per cent of applications,[88] Tunisian journalists face significant barriers in accessing public information. In Kuwait, a survey conducted by Transparency International revealed that government agencies' adherence to information disclosure requirements is minimal, with compliance levels not exceeding ten per cent.[89] Similarly, in Jordan, public administration remains entrenched in a culture of withholding information. Only thirty per cent of public administrations complied with a Prime Ministerial directive to provide statistics on information requests.[90] Interactive publishing in Jordan faces similar challenges, with nearly half of official institutions failing to respond to requests.[91] Successful responses are rare, often comprising generic referrals to publicly available websites and studies rather than providing accurate and up-to-date data tailored to the information seeker's needs.[92] Timeliness also remains a significant issue. In Jordan, the average response time increased from sixty-two days in 2020 to sixty-eight days in 2023, far exceeding the legally mandated period

of twenty days. Such delays highlight the gap between legislative provisions and actual practices in implementing information disclosure policies, compounded by procedural inefficiencies.[93]

The responsiveness of official departments to complaints and appeals within the access-to-information system remains a significant issue across Arab countries. In Jordan, the Information Council plays a limited role in addressing complaints from individuals seeking information, primarily due to the dominance of the executive authority over its organisational structure.[94] This has hindered the Council's ability to effectively process appeals against administrations that withhold information. In Morocco, findings from the Sesame-Citizenship Participation association revealed that most public bodies neglect complaints related to appeals against decisions to deny access to requested information. The situation in Kuwait is even more challenging, as public bodies possess broad discretion to reject requests.[95] This is compounded by the absence of an independent supervisory body capable of supporting individuals who face resistance or non-compliance from administrative entities.[96]

These issues highlight the fragility of institutional frameworks designed to enforce the right to access information. Most supervisory and monitoring bodies lack independence, with the exception of Tunisia, which initially established a model framework by creating an independent body elected by Parliament. However, the weakening of democratic structures in the country has since undermined this body's independence.

In Jordan, the Information Council's limited administrative autonomy—due to its subordination to the Ministry of Culture—has undermined its role in supporting the Access to Information Law and in pressuring public bodies to comply with its provisions.[97] Similarly, while Moroccan law stipulates the independence of its information access committee, the reality falls short. The committee remains a 'governmental' entity, inconsistent with international standards requiring administrative independence for human rights monitoring bodies. Most members of Morocco's committee are appointed by the Prime Minister, including the sole civil society representative.[98] Consequently, the committee's mediation and monitoring capabilities are restricted, as it lacks investigative and sanctioning powers to hold administrations accountable for non-compliance, whether in proactive dissemination of information or in responding to requests.[99] Notably, since its establishment in March 2019, the committee has not issued any annual reports on its activities, despite Article 22 of Law 31.13 requiring it to do so.[100]

In Jordan, the situation mirrors that of Morocco. The Information Council has failed to issue periodic reports to evaluate the responsiveness of government institutions or to document its own efforts in promoting the Access to Information Law.[101] Conversely, Tunisia's Access to Information Committee traditionally publishes monthly and annual reports on its website. However, these reports lack details on measures taken to impose sanctions against agencies obstructing access to information, despite the committee's quasi-judicial powers.[102] Beyond administrative challenges, structural factors play a significant role in explaining the limited success of information access systems in the Arab region. Chief among these are the contexts in which these systems emerged, often tied to compliance with conditions for participating in international partnerships.

In Morocco, the adoption of the Access to Information Law (Law No. 31.13) was closely linked to meeting the criteria required for joining the Open Government Partnership. This connection is evident in Morocco's acceptance into the initiative in April 2018, less than a month after the law was enacted.[103] A similar situation unfolded in Tunisia, where government data openness became a central condition for maintaining membership in the Open Government Partnership and securing partnerships with international financial institutions, which increasingly demand advanced disclosure of key public policy data.

In Jordan, the development of freedom-of-information legislation was primarily driven by the requirements of financial partnerships with Western countries,[104] particularly under growing pressure from the United States regarding freedom of expression. According to Jordanian researcher Yahya Shuqeir, who contributed to drafting the legislation, the enactment of Law No. 47 of 2007 was less about addressing national needs and more about fulfilling international obligations. Notably, the law's preparation began immediately after King Abdullah II's speech before the US Congress in 2006, with the aim of bolstering the credentials of Jordan's ambassador to the United States.[105] In Kuwait, codifying the right to information was part of an effort to improve its standing in international freedom and integrity indices. Law No. 12 of 2020 was published in the Official Gazette just a month after Kuwait ratified the United Nations Convention against Corruption on 5 August 2020. This legislation was also linked to the implementation of the National Integrity and Anti- corruption Strategy, developed in January 2019 with the support of the United Nations.[106]

Another significant shortfall in Arab access-to-information systems is the lack of activation guarantees, particularly concerning the human factor. In Kuwait, most government departments have not appointed personnel responsible for receiving and processing information requests, despite this being a fundamental component of the access-to-information process.[107] Similarly, in Jordan, few institutions have designated information coordinators, as mandated by law, to assist individuals seeking information. Where such coordinators exist, their roles often lack clear job descriptions and defined responsibilities, limiting their effectiveness.[108] Instead, most government departments delegate the task of handling information requests to public relations employees, whose overloaded responsibilities prevent meaningful contributions to advancing the right to access information.[109] In Morocco, while a wide network of personnel has been established to manage information requests, their effectiveness remains limited due to insufficient training and capacity-building efforts.[110]

Another critical issue is the failure of most Arab experiments to foster an administrative environment conducive to transparency. Many countries maintain a closed organisational culture that prioritises secrecy and monopolisation of information, undermining efforts to establish equitable access to public data. Furthermore, the digital divide exacerbates these challenges, particularly in countries like Kuwait, which have allocated substantial budgets to accelerate digital transformation. Despite these investments, citizens often face significant obstacles in accessing information due to poorly designed or inadequate digital applications.[111]

Institutional disparities also hinder the effective dissemination of information. Central

government institutions are generally more open than local administrations, where transparency is often weakest. For example, in Morocco, most municipalities fail to meet even the minimum standards for proactive disclosure of public information.[112] In Tunisia, while municipalities are comparatively more responsive to information requests than central administrations,[113] the limited financial and human resources available to local governments—alongside the centralised management of access-to-information systems—perpetuate a culture of opacity and the spread of a climate of withholding information throughout the entire administrative apparatus.[114]

Approaches to Effectualising the Right to Access Information

Lessons learned from past experiences demonstrate that meaningful access to information is not achieved by simply providing formal or secondary documents to citizens. Instead, it requires the availability of sensitive and impactful data that significantly influence their lives. To this end, access-to-information laws in the Arab region must align more closely with international standards. This includes narrowing exceptions to ensure they are clearly defined and narrowly interpreted, reconciling the need to protect national security with the imperative of guaranteeing the free flow of public data.[115] Additionally, administrations should be compelled to adhere to the principle of maximum disclosure, ensuring that public databases are proactively published and accessible to all. Proactive publication is a critical criterion for democratising access to information, particularly given the procedural difficulties associated with request-based systems.[116]

Efforts to codify the right to information should focus not only on quantity but also on the novelty and quality of information provided. International standards such as the Tshwane Principles emphasise key criteria, including completeness.[117] This means data must be comprehensive and detailed enough to protect rights and freedoms and to monitor public authorities effectively. Information should also be presented in various accessible formats and simplified for public use.[118] Given the importance of timeliness in ensuring the effectiveness of public information, all official documents should be published immediately and updated periodically as new data becomes available. Deadlines for responding to information requests and appeals against denials should also be shortened to enhance accessibility and responsiveness.

Adhering to international standards requires more than amending access-to-information laws. It necessitates an overhaul of the broader legal framework governing the right to information.[119] For example, restrictions embedded in other laws, such as Jordan's Law on the Protection of State Documents and Secrets No. 50 of 1971, should be removed.[120] In Morocco, Chapter 18 of the Public Service Law, which restricts employees' ability to disclose public information under the guise of professional secrecy, must be reformed in line with constitutional principles. Similarly, Article 12 of Law 31.13, which exempts personnel handling information requests from the duty to maintain professional secrecy, should be clarified to prevent misuse.[121] In Kuwait, it is essential to review all legal provisions restricting access to information to ensure compliance with the transparency requirements outlined in Law No. 12 of 2020.[122] Tunisia must also expedite efforts

to address shortcomings in its legal framework for access to information while introducing complementary legislation to cover open data,[123] public archives management, intellectual property and personal data protection, and whistleblower and witness protections. It must also enhance the transparency of the procedures for adopting and activating financial laws, which are the solid basis for public policy exposure.

In order to avoid fragmentation and overlap in freedom-of-information laws, it would be beneficial to develop a comprehensive transparency code. Such a code could draw inspiration from successful models in Southern countries that have integrated access-to-information requirements into cohesive legislative frameworks. Examples include Panama's Public Administration Transparency Law, Mexico's Transparency and Access to Government Public Information Law (2002), and Chile's Transparency and Access to Information Law (2008).

This demand for unified legislation has long been echoed by civil society in the Arab region. For instance, the Kuwait Transparency Society proposed a draft law to integrate provisions on transparency, anti-corruption, and access to information into a single legislative text.[124] Similarly, civil society in Jordan has consistently called for reform of the Access to Information Law to encompass all legislative requirements related to transparency and the right to information.[125]

To enhance the institutional framework, it is essential to strengthen the powers of committees responsible for monitoring access to information and improve their ability to contribute to the effective realisation of this right. These improvements should include mandating such committees to submit regular reports to Parliament and ensuring the broad dissemination of these reports. This would increase public awareness of the efforts being made to implement the right to information effectively.[126] Furthermore, annual reports from these bodies should be subjected to extensive parliamentary discussion and media coverage, fostering public dialogue and accountability.

Additionally, decisions and recommendations issued by information-monitoring bodies should be made binding, as demonstrated by successful practices in countries like Mexico and India. In Mexico, the Federal Institute for Public Access to Information (IFAI) issues binding and enforceable decisions for all government agencies.[127] Similarly, India's Central Information Commission (CIC) enjoys quasi-judicial powers, including summoning witnesses, examining documents, conducting investigations, and imposing penalties, which ensures its decisions are respected across public administrations and enterprises.[128]

Alongside legislative and institutional reforms, activation mechanisms must also be strengthened. This begins with developing robust information systems capable of facilitating universal access to information.[129] Part of the current limitations in the electronic dissemination of public data stems from the fragmentation of digital platforms. To address this, all websites hosting public data should be integrated into a central portal, creating a bridge that links the various data repositories managed by public and local administrations and institutions. This centralisation would democratise access to national data and reduce administrative barriers to exercising the right to information.[130] On the other hand, the general architecture of interactive publishing platforms must be reviewed, by making them allow access to the answers provided by the relevant bodies, which would contribute to relieving pressure on the administration and establishing a culture of

obtaining information among citizens, as publishing and classifying answers can contribute to establishing a database. Information that constitutes an important reference for guidance for those wanting to obtain public information.

Awareness of the social and spatial risks posed by the digital divide must be integrated into the review of procedures for obtaining information. Socially, this requires diversifying solutions for submitting and tracking requests to ensure they are accessible to all social groups. Regionally, local administrations must be equipped with the necessary tools, resources, and trained personnel to bridge gaps in access. This involves preparing a qualified workforce by revising the appointment procedures for employees tasked with managing information requests, ensuring they meet standards of competence, specialisation, and experience. Continuous capacity-building mechanisms should also be established, including in-person annual forums and virtual platforms for sharing experiences and best practices. These measures would enable employees to respond to information requests with speed and efficiency, keeping pace with the evolving demands of transparency.

The cultural approach also plays a pivotal role in enhancing the efficiency of access-to-information systems. Efforts should focus on transforming societal and institutional mindsets to eliminate barriers to openness.[131] For citizens, this involves intensifying communication and awareness campaigns as well as training activities to cultivate a culture of information-seeking and familiarise them with appropriate channels. For employees, this means fostering a culture of transparency through motivation, support, and training programmes, aimed at dismantling entrenched 'management doctrines' that glorify secrecy. Misinterpretations of professional confidentiality, which often inhibit administrators from facilitating access to public information, must also be corrected.

Promoting equitable and productive access to information requires democratising public administration, transitioning from hierarchical to interactive models.[132] Priority measures should include establishing dedicated offices within public bodies to handle information requests, offering incentives to employees who actively support transparency efforts, and introducing 'black-and - white lists' to evaluate and publicise the responsiveness of administrative structures. Informing public opinion of the outcomes of these efforts is crucial, drawing inspiration from international examples like Bulgaria, where all ministers are required to disclose detailed reports on information requests. These reports are consolidated and published by the Council of Ministers, providing a transparent overview of efforts to enable the right to information.[133]

In addition to official efforts, civil society initiatives must be supported to complement governmental programmes and institutionalise the right to information. These initiatives can educate citizens on the importance of exercising their right to access information and assess the impact of governmental and administrative programs aimed at improving transparency. Civil society can also play a role in training activists on the human rights and democratic dimensions of access to information and the transparency of government data. Furthermore, support should be extended to parallel platforms created by civil organisations to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of information access systems.

Conclusion

The Arab countries examined in this study have made notable progress toward empowering the right to access information. Constitutional requirements have established guarantees and mechanisms for citizens to obtain information, supported by legal and regulatory frameworks aimed at standardising procedures and creating structures for public information systems. Efforts to enhance administrative transparency through specialised platforms and the integration of information technologies have also increased citizens' access to government data.

However, these advancements fall short of expectations and remain inconsistent with international standards. Key challenges include the laxity of government agencies in proactively publishing available data, weak responses to information requests, and structural obstacles limiting the exercise of the right to information. These obstacles include insufficient legislative guarantees, a fragile institutional framework for enforcing the constitutional right, technical and political difficulties in adopting digital tools, and the limited economic and social impact of access-to-information measures. Furthermore, inadequate stakeholder involvement and weak governmental commitment to upholding the human right to public information exacerbate these issues. Significant gaps persist, perpetuating elitism and selectivity in access, even after timeframes and internationally recognised action plans have been implemented.

To address these shortcomings, comprehensive reforms are necessary. Efforts must focus on maximising information disclosure through both proactive and interactive measures. Proactive measures should require all public bodies to publish their documents and data, ensuring the generalisation and improved quality of open data. For interactive measures, national portals must be enhanced to efficiently handle and track information requests, simplifying procedures and ensuring transparency during appeals against rejection decisions.

Additionally, the independence and authority of bodies monitoring access-to-information systems should be strengthened. These bodies must operate with greater autonomy from government influence, and their decisions should be binding on public administrations. Regular and transparent reporting is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of measures aimed at improving access to information, aligning with international standards for accountability.

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This article is originally written in Arabic for Rowaq Arabi.

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