



ماعت للسلام والتنمية وحقوق الإنسان  
Maat For Peace, Development, and Human Rights

# *Impact of Social Media on Electoral Participation in the Middle East*



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## Introduction

Social media has been of great importance in various fields, including politics, and has become an essential means of supporting political participation and learning about the campaigns and electoral programs of candidates, being a key tool for mobilizing and winning the support of voters and then being able to influence public opinion. Political parties are now using certain tools to attract voters to support their candidates. Citizens can access all information about the elections, communicate with candidates, identify their opinions, positions, electoral programs, and interact easily with them. Social media has become an open forum for debates and discussions on various issues, and provided an opportunity for the informal and sarcastic opposition to express their views on various electoral events.

Social media is used, on the other hand, by opposition political currents as an effective means of calling for a boycott of the elections or limiting political participation, so social media can play a role in increasing political participation rates; directing voters to support a particular candidate; or influencing voting rates.

This study indicates the impact of social media on political participation and involvement of individuals in various elections within the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), by analyzing calls both to encourage participation and to boycott the recent elections in this region. The countries that witnessed conflicts and political instability, namely Libya, Syria, and Yemen, were excluded.

## Methodology

This study relies initially on reviewing participation rates in elections in MENA, without counting the countries of "Syria, Libya, and Yemen" due to the instability of the political situation there, and then reviewing the most prominent calls on social media made by the political forces in these countries, whether it is related to the call for participation and voting, or those that urge abstention from participation and boycotting the elections, and analyzing the impact of these calls on the voting of citizens.

## Map of the impact of social media on elections in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Social media platforms have become an important and influential means of shaping public opinion during elections. Its nature as an easy and available means to use has made them platforms for candidates to present their electoral programs and interact with citizens in order to influence their voting. Unlike traditional media, communication between individuals and political forces has become easier, and



mobilizing citizens and influencing the direction of voting through platforms has become effective and at less or no cost, therefore, it can shape opinions, change ideas, and then influence the election process.

The Middle East and North Africa region(MENA) has recently seen an influential role of social media in the election, as the political parties and forces that participate in the electoral processes seek to promote their vision, policies, and ideology through these sites, this due to their ability to reach as many citizens as possible. On the other hand, opposing forces use social media to call for a boycott of elections for many reasons, including the existence of a fundamental political argument with the government or the majority parties, which makes boycott calls have a noticeable impact on declining popular participation rates in the elections.

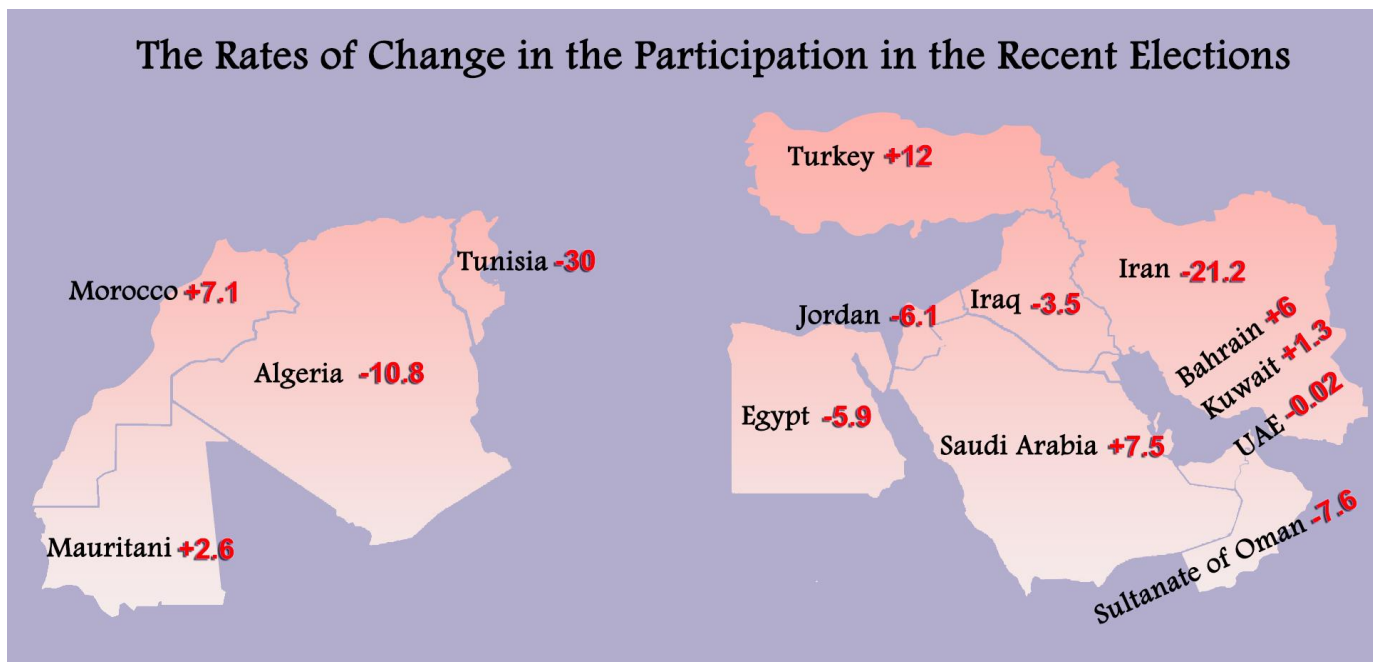
There are many indications that social media is being used to manipulate public opinion during elections, by opening discussions that are contrary to reality, through tactics that depend on publishing political content and news that influence voters to support or increase sympathy for specific candidates by portraying them as popular, or by publishing certain media messages and “hashtags”; which creates a collective public opinion that pushes the voters to either participate or boycott the electoral process.

Maat’s estimates indicate that the calls of the various political forces on social media during the election campaigns, whether to participate or boycott, contributed to an increase in the rate of political participation of society groups during four electoral entitlements in the countries of "Morocco, Bahrain, Israel, and Saudi Arabia". Boycott campaigns on social media succeeded in reducing political participation rates in 11 electoral entitlements in the countries of Algeria, Tunisia, Kuwait, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iran, and Lebanon; while it had dual effects in other countries, as they contributed to reducing the rates of political participation in some electoral entitlements and to raising participation rates in other.

The following table shows the impact of social media campaigns on the political participation and voting of citizens in the MENA region:

Electoral entitlement	Year	Participation rate	rate of change
Turkey - Parliamentary	2018	86.2	-1.5
	2015	87.7	
Turkey - Presidential	2018	86.2	+12
	2014	74.13	
Morocco - Legislative	2021	50.18	+7.1
	2016	43	
Algeria - Legislative	2021	30.20	-6.8
	2017	37	
Algeria - Presidential	2019	39.93	-10.8
	2014	50.7	
Tunisia - Parliamentary	2022	11.22	-30
	2019	41.3	
Tunisia - Presidential	2019	45	-19
	2014	64	
Egypt - Parliamentary	2020	29.5	+1.3
	2015	28.2	
Egypt - Presidential	2018	41.5	-5.9
	2014	47.4	
Bahrain - Parliamentary	2022	73	+6
	2018	67	
Kuwait - Legislative	2022	70	+1.3
	2020	68.65	
Sultanate of Oman - Shura Council	2019	49	-7.6
	2015	56.6	
Saudi Arabia - Municipality	2015	47.4	+7.5
	2011	39.92	
UAE - Legislative	2019	34.81	-0.2
	2015	35	
Iraq - Parliamentary	2021	41	

Electoral entitlement	Year	Participation rate	rate of change
	2018	44.5	-3.5
<b>Qatar - Shura</b>	2021	63.5	-
<b>Jordan - Parliamentary</b>	2020	29.9	-6.1
	2016	36	
<b>Iran - Presidential</b>	2021	48.8	-21.2
	2017	70	
<b>Iran - Parliamentary</b>	2020	40	-18
	2016	58	
<b>Mauritania - Presidential</b>	2019	62.6	+2.6
	2014	60	
<b>Mauritania - Parliamentary</b>	2018	73.4	-2.6
	2013	76	



The previous graph indicates that Tunisia and Iran were among the highest countries in which the percentage of political participation decreased during recent elections because of the campaigns of various political forces on social media to boycott the elections. In contrast, there was a positive impact and an increase in participation rates in the elections in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. However, the impact has remained balanced in some elections in both Egypt and Turkey.

The electoral propaganda of various political forces on social media has focused on many tactics to emphasize their influential political messages in the electoral context, topped by the use of hashtags, "Any word or phrase preceded by a # symbol to mark distinguish the text following, which helps spread information among the largest number of users, is an essential way to regulate search on Twitter, Facebook, or other social media."

The same hashtag is used by many people at the same time to demonstrate a specific message, whether by participating in or boycotting the elections. For example, before the Algerian presidential elections in December 2019, there were many hashtags and trends calling for boycotting the elections and others urging participation, the hashtags "#Algeria\_free\_democratic, and #no\_elections\_with\_gangs" were used to call for a boycott of the elections. On the other hand, the hashtags #Algeria\_elects and #don't\_speak\_in\_my\_name were used to invite citizens to vote and participate in the elections<sup>1</sup>, which had the effect of reducing the percentage of political participation in this election compared to the previous one by 10.8 percent.

The vocabulary of the speech and the content of the messages used by the political parties differ during the electoral events. The speeches about boycotting the elections often focus on their futility, and highlight that they are formal elections that try to legitimize the political process needed to correct its conditions, and demonstrate its messages with a set of symbolic images that refer to violations of human rights or the corruption of the political process, while the political forces that call for participation in the elections point to their importance in supporting the stability of the state and achieving democracy and political reform, they also try to push voters to choose some candidates and not others. The common denominator among all these campaigns is the reliance on tools, symbolic images and videos to influence public opinion, whether emotionally or rationally.

In the Tunisian legislative elections that were held in December 2022, the political movements calling for a boycott of the elections demonstrated the existence of human rights violations and legal and constitutional violations in the conduct of the elections. They also referred to the difficult economic conditions experienced by citizens, using verbal and symbolic expressions, pictures and various videos. The main

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<sup>1</sup> مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي في الجزائر حلبة صراع بين الحراك الاحتجاجي وداعمي النظام، مونت كارلو الدولية، يوليو ٢٠١٩ ، <https://bit.ly/3RhUs3g>

hashtag, "#Down with Kais Saied," was used by the forces calling for a boycott of the elections.<sup>2</sup>

### **Calls to boycott the elections and their impact on political participation rates**

The recent elections in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa region witnessed various calls on social media to boycott the elections launched by opposition political forces, which resulted in low rates of voter participation in the voting process in a number of countries. The hashtags and videos launched by these forces reached millions of people who abstained from voting, and according to available information, boycott calls succeeded in reducing voting rates during 11 electoral dues in the countries "Algeria, Tunisia, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Iran, and Lebanon."

Tunisia is a clear example of the impact of social media on political participation. During the last legislative elections held in December 2022, the participation rate in the elections reached 11.22%, which is a very low rate<sup>3</sup>, compared to the parliamentary elections held in October 2019, which amounted to 41.3% of the number of voters<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps the boycott calls launched by the various Tunisian political forces on social media, which reject to participate in the parliamentary elections, were the reason for this low percentage, where the movements calling for a boycott used many hashtags, including # Down with Kais Saied, and many satirical phrases were spread on the banners of the candidates, which some considered closer to humor. Among the most prominent of these phrases that carry messages with a promise to liberate Palestine and build ports in internal areas where there is no sea in the first place, and this bad propaganda by the candidates on social media is considered an important factor in the low participation in the vote, due to the lack of sufficient conviction of the individuals in the candidates<sup>5</sup>.

In Iran, the participation rate in the recent parliamentary elections reached about 42.6% of the number of voters, which is the weakest turnout in the elections since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, due to the negative propaganda campaigns called for by the Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ali Khamenei, as he confirmed on his page on the social media site "Twitter" the importance of thwarting the enemies' plans and their media campaigns to prevent the Iranian people from participating in the elections, and the negative impact of his

<sup>2</sup> تحليل لمؤسسة ماعت للهاشتاج الداعي إلى عدم المشاركة في الانتخابات التشريعية التونسية "يسقط قيس سعيد" متاح الهاشتاج على اللينك التالي

<https://bit.ly/3XPUtxT>

<sup>3</sup> تونس: نسبة المشاركة في الانتخابات التشريعية تبلغ رسميا 11,22 بالمئة، فرنسا ٢٤ ، ديسمبر ٢٠٢٢ ، <https://bit.ly/3YfewFL>

<sup>4</sup> تونس: نسبة المشاركة في الانتخابات التشريعية بلغت 41,3%، فرنسا ٢٤ ، أكتوبر ٢٠١٩ ، <https://bit.ly/3XRZrtW>

<sup>5</sup> حملات دعائية يطاولها استهزاء واسع من الاستحقاق في مقابل تشويه للمقاطعين، الإندبندنت البريطانية، ديسمبر ٢٠٢٢ ، <http://bit.ly/3HewYqU>

comment, and the participation rate in the elections decreased to a low level<sup>6</sup>. This is in conjunction with the opposition's calls for the need to boycott the elections due to human rights violations committed by the Iranian government. The participation rate in the presidential elections held in June 2021 decreased to 48%<sup>7</sup>, after it was 70% in the presidential elections held in May 2017, this is due to the boycott campaign launched by opposition movements on social media in Persian under various hashtags, including "No to the Islamic Republic"<sup>8</sup>.

In Algeria, the percentage of political participation in the parliamentary elections held in June 2021 decreased to 30.20%, while in June 2017, the percentage reached about 37.09%<sup>9</sup>, as a result of the spread of calls for a boycott of the Algerian legislative elections under the hashtag #legislative\_farce and #I\_did\_not\_betray\_my\_homeland, in light of the boycott of 6 Algerian parties of the elections held due to the blurring of the political scene, many participants in the campaign calling for a boycott of the elections described it as a formality. Despite calls for a boycott, there were other participations in support of the elections and participation in voting, but they did not contribute to the increase in participation, which reached 30.20%<sup>10</sup>.

In Lebanon, the participation rate in the recent legislative elections reached 41 percent<sup>11</sup>, which is lower than the previous elections, which amounted to 49.20%<sup>12</sup>. The reason for this is the calls made by many citizens to boycott the elections, especially supporters of the Future Movement, which is headed by politician and former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and the spread of many hashtags calling for a boycott, including #Lebanon elections 2022 #boycott for your sake, and #boycott for my dignity<sup>13</sup>. On the other hand, many political movements urged citizens to participate in the elections and vote, led by Hezbollah. Voters also used many pictures and video clips in voting in the elections in front of the electoral commissions<sup>14</sup>.

In Iraq, the voter turnout in the Iraqi legislative elections in October 2021 reached approximately 41%<sup>15</sup>, lower than the previous elections, which amounted to 44.52%, preceded by the spread of calls for boycotts and civil disobedience on social

<sup>6</sup> الانتخابات التشريعية الإيرانية: أضعف نسبة إقبال في تاريخ الجمهورية الإسلامية، بي بي سي، فبراير ٢٠٢٠، <https://bit.ly/3WV4vwa>

<sup>7</sup> نسبة المشاركة في الانتخابات الإيرانية محل ترقب في ظل دعوات المقاطعة، <http://bit.ly/3kQJdTb>

<sup>8</sup> خامنئي يحث الإيرانيين على تجاهل الدعوات إلى مقاطعة الانتخابات الرئاسية، فرنسا ٢٤، <https://bit.ly/3XPfF6R>

<sup>9</sup> وسط إقبال ضعيف إعلان نسبة المشاركة بانتخابات الجزائر، أسكاي نيوز، يونيو ٢٠٢١، <http://bit.ly/3wJH7Y4>

<sup>10</sup> مقاطعة الانتخابات التشريعية في الجزائر وتصريحات الرئيس عبد المجيد تبون تثير الجدل، بي بي سي، يونيو ٢٠٢١، <http://bit.ly/3HjdFNn>

<sup>11</sup> تعرف على نتائج الانتخابات النيابية اللبنانية، الجزيرة، <http://bit.ly/3HLSO6F>

<sup>12</sup> لبنان 41% نسبة المشاركة في الانتخابات البرلمانية بالداخل، العين الإخبارية، <http://bit.ly/3Y9Bui1>

<sup>13</sup> تحليل مؤسسة ماعت لمجموعة من الهاشتاجات والدعوات التي انطلقت على موقع تويتر خلال الانتخابات البرلمانية، <https://bit.ly/3HJY0YS>

<sup>14</sup> الانتخابات اللبنانية: كيف تفاعلت مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي مع الاستحقاق الانتخابي، بي بي سي، مايو ٢٠٢٢، <http://bit.ly/3XVoyMI>

<sup>15</sup> إعلان نسبة التصويت لانتخابات مجلس النواب العراقي ٢٠٢١، المفوضية العليا المستقلة للانتخابات، <https://bit.ly/3wLBTlu>



media<sup>16</sup>. In Jordan, the percentage of political participation decreased in the recent parliamentary elections, in 2020, as it reached 29.88%, lower than the elections in September 2016, which amounted to 36%. The main reason of the boycott campaigns launched by many activists in Jordan is to boycott the parliamentary elections and not vote due to the high number of people infected with the Coronavirus. The activists used the hashtag #Boycott\_the\_elections\_for\_your\_life to call for a boycott; despite many calls to participate in the elections they did not raise the participation rate<sup>17</sup>.

In Kuwait, during the National Assembly elections in December 2020, reliance on social media increased to deliver the candidates' messages to their voters and to introduce issues of interest to each candidate<sup>18</sup> due to the Corona pandemic, which increased the rate of political participation, reaching 70%<sup>19</sup>. In the last elections held in 2022, the participation rate decreased to 60% due to the decline in reliance on electoral media in electoral campaigns and coverage of election issues<sup>20</sup>; that reflects the role played by social media during the electoral process.

In Qatar, the first legislative elections, October 2021, in expectations that participation would be wide because it is the first elections. However, the boycott calls that spread at the time through social media resulted in a decrease in the participation rate to 63.5% of the total votes due to the calls that were launched on "Twitter" under the hashtag #the people\_boycott\_Shura\_elections<sup>21</sup>.

### Social media and its role in increasing electoral participation rates

Social networking sites contributed to increasing political participation in the elections in Morocco, Bahrain, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Despite the emergence of calls to boycott in some of these countries, they did not succeed in reducing participation rates. In Morocco, social media platforms formed awareness of the legislative elections by giving mental images of the candidates. Parties use sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to address Moroccan voters rather than the traditional rhetoric platform. The participation rate in the elections held in September 2021 increased, reaching

<sup>16</sup> دعوات المقاطعة والعصيان المدني هل تؤثر على سير الانتخابات في العراق، <http://bit.ly/3Y6eFve>

<sup>17</sup> حملة أردنية لمقاطعة الانتخابات بسبب "كورونا" والحكومة تقاومها عبر إعلامها، القدس، <http://bit.ly/3HWpsCZ>

<sup>18</sup> بسبب تدابير كورونا مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي ميدان الدعاية الأبرز في الانتخابات البرلمانية الكويتية، الجزيرة، <http://bit.ly/3wIWksg>

<sup>19</sup> الكويت القبائل والمعارضة أكبر الفائزين بالانتخابات وتوقعات بفصل تشريعي ساخن، الجزيرة، <https://bit.ly/3DvvMhP>

<sup>20</sup> انتخابات الكويت عودة بارزة لأسماء معروفة من المعارضة والإسلاميين، اندبنت البريطانية، <http://bit.ly/3Yfa35W>

<sup>21</sup> حملات انتخابية مقابل دعوات لمقاطعة انتخابات الشورى القطري، العرب، <https://bit.ly/3wHy7Tj>

50.18%, compared to 43% in the elections held in 2016<sup>22</sup>, despite calls to boycott under the hashtag “Don’t Vote Me<sup>23</sup>.”

In Bahrain, the participation rate in the legislative elections in November 2022 reached about 73%, the highest rate since the 2002 elections, due to the success of calls launched by the Bahraini government to support participation<sup>24</sup>; these calls were in contrast to other calls made by the opposition forces that supported a boycott of the elections<sup>25</sup>.

In Saudi Arabia, the percentage of political participation in the Saudi local elections in 2015 was approximately 47.4%,<sup>26</sup> which is a high rate compared to the local elections in October 2011, which amounted to 39%,<sup>27</sup> due to the increased use of social media in recent elections and the involvement of citizens in exchanging election-related information on those social platforms<sup>28</sup>.

In Israel, the political participation rate in the legislative parliamentary elections reached 71.3%, the highest rate since 2015<sup>29</sup>, despite the boycott calls made by many Arabs residing in Israel not to participate in the elections. One of the most important reasons boycott calls did not have an effect is that Facebook has blocked dozens of accounts that called for not participating in the elections, which explains the importance of social media in influencing participation rates.

In Mauritania, social media plays an important role in electoral life. Social media contributed to increasing political participation in the presidential elections in Mauritania<sup>30</sup> after candidates used it extensively to harvest electoral votes<sup>31</sup>. The participation rate in the last presidential elections in June 2019 increased to 63.3%, compared to the elections in December 2013, with an increase of 3.6%.

In Egypt, the House of Representatives elections in 2020 increased voting participation rates by approximately 1.3% compared to the 2015 Parliament elections.

<sup>22</sup> وزارة الداخلية المغربية تعلن نسبة المشاركة في الانتخابات، اسكاي نيوز، سبتمبر ٢٠٢١، <http://bit.ly/3Dvx2Se>

<sup>23</sup> الملاحظة المستقلة والمحيدة للانتخابات المحلية والجهوية والتشريعية 2021، <https://bit.ly/3JBa0Xj>

<sup>24</sup> جدلية المشاركة والمقاطعة في الانتخابات الصحافية المحلية خارج التغطية، رابطة الصحافة البحرينية، <http://bit.ly/3jpaLPi>

<sup>25</sup> حملة الكترونية لمقاطعة انتخابات البحرين.. ومنظمات حقوقية تدخل على الخط، قناة العالم، <http://bit.ly/3HOmVdZ>

<sup>26</sup> فوز 20 سيدة في الانتخابات البلدية للمملكة العربية السعودية، <http://bit.ly/40hJJkb>

<sup>27</sup> لجنة الانتخابات 432 ألف أدلوا بأصواتهم في الانتخابات البلدية ونسبة المشاركة 39%، <http://bit.ly/3HqKI7K>

<sup>28</sup> الانتخابات البلدية السعودية هل تستحق عناء المشاركة، السفير، <http://bit.ly/3DxnxC9>

<sup>29</sup> لجنة الانتخابات في إسرائيل نسبة التصويت هي الأعلى منذ 2015، سي أن أن العربية، <http://bit.ly/3Hr7VB1>

<sup>30</sup> مسيرة للمعارضة ترفض نتائج انتخابات موريتانيا، الجزيرة، <http://bit.ly/3HsAj5S>

<sup>31</sup> وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي حلبة صراع في رئاسيات موريتانيا، الاندبائيت البريطانية، <http://bit.ly/3Dw4XdW>

Social media had an influential role in political participation, and there was extensive use of Facebook platforms to urge citizens to participate and vote; in contrast, other opposition forces called to boycott the elections, which focused on the Twitter platform<sup>32</sup>.

In Turkey, political currents used social media during the elections to influence the voting citizens' behavior<sup>33</sup>. Opposition forces presented their ideas on social media platforms and communicated with various groups of society, which increased the participation rate during the last Turkish presidential elections in 2018, which amounted to 86.2%, an increase of 12% compared to the previous elections, which amounted to 74.13%.

Social media plays a pivotal and influential role during elections. On the one hand, it can enhance communication between political forces and citizens and then work to increase political participation or use it to limit political participation through boycott calls launched by various parties. Social media has become a factor in moving public opinion and influencing citizens voting behavior. Social media platforms are misused to spread misinformation, fake news, and hate speech to control competing forces, the voting direction of voters, or limit political participation.

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<sup>32</sup> رصد مؤسسة ماعت للهاشتاج على موقع تويتر، <https://bit.ly/3HMxnSV>

<sup>33</sup> أدوار متباينة كيف أثرت وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على نتائج الانتخابات التركية، مركز المستقبل للأبحاث والدراسات السياسية، <https://bit.ly/3Dy9sEp>