

The 2026 Global Youth Outlook: Middle East findings

How young people in the Middle East want governments to listen, serve and act



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Executive summary

Young people in the Middle East look to the future with optimism, reflecting the resilience of a generation navigating technological change and geopolitical uncertainty with confidence. Drawing on the views of 676 respondents across seven countries in the region, the Middle East findings of PwC's Global Youth Outlook 2026 reveal that 70% of youth are confident their government will create good opportunities over the next three years, almost double the global average of 38% and the highest level of confidence recorded globally.

This reflects efforts by governments across the region that recognise youth's vital role in shaping the future. Youth development programmes, education and training strategies are empowering young people to shape their own futures and contribute to the region's wider progress.[1]

Youth across the Middle East want public services that are more effective, transparent and responsive to their needs, with education as a particular priority. They see digital transformation as an opportunity to make government services more accessible and efficient, alongside stronger safeguards around artificial intelligence (AI), privacy and data use. They also take a broad view of security, combining defence and territorial priorities with cyber protection and information integrity.

Young people also want to move from being beneficiaries of progress to active participants in shaping it. They want a greater voice in decisions that affect their future, signalling an opportunity for governments to build more inclusive and participatory approaches to policymaking.

These findings paint a picture of a generation that is bravely optimistic about the region's future, while being discerning about how it is shaped. For governments, the opportunity is to build on this optimism, turn ambition into tangible outcomes and give young people a meaningful role in shaping the region's future.



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Key findings for the region

70%

Are confident their government will create good opportunities for youth over the next three years, the highest level globally and almost double the global average of 38%.

78%

Rate government performance on security and geopolitical integration as “good” or “excellent”.

48%

Prioritise greater efficiency and transparency in education spending, ahead of healthcare at 43%, reversing the global order.



45%

45% rank digital government services as the leading digital priority, while 47% cite privacy and surveillance as concerns around their governments' use of artificial intelligence (AI).

32%

Favour national and local youth advisory boards, the highest share across regions, compared with 23% globally.

41%

Rank clean and renewable energy as the leading environmental priority, while 25% prioritise grid upgrades for electric vehicles and data centres.

44%

44% rank defence and military readiness as the leading security priority, while 34% prioritise countering foreign interference and online misinformation, nine percentage points higher than the global average.

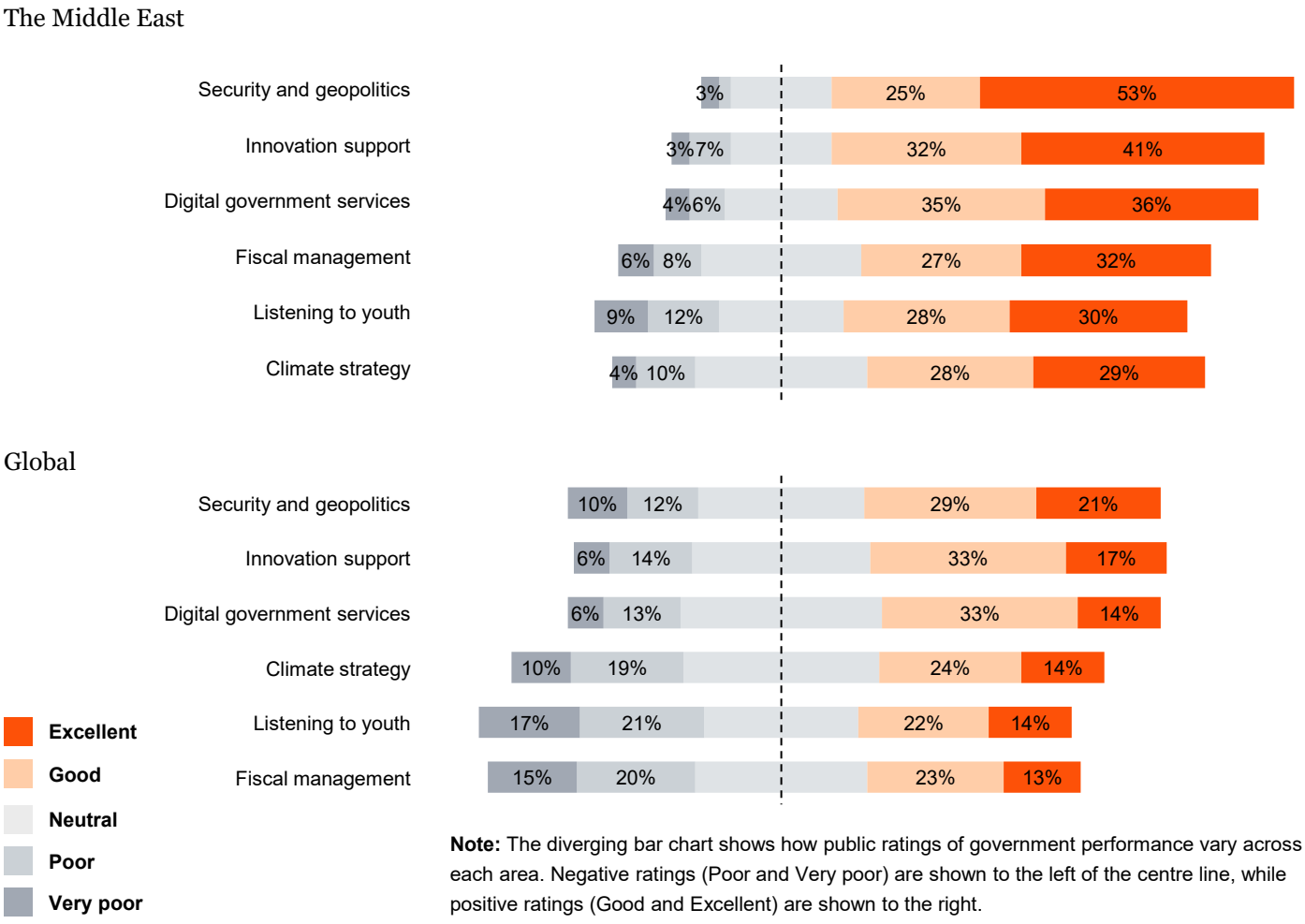


01 Government priorities and performance

High performance leads to optimism

Survey findings indicate that youth in the Middle East rate their governments more positively than their global peers across all six measured performance areas. Security and geopolitical integration receive the highest rating, with 78% assessing government performance as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ (vs 50% globally). This is followed by support for innovation (73% vs 50% globally) and digital integration (71% vs 47% globally).

Figure 1: How would you rate your government’s performance in each of the following areas?



Note: The diverging bar chart shows how public ratings of government performance vary across each area. Negative ratings (Poor and Very poor) are shown to the left of the centre line, while positive ratings (Good and Excellent) are shown to the right.

High confidence in government performance extends to the wider outlook of the region's youth, with trust in institutions and politics ranking as their least pressing daily-life concern. Seven in 10 young people in the Middle East are confident that their government will create good opportunities for them over the next three years, the highest level globally and nearly double the global average of 38%. Notably, the region reverses the global gender trend: confidence is higher among young women (73%) than young men (68%), compared with 35% and 41%, respectively, at the global level.



Connecting growth with everyday priorities

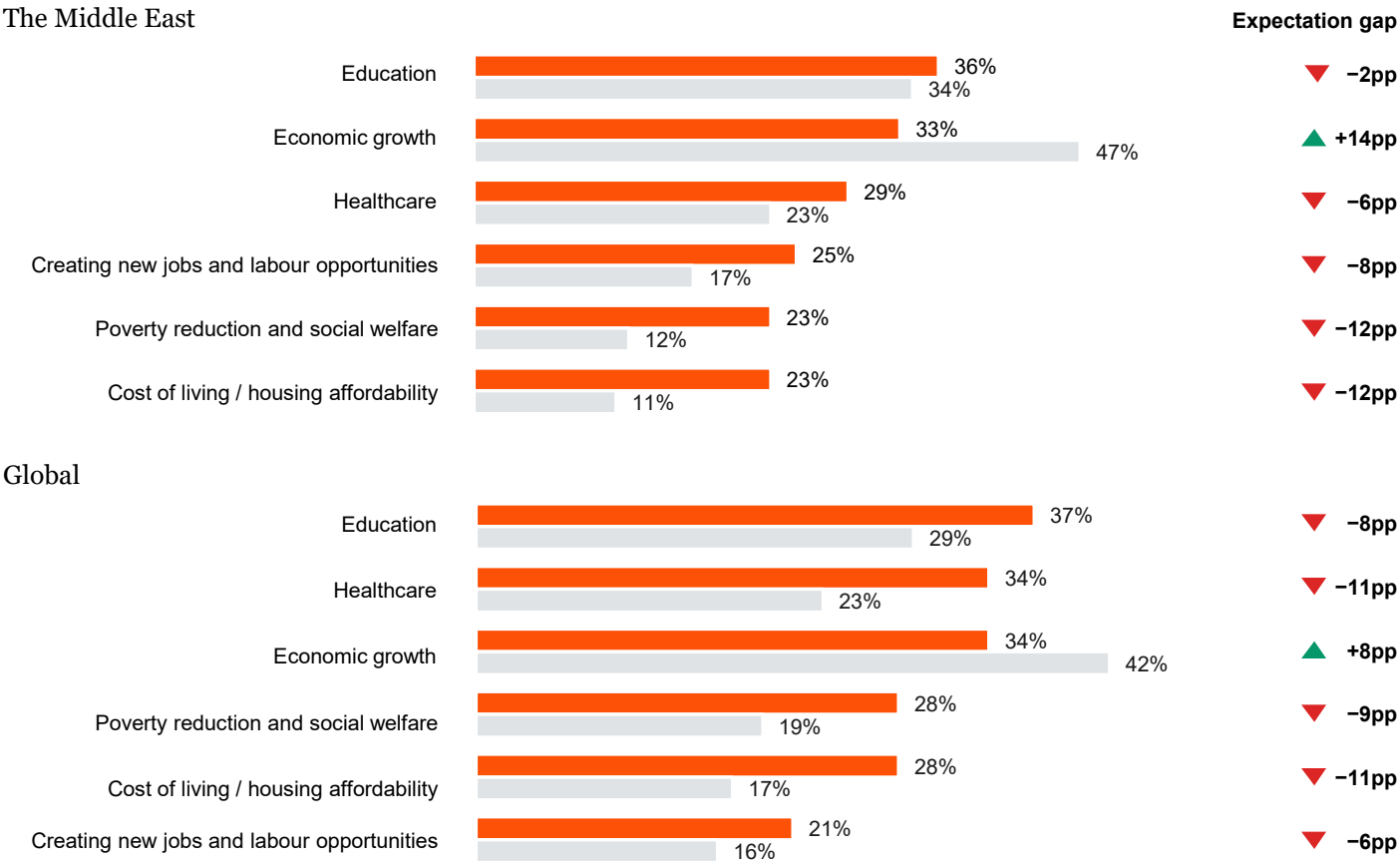
Yet high confidence does not remove the everyday pressures youth in the region face. Education (36%), economic growth (33%) and healthcare (29%) emerge as the top three priorities for government action. Findings indicate that regional youth perceive economic growth as receiving more government attention than they believe it should, with a 14-percentage-point gap between perceived and desired priorities. This sentiment is also reflected globally, although to a lesser extent, with an eight-percentage-point gap.

Economic growth still matters, but young people in the Middle East want greater emphasis on how that growth translates into tangible improvements in their daily lives. The largest gaps between perceived government priorities and what youth in the region believe should be prioritised are in cost of living and housing affordability (-12 percentage points), poverty reduction and social welfare (-12 percentage points) and job creation and employment opportunities (-8 percentage points). These gaps reflect the everyday pressures young people in the regions face, especially amid wider geopolitical developments, fluctuating energy prices and economic uncertainty.[2]

Figure 2: Top government priorities desired by youth

Based on your knowledge, what are the current priorities of your country's government? (choose max 3)

In your opinion, which of the following areas should your country's government prioritise? (choose max 3)



Desired priorities

Perceived priorities

Note: The **Expectation gap** is calculated as the difference between current (perceived) government priorities and youth desired government priorities for different focus areas. The negative gap reflects the areas that youth consider under-prioritised and that require more government focus, while the positive gap reflects the over-prioritised areas.

Where to act now



For governments, the opportunity is to build on this strong foundation of trust and optimism by making the benefits of economic growth more visible and accessible to young people. This means placing greater emphasis on affordable housing, quality job creation, education-to-employment pathways and targeted support that eases cost-of-living pressures. This should be supported by clear indicators to monitor and measure how economic progress is improving affordability, employment opportunities and overall quality of life for young people.

02 Better outcomes from public spending

Efficiency and transparency – making every investment count

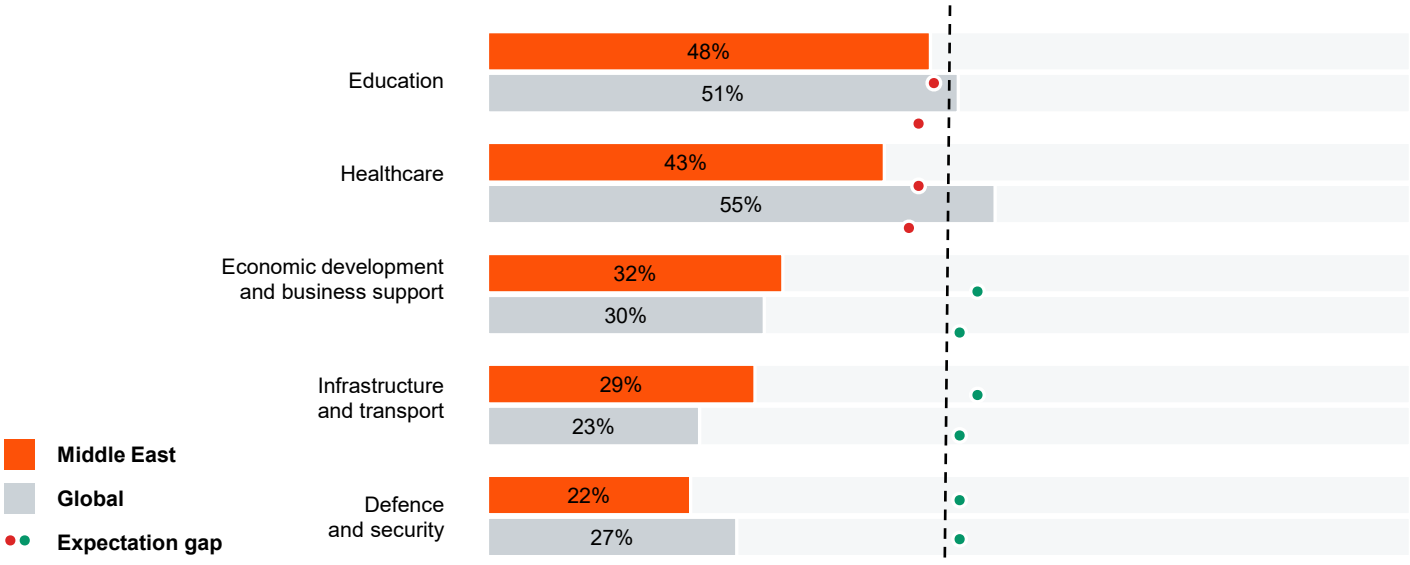
When it comes to public spending, young people in the Middle East want stronger evidence that governments are using resources effectively and delivering tangible improvements in outcomes.

Globally, healthcare and education emerge as the two areas where young people are most keen to see greater efficiency and transparency in government spending. In the Middle East, those priorities are reversed. Education ranks first, selected by 48% of respondents, followed by healthcare at 43%.

Across key economies in the Middle East, governments are increasingly investing in education and youth skills development to equip the next generation for technological change and evolving labour market demands. With the youth population across GCC countries projected to reach 28.6 million by 2050,[3] education is becoming more than a means of expanding access to knowledge. It is increasingly central to developing human capital, strengthening economic competitiveness and equipping the next generation with the skills needed to thrive in a digital economy.[4]

Figure 3: Top 5 government spending areas requiring greater efficiency and transparency

Which government spending areas do you believe need greater efficiency and transparency? (choose max 3)



Other regional differences suggest that this expectation extends beyond core public services. Middle East youth are more likely than their global peers to call for greater efficiency and transparency in infrastructure and transport (29% vs 23% globally), affordable and reliable energy (20% vs 12% globally), and digital transformation and technology (15% vs 8% globally). The latter two represent the highest shares across all regions globally. These findings shift the emphasis beyond public spending; young people also focus on what that investment delivers.



From being heard to shaping decisions – youth seek more structured participation

Better outcomes also depend on giving young people a meaningful role in shaping the policies that affect them. While schools and universities, alongside online ideas and feedback platforms, are the top-rated engagement channels globally, Middle East youth stand out for their preference for more structured forms of participation compared with their global peers.

Nearly one-third (32%) favour national and local youth advisory boards—the highest share across regions, compared with 23% globally, while 30% support investment in youth-led social enterprises and startups and 25% favour participation in government committees.

This preference goes beyond consultation: young people value accessible ways to contribute ideas alongside formal channels that allow them to shape decisions and see their input translate into action.

Where to act now

Governments have an opportunity to make the impact of public spending more visible by demonstrating how investments translate into measurable outcomes. Greater transparency, supported by clear indicators of progress, can help show where spending is delivering value and where further improvements are needed.

Building on the GCC's strong foundation in education and digital skills, the next priority is to translate these investments into tangible opportunities for young people. This means strengthening the pathways from education and skills development to employment and entrepreneurship, ensuring that public investment not only builds capabilities but also supports greater economic participation and long-term opportunities for youth. Youth engagement should also form part of that process, with structured channels that show how young people's input informs decisions.



03 Digital ambition and trust must advance together

Middle East youth are setting a bold mandate for continued digital transformation. Almost one-third (30%) see digital transformation and innovation as a current government priority, compared with 22% globally. Looking ahead, 23% want it prioritised in the future, well above the global average of 15%.

Beyond digital ambition – youth want technology that delivers

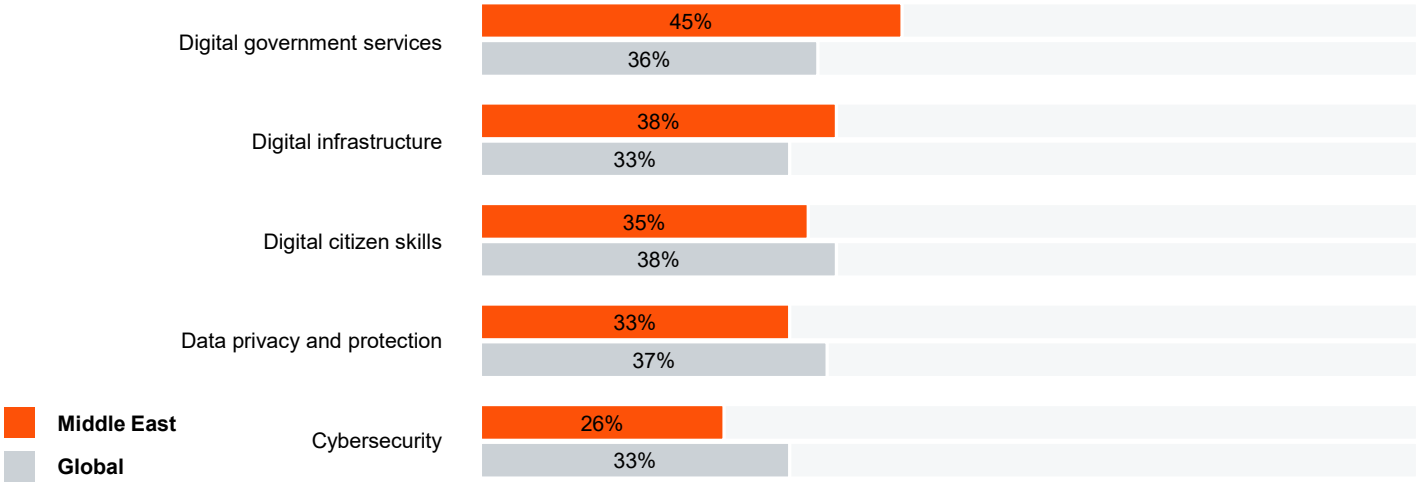
The innovation agenda extends further. When asked about the most important innovation areas their government should focus on, digital ambitions dominate. Middle East youth rank AI and digital technology as their leading innovation priority at 37%, compared with 30% globally. AI infrastructure ranks third at 32%, 12 percentage points above the global average of 20%, and tech startups at 28%, compared with 24% globally.

Young people are also clear about what governments should deliver next. Nearly half (45%) prioritise improving and expanding digital government services, compared with 36% globally. Demand is also higher for digital infrastructure, at 38% versus 33% globally, and AI adoption, at 20% versus 16%. At the same time, digital citizen skills (35% vs 38%) and data privacy and protection (33% vs 37%) remain important priorities.

Youth in the Middle East also place infrastructure, digital skills and data protection ahead of AI itself. The priority is to advance adoption while strengthening the capabilities and guardrails needed to support it.

Figure 4: Top five desired digital priorities

From a digital transformation perspective, what should be the main priorities for your country's government? (choose max 3)





Ambition is matched by higher expectations of trust

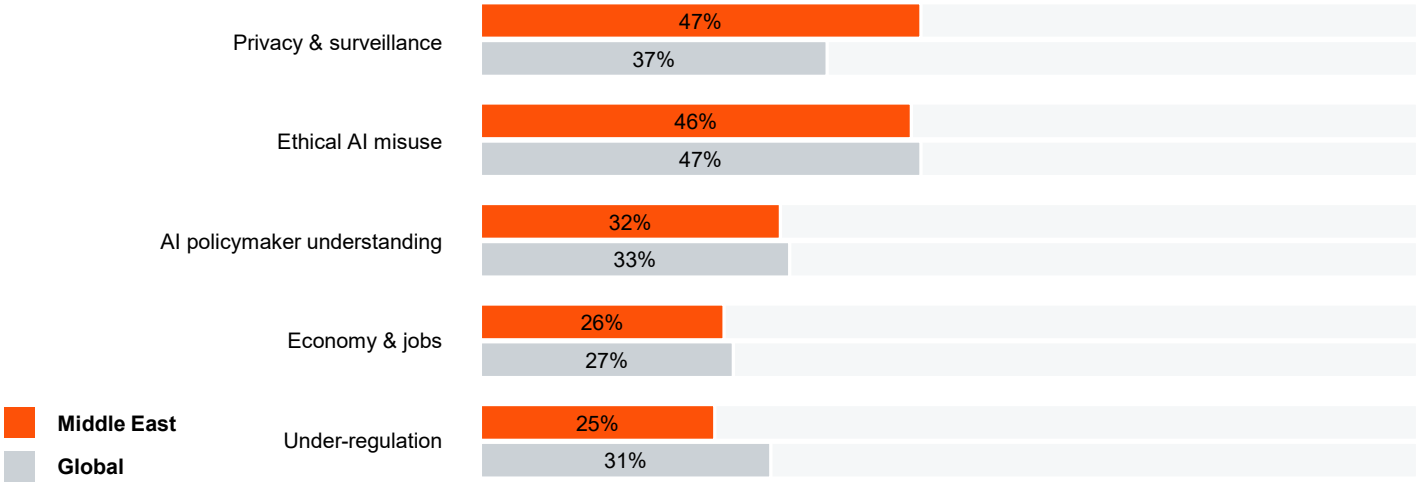
Greater digital adoption also raises expectations for responsible AI. Almost half (47%) of Middle East youth cite loss of privacy and surveillance as a concern about government use of AI, 10 percentage points above the global average of 37%. Ethical misuse follows closely at 46%, broadly in line with 47% globally.

These findings highlight an important distinction. High confidence in government does not translate into unconditional trust in technology. Young people support expanding digital capabilities and AI while expecting safeguards around privacy, data protection, transparency and ethical use.

This reinforces the picture of a digitally engaged generation. Around a third of Middle East youth are concerned about policymakers' understanding of AI (32%, in line with 33% globally), while concern about under-regulation is lower than the global average (25% vs 31%). At the same time, similar levels of concern about under- and over-regulation in the region (25% and 22%, respectively) point to an appreciation of the balance between effective safeguards and enabling continued innovation.

Figure 5: Top five AI concerns for Middle East youth

Which of the following concerns, if any, do you personally have regarding governments and AI? (choose max 3)



As governments expand digital and AI-enabled services, maintaining confidence will depend partly on ensuring young people understand how their data is used, how AI-enabled decisions are governed and what protections are in place. Responsible governance is therefore an enabler of sustained digital adoption, not a constraint on it.

Where to act now

For governments, the opportunity is to advance AI adoption alongside stronger public trust and accountability. This means embedding privacy, data protection and ethical safeguards into the design and delivery of AI-enabled public services, while strengthening policymakers' understanding of emerging technologies. Greater transparency around how AI is used, what data is collected and how decisions are made can help address concerns without slowing innovation. The priority is to create a regulatory environment that protects citizens while enabling innovation, ensuring that trust and technological progress advance together.



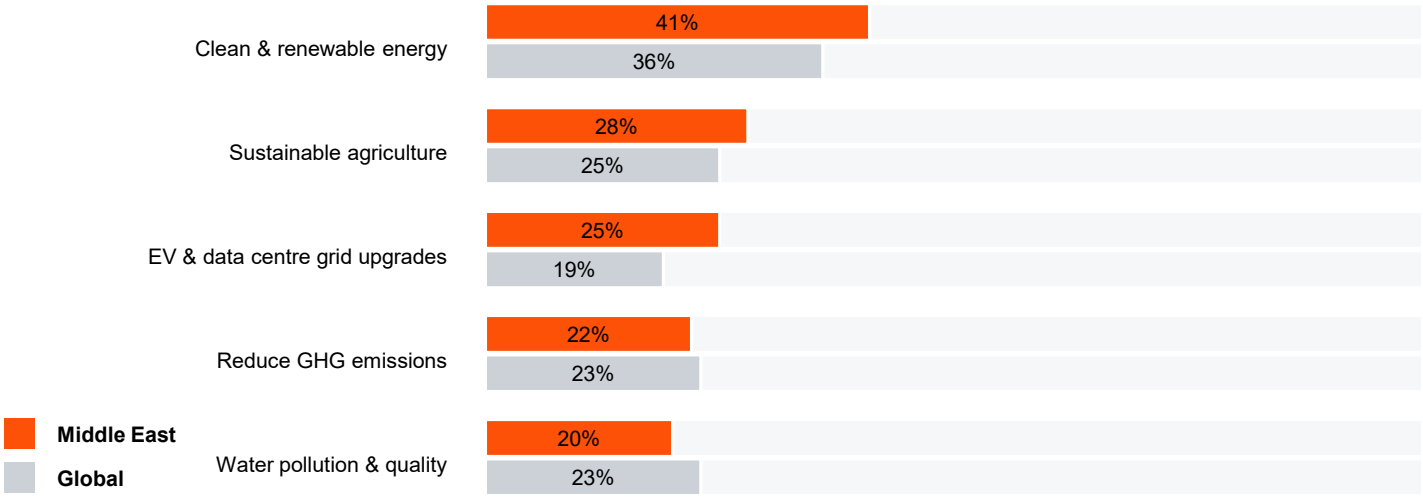
04 Climate ambition is strongest when it becomes tangible

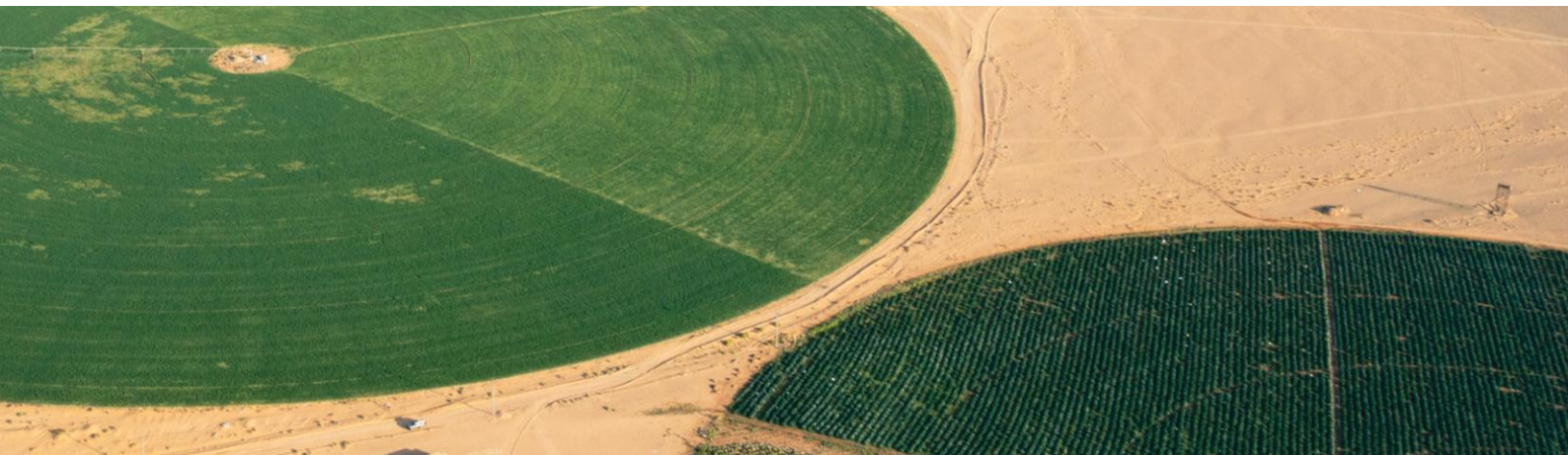
Climate change may not rank among the most immediate concerns for Middle East youth, but this does not translate into low ambition for the energy transition. While 10% want climate change to be a government priority, versus 16% globally, a different picture emerges when the focus shifts to tangible environmental action.

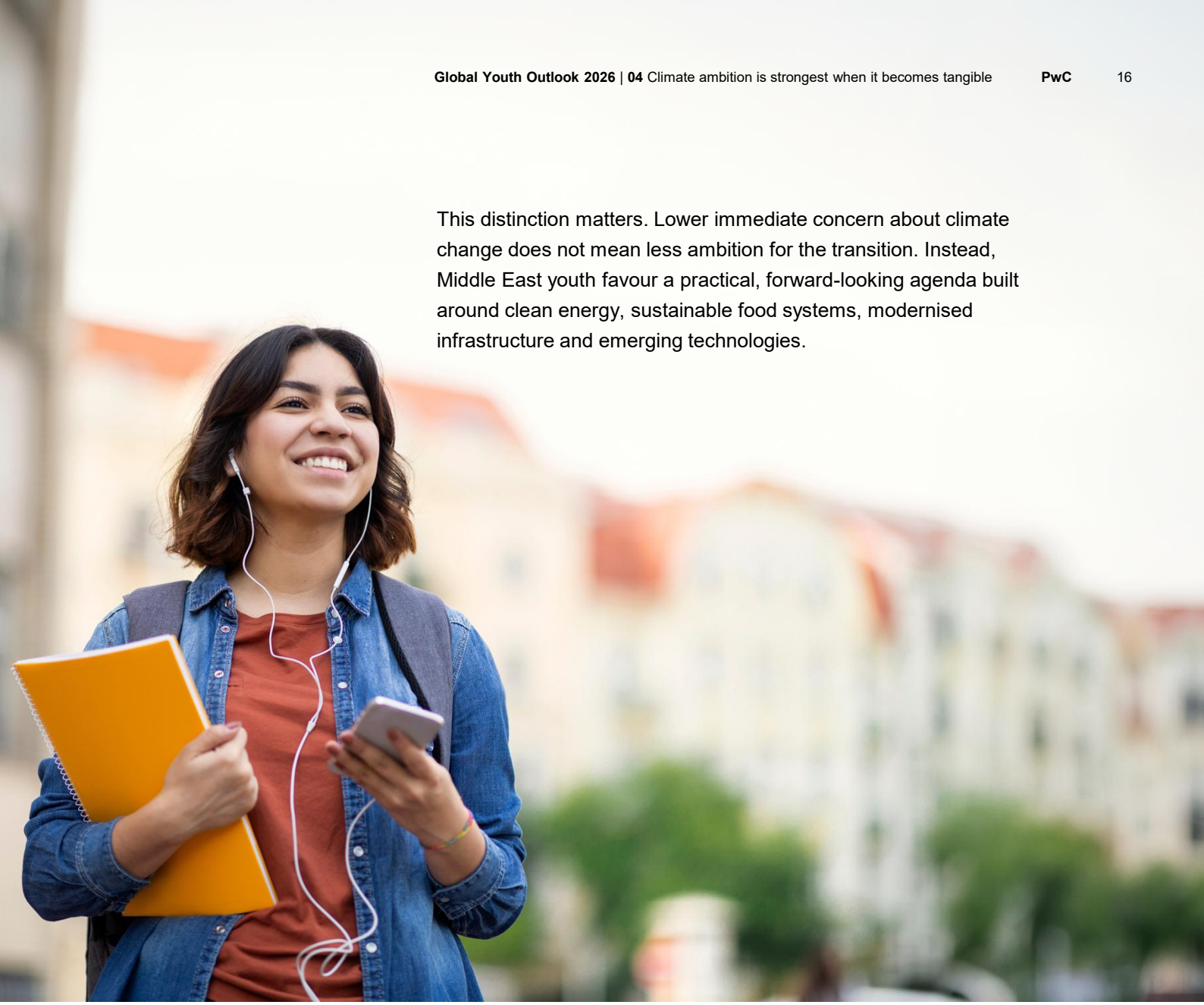
A different picture emerges when the focus shifts to tangible environmental action, with young people in the region placing particular emphasis on the practical enblers of climate transition. Clean and renewable energy tops the list of government priorities for 41% of respondents in the Middle East, compared with 36% globally, followed by sustainable agriculture (28% versus 25%), and grid upgrades for EVs and data centres (25% compared with 19% and ninth place globally).

Figure 6: Top five environmental issues for Middle East youth

Which environmental issue should be a top priority for your country's government?







This distinction matters. Lower immediate concern about climate change does not mean less ambition for the transition. Instead, Middle East youth favour a practical, forward-looking agenda built around clean energy, sustainable food systems, modernised infrastructure and emerging technologies.

Where to act now

With temperatures in the region rising at nearly twice the global average[5,6] and growing exposure to climate-related economic risks,[7] governments have an opportunity to connect the energy transition more directly to young people's priorities, including economic opportunity, innovation, future jobs and quality of life. University-industry partnerships can equip young people with skills in renewable energy and emerging technologies, while targeted funding and procurement opportunities can empower local businesses and entrepreneurs to participate in the transition.
By embedding these initiatives into national economic diversification strategies and sustainable infrastructure investments, governments can turn young people's support for sustainability into meaningful economic opportunities and long-term social benefits. [8]

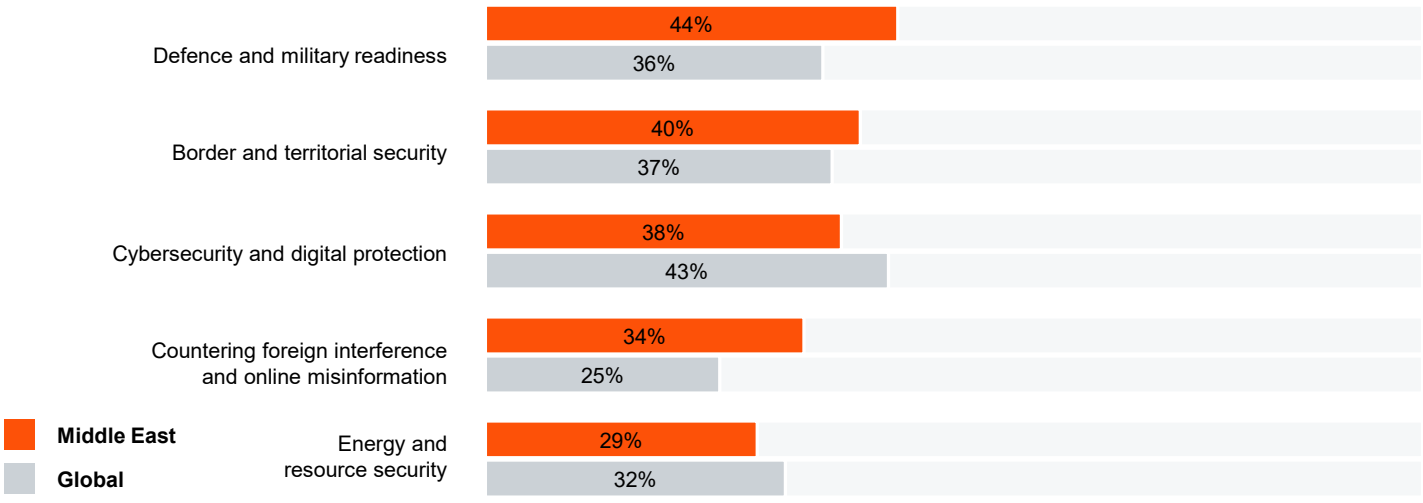
05 Security strength meets an expanding risk landscape

Security and geopolitics are the highest-rated areas of government performance in the Middle East, ranking third globally and providing a strong foundation as the region's security landscape becomes more complex.

When asked where their government should focus on, 44% selected defence and military readiness, eight percentage points above the global average of 36%, followed by border and territorial security at 40% (vs 37% globally). Cybersecurity and digital protection round out the region's top three areas for government focus at 38% compared to 43% globally, where it ranked as the highest priority.

Figure 7: Top 5 focus areas for geopolitical security and stability for Middle East youth

Which aspect of geopolitical security and stability should your government focus on? (choose max 3)





Information security is another regional differentiator. More than a third (34%) prioritise countering foreign interference and online misinformation, nine percentage points above the global average of 25% and fourth in the Middle East, compared with eighth globally.

The findings reveal an interconnected security agenda. Young people value existing strengths in security while defining resilience more broadly spanning physical and territorial security, cyber protection and information integrity. Physical, digital and information security increasingly sit alongside and reinforce one another.

Where to act now

As Middle East economies accelerate digital transformation, diversify and expand critical infrastructure, governments should build on their established security capabilities to address increasingly interconnected risks. This means strengthening protection across strategic assets, including energy facilities, transport networks and digital infrastructure, while investing in cyber resilience, countering misinformation and improving coordination between government agencies and the private sector. Embedding these priorities into national development strategies can help safeguard essential services, strengthen public trust and maintain the stability needed to attract investment and sustain long-term economic growth.



06 Turning confidence into continued progress

- The youth is playing an increasingly important role in shaping the Middle East's future, driving economic and social development, advancing innovation and entrepreneurship and contributing to a more sustainable and prosperous region.

- Governments in the Middle East have significant strengths to carry this momentum forward. Economic growth creates new opportunities, while education and skills development equip young people to take advantage of them. Digital transformation can make public services more accessible and effective, underpinned by infrastructure, capabilities and trusted safeguards. Investment in energy and infrastructure can open new avenues for growth, while security and resilience can support increasingly connected economies and societies.

- Young people can be active partners in this progress. Their preference for structured participation creates an opportunity to bring their perspectives more directly into policymaking, helping governments connect ambition with the priorities and experiences of the next generation.

- The opportunity now is to build on what is already working. By turning ambition into tangible outcomes and giving young people a meaningful role in shaping what comes next, the Middle East can create broader opportunities for the generation that will shape its future.



07 About this survey and methodology

We surveyed a stratified sample of 5,591 young people across 42 countries in March 2026, with the sample stratified by age and gender. The survey captured young people's views across seven public-sector themes: government priorities, digital transformation, AI, fiscal management, climate change, geopolitical security and youth engagement. The sentiments captured in the report reflect views at the time of the survey.

Note

Note: Percentages in charts may not add up to 100 as a result of rounding, multi-selection answer options and, in certain cases, the exclusion of certain responses from display, including 'Other', 'Not applicable' and 'Don't know'. The global and regional figures in this report are weighted proportionally to the nominal GDP of each country, so the youth's views are broadly representative across all major regions.

The countries covered for each of the regions are the following:	
Africa	Algeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa
Asia and Pacific	Australia and New Zealand, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam
Eastern Europe	The Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Turkey
Northern Europe	Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the UK
Southern Europe	Italy, Slovenia, Spain
Western Europe	Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands
The Middle East	Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates
North America	Canada, Mexico, the US
South America	Argentina, Brazil, Colombia

Who we heard from

676

Total respondents
surveyed in the Middle East

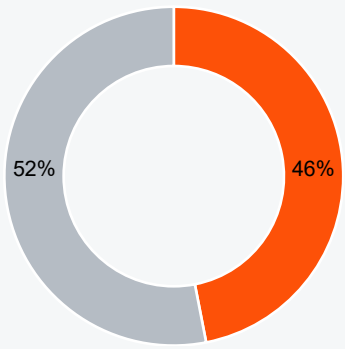
7

Countries
Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Egypt and Jordan

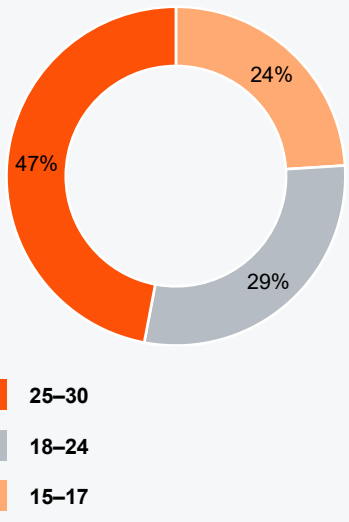
35%

Hold a bachelor's degree
The highest share of any region (global avg. 24%)

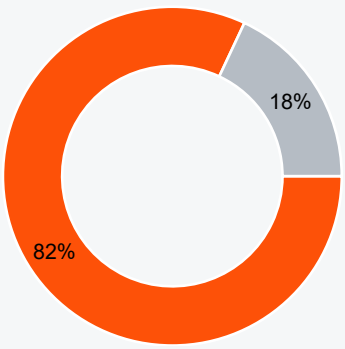
Gender



Age



Urban vs. rural



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