

## REGIONAL BRIEFING: CONSUMER PRIVACY AND DATA PROTECTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

*This briefing is [part of a set](#), giving a snapshot of Middle East and North Africa consumer experiences across three key digital areas: privacy and data protection, cybercrime, and e-commerce*

The Middle East and North African (MENA) region is home to one of the most youthful populations in the world, with 60% of people aged under 30. It is undergoing a digital boom; internet access has almost doubled in the last seven years and now [71% of people](#) are online compared to just [39% in 2012](#). Ambitious national strategies are supporting the [roll out of 5G networks](#) and the region has the [fastest mobile phone growth rate](#) of any region outside Sub-Saharan Africa. There has also been an [explosion in e-commerce](#).

We surveyed online consumers in the region<sup>1</sup>, and found they are embracing this new digital world, with 75% of participants optimistic about the role of technology in helping them live a better life in the future. However, concerns about data protection and privacy exist which could hold back this potential. Consumer organisations have a vital role to play in helping consumers have more control over their personal data - creating a safer and more trusted digital environment in the region that can bring empowerment, economic benefits and convenience.

### Online consumers in the MENA region told us:

#### They are worried about data protection

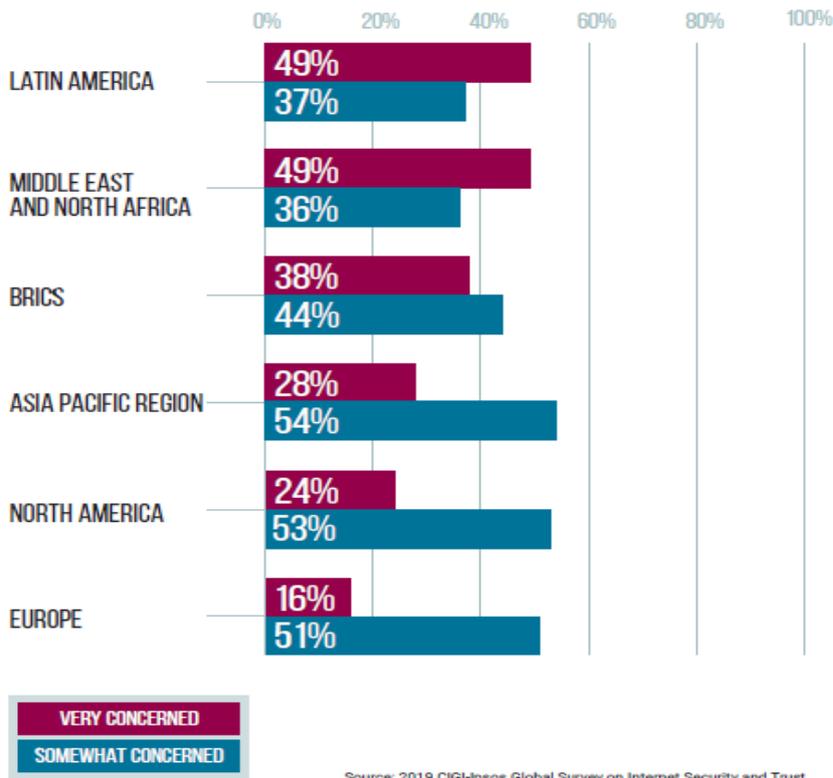
Consumers in the MENA are one of the most worried populations in the world with regards to how their data is collected and kept private online, with [85% reporting concerns compared to 67% of Europeans](#).

As a result, more MENA consumers are changing their behaviour online by taking action to protect themselves. 38% of MENA consumers are avoiding certain websites, 37% are using more privacy settings and a quarter are self-censoring what they say online. Almost [one in five make fewer online purchases \(16%\)](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Consumers International surveyed online consumers in Oman, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Egypt to help us understand MENA consumers' experiences with e-commerce, privacy and security online in a diverse range of markets. Survey findings were accompanied by interviews with our regional members.

## CONSUMERS VIEWS ON ONLINE PRIVACY ACROSS THE WORLD



### These concerns could increase as the Internet of Things grows

With the growth of connected devices like energy meters, wearables and home security, consumers will be required to share more personal information. The consumer Internet of Things sector is [growing across the world](#) and in MENA itself is predicted to generate almost \$160 billion US dollars in value to [MENA economies by 2025](#). If consumers don't trust these products, they may not use them, potentially missing out on the [convenience and empowerment they can bring](#).

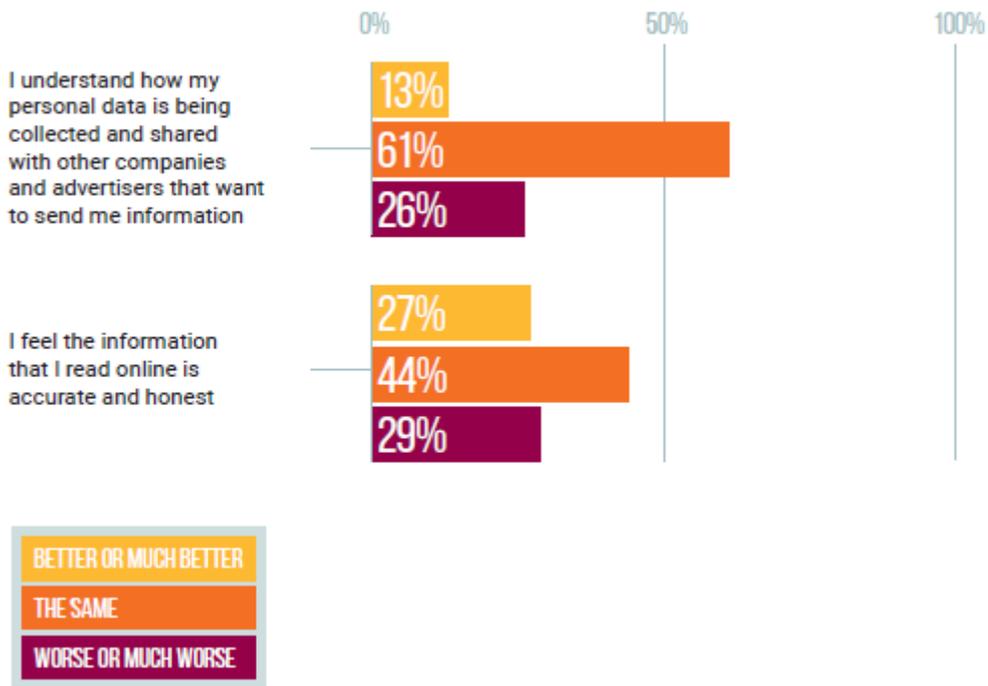
### They don't understand what data is being collected about them

People reported not understanding how data about them is being collected and shared with other companies and advertisers. In fact, over a quarter of consumers feel their understanding of how their data is collected is deteriorating (26%) compared to those who feel it is improving (13%). Many consumers also feel there is room for improvement in the quality of information online. 29% of MENA consumers state the accuracy and honesty of information they read online is declining compared to last year, while 27% feel it is improving.

This lack of clarity about how consumers are targeted with information, plus the quality of this information could be contributing to persistent feelings of distrust online.

**“Consumers are concerned about their data being misused, and about their accounts being manipulated, or about being harassed.”** The National Society for Consumer Protection in Jordan

CONSUMER VIEWS ON PRIVACY AND TRANSPARENCY FACTORS WHEN USING THE INTERNET, THIS YEAR COMPARED TO LAST



But are more mindful of the data they can control being collected

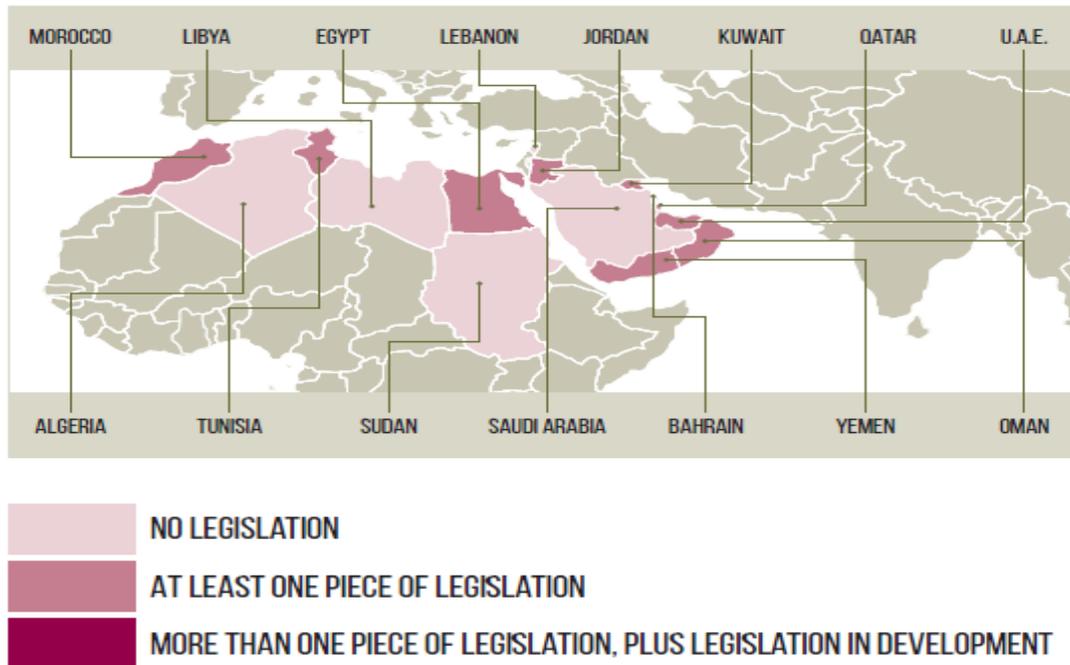
Coupled with this lack of understanding of what data is being collected about them, is an increased awareness of the need to take steps, where they can, to protect their privacy. Almost half of people (47%) said their awareness of how to adjust their privacy settings had grown over the past year. The Consumer Protection Association of Saudi Arabia felt this was partly due to awareness campaigns on changing settings and international news coverage of social media privacy breaches.

**“There is a lot of untrue and dark advertising that in some cases violates consumer rights”**

Omani Association for Consumer Protection

## Is data protection legislation the solution?

### DEVELOPMENT OF DATA PROTECTION AND PRIVACY LEGISLATION IN THE MENA REGION 2019



Data protection laws can protect consumers' rights against discriminatory practices, [invasive marketing and loss of privacy](#). However, The UN's Global Data Protection Tracker reveals that only nine out of 14 countries in the MENA region have [data protection and privacy legislation](#) and that to date, these laws have resulted in [few examples of enforcement action](#). Updating and improving data protection measures could tackle some of these issues of a lack of consumer trust and enable more people to embrace digital opportunities with confidence.

## Sector specific or umbrella legislation?

Data protection and privacy can be governed through [sector specific laws](#), such as in the healthcare, finance and telecommunications sectors, or measures can be applied across different sectors, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Countries such as Tunisia and Bahrain are both adopting approaches to data protection in line with aspects of GDPR. The draft Tunisian law requires businesses to be more transparent with [how they use customers' data and acquire consent](#) and in [Bahrain](#), data controllers will have to make sure data is collected for a legitimate, specific and clear purpose and notify the data subject when data is being collected.

In addition, countries in the region including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and [UAE](#) and [Morocco](#) have introduced national digital strategies which include the opportunity for measures to strengthen data privacy and security. For example the [Dubai IoT Strategy](#) sets out principles for IoT providers, including purpose limitation and data minimisation and has adopted definitions such as consent from the GDPR.

## What can consumer rights organisations do?

Consumer organisations are well placed to make calls on governments and companies to improve data protection and privacy measures and contribute to consumer trust online.

[Consumers International's recommendations to the G20 Consumer Digital Summit](#) covered a range of actions governments and businesses could take to improve consumers' experiences online and help to build a trusted digital world. They included increasing access to the internet, security and transparency in terms and conditions, data protection by design, redress and education.

You can read the full set on our [website](#). Below we have selected the recommendations that are most relevant to data protection and privacy along with some actions that consumer organisations could take to improve data protection for consumers in the region:

### Actions for governments include:

- Introduce data protection laws or strengthen and fully enforce current ones to protect consumers' rights against discriminatory practices, invasive marketing and loss of privacy.
- Establish well-resourced, independent data protection agencies.
- Introduce incentives for companies to adopt best practice standards in data protection and privacy.
- Incorporate data protection and privacy measures into national digital strategies.
- Ensure redress systems are easy to access and that breaches of security and privacy are tackled quickly and effectively.
- Introduce initiatives to inform consumers about how to take steps to protect their privacy and security online to help address growing levels of privacy concerns amongst consumers.

### Actions for companies include:

- Make it easier for consumers anywhere in the MENA region to understand risks and opportunities of data collection and use and provide simple ways for people to opt out of features they don't like or are uncomfortable with.
- Establish clear processes for consumers to easily understand how their data is being collected and shared, for example through clear privacy notices.
- Regularly review and re-evaluate the scope of personal data collection and whether it is necessary for the service being delivered.
- Make it clear where a consumer should go for assistance or to make a complaint if they need to.

### Actions for consumer organisations include:

- Refer to the [Consumers International Digital Index](#), a global database of legislation and initiatives for digital consumer empowerment, to spread awareness of best practice on data protection, privacy legislation and industry leadership.
- Explore Consumers International's Trust by Design guidelines and see how they can be applied to different digital products and services.

- Develop digital awareness campaigns to build understanding of how consumers can take steps to adjust their privacy settings and keep their personal data safe.
- Work with consumer groups in the region to share resources and evidence to build the case for improved data protection at a regional level.

*This briefing gives a snapshot of the MENA consumer experience of privacy and data protection. [See here](#) for more information on the other briefings in this series.*

*Consumers International is currently building a Change Network, a powerful network of national consumer rights organisations and partners from business and civil society to explore how technology can provide solutions to some of the challenges faced by consumers around the world.*

*Together we will drive forward positive consumer outcomes on pressing issues such as Artificial Intelligence, the Internet of Things, e-commerce, data, sustainability, food and energy.*

*If you would like to be part of this growing network, please see Consumers International's website for more details.*

**With thanks to:**

Consumer Protection Association Saudi Arabia  
 Oman Association for Consumer Protection (OACP)  
 National Society for Consumer Protection of Jordan (NSCP)  
 Consumer Protection Directorate, Lebanon Ministry of Economy & Trade  
 Consumers Lebanon  
 Yemen Association for Consumer Protection (YACP)  
 Consumer Protection Agency of Egypt, Ministry of Trade and Industry  
 National Federation of Consumer Associations of Morocco  
 Consumer Protection Association Libya  
 Sudanese Consumers Protection Society (SCPS)  
 National Union for Consumer Protection of Algeria

**Methodology:** Consumers International surveyed 3,000 online consumers in Oman, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Egypt to help us understand MENA consumers' experiences with e-commerce, privacy and security online in a diverse range of markets. Survey findings were accompanied by interviews with our regional members.