

Consultation Report on www.Qanouni.org



Providing Easy Access to Human Rights for all in Arab countries

An on-line Arabic legal search engine on Human rights
and humanitarian law

**MANDAT
INTERNATIONAL**



31, chemin William Rappard
1293 Bellevue - Switzerland

☎: +41 22 959 88 55 Fax: +41 22 959 88 58

E-mail contact : sziegler@mandint.org

Web: www.mandint.org

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Introduction

The International Public Law is uneasy to access, due to the rising number of international conventions, their complexity, and the multiple stages in the ratification process. Even professionals (lawyers, searchers, etc.) have difficulties to identify and determine all the international obligations of a given State on a given topic. Obviously, the challenge is even more arduous for the public at large. These difficulties seriously limit the implementation of these standards.

Consequently, Mandat International had developed a unique legal search engine which enables anyone, even those without legal training, to have an easier, quicker and more systematic access to the international obligations. This legal search engine was developed in English, French and Spanish. It already covers 334 multilateral conventions on Human Rights and Humanitarian Law. This tool was developed in collaboration with several international institutions and universities and is currently used by organizations such as the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, the legal department of ICRC and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

However, the challenge remained for Arabic users, a large part of the World population. It was even more complicated for them, as a large part of those multilateral conventions has no official version in Arabic, and the other part is difficult to find. The current project supported by UNDEF aimed at developing a new tool for Arabic users to provide an easier, quicker and more systematic access to human rights and humanitarian law obligations. It intends to ease the implementation and effectiveness of International Law in the MENA region. It has been shaped to be used by professionals (such as lawyers, judges, governmental administrations, and diplomats), as well as by the public at large (such as citizens, students, universities, media, and civil society organizations).

The project required the development of a new website, with a new technical structure, including a new database structure. It also required a lot of substantial work, including to identify, collect and integrate all available Arabic versions of multilateral conventions on Human rights and Humanitarian law. To collect the reservations, ratifications and signature dates, etc. It also required checking and analysing the articles of the conventions, one by one. This tool is now freely available on www.qanouni.org

Qanouni has been presented in a parallel session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, during the June 2010 session. Several diplomatic representatives and NGOs attended it and expressed their congratulations for this development.

In order to assess and to improve this new tool, we had planned to launch a consultation with potential institutional Arabic users. This Report presents those consultation results.

Qanouni's description

www.Qanouni.org is an Arabic on-line Legal Search Engine on Human rights and humanitarian law. It provides an easier, quicker and more systematic access to international norms. It enables everybody, including those who do not have any legal background, to access the international obligations which are binding her or his country. In order to access those obligations, one just needs to select:

- **a country**
- **a topic**
- **a date** (the current date is chosen as the default date)

By one click, the user can access directly to the articles of the international conventions which are binding the selected country on the chosen topic. The results take into account the ratification process, the entry into force of the conventions and the potential reservations made by the States. Each and every convention has been analysed and indexed article by article, enabling very precise and relevant search results. Qanouni provides other functionalities, such as ratifications list, reservations, etc. It facilitates the work of professionals and opens international law to the citizens and to the public at large.

Goals:

- **Provide an easier, quicker and more systematic access to the international norms and obligations.**
- **Facilitate the work of jurists and organizations by offering them an efficient tool which will make their searches quicker and more systematic.**
- **Enable citizens and the public at large to access the obligations binding their country in the field of human rights and humanitarian law.**
- **Promote the knowledge and dissemination of international public law on human rights and humanitarian law.**
- **Contribute to the enforcement and effectiveness of those norms.**

Content

Qanouni covers multilateral conventions the field of human rights and humanitarian law. It encompasses 334 multilateral conventions, including 190 conventions with official Arabic versions. It gives access to the original text of the other conventions in English, French and/or Spanish.

Main functions:

- Direct access to the relevant articles of the conventions binding any selected country on any chosen topic,- taking into account the ratification process, the entry into force off the convention and potential reservations expressed by the selected country.
- Access to the conventions in full text.
- Access to the list of conventions ratified and/or signed by any chosen country.
- Access to the status of ratifications of any convention.
- Access to the list of conventions linked to any chosen topic.
- Access to the reservations
- A brief introduction to the principles of international law.
- A selective list of links to useful websites.

Methodology and panel selection

In order to assess Qanouni and to identify improvements to be made, we have decided to consult Arabic end users. In order to do so, we set up an online questionnaire on a website. The access was restricted in order to avoid unsolicited participants. The questionnaire included both closed and open questions. We identified 120 potential Arabic users from the MENA region as well as from Europe and North America. We focussed mainly on institutions representative of different kind of end users and different regions. Some individual experts were also included. The panel was selected according to the following criteria:

- Geographical distribution
- Type of institution represented
- Area of expertise
- Credibility of the participants

After a substantial process of selection, our team set up a multifaceted panel of actors. The panel included institutions from the majority of the twenty-two members of the Arab League, as well as all the Arab diplomatic representations in Geneva. Concerning the type of institution represented, it should be noticed that national NGOs, think tanks and universities located in the Arab world represents two third of the panel. In doing so, our purpose was to focus on grass root end users. Our intent was the provision of a panel that would represent a matritiel combination between geographic representation and diversity of the stakeholders.

In order to select local NGOs and think tanks, we prepared a preliminary list covering as much as possible the twenty-two members of the Arab League. We decided to avoid organizations linked to political movements or whose credibility was doubtful. In order to assess their credibility, we used several criteria, including their size, the extent of their activities, their affiliation to a renowned federation or commission, the international prizes that they received and their potential consultative status with ECOSOC.

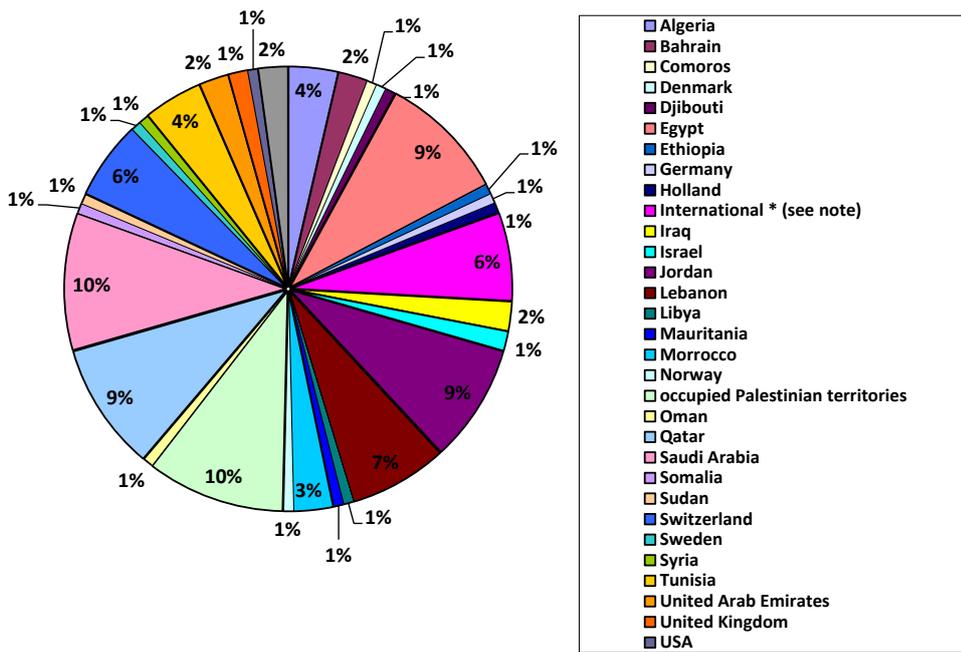
We informed the Arab diplomatic representations in Geneva of the creation of this Arabic legal search engine and invited them to take part in the evaluation process.

Several individual experts in Europe and in the USA were also contacted. Their selection was based on their extensive experiences and records in the fields of Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law as well as their past academic publications.

Finally, our team completed the panel with a selection of the Law and International Law departments of several universities in the Arab world.

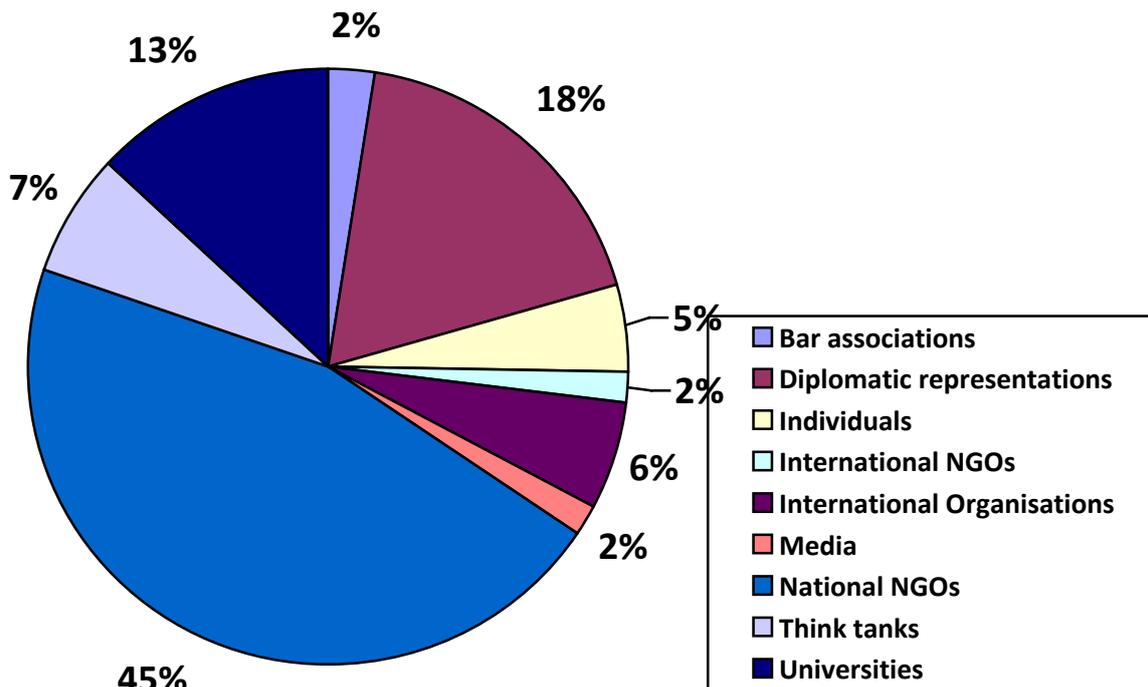
The definitive list included 120 participants from 31 countries and territories, representing a good compromise to suit our selected criteria.

Geographic Panel ventilation



Note: International includes international organisations and international NGOs whose activities extend worldwide and who do not focus on a single country.

Panel ventilation in categories



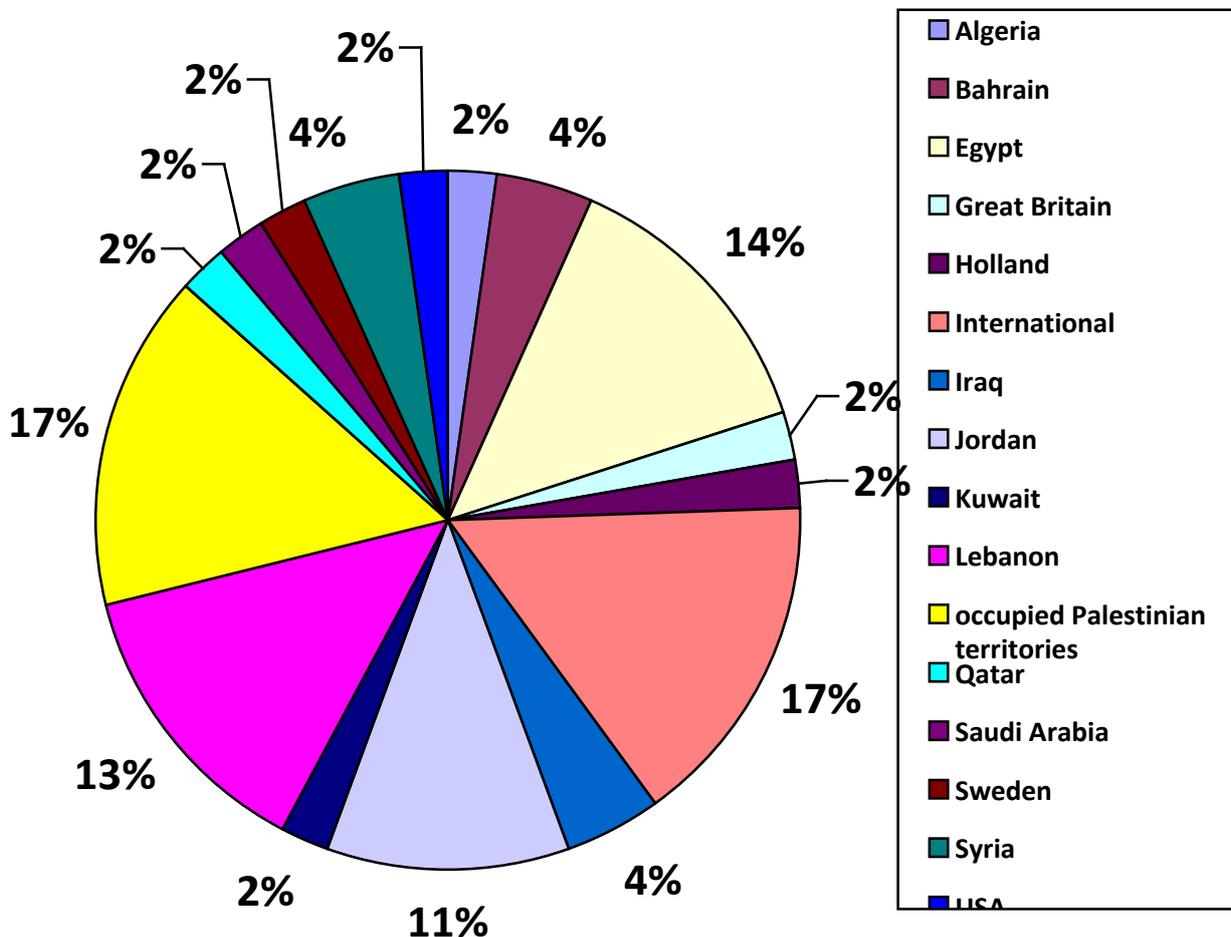
Results overview

We contacted the 120 panel members by e-mail, and we recontacted directly by phone the grass root participants (NGOs, think tank Universities, etc). 46 evaluations were provided out of the 120 invitations sent to the panel members. This rate of response (38%) has to take in consideration the fact that this inquiry occurred in June and July and that many actors were consequently on holiday. This has been mentioned as a limitation to answer by several contacted organizations.

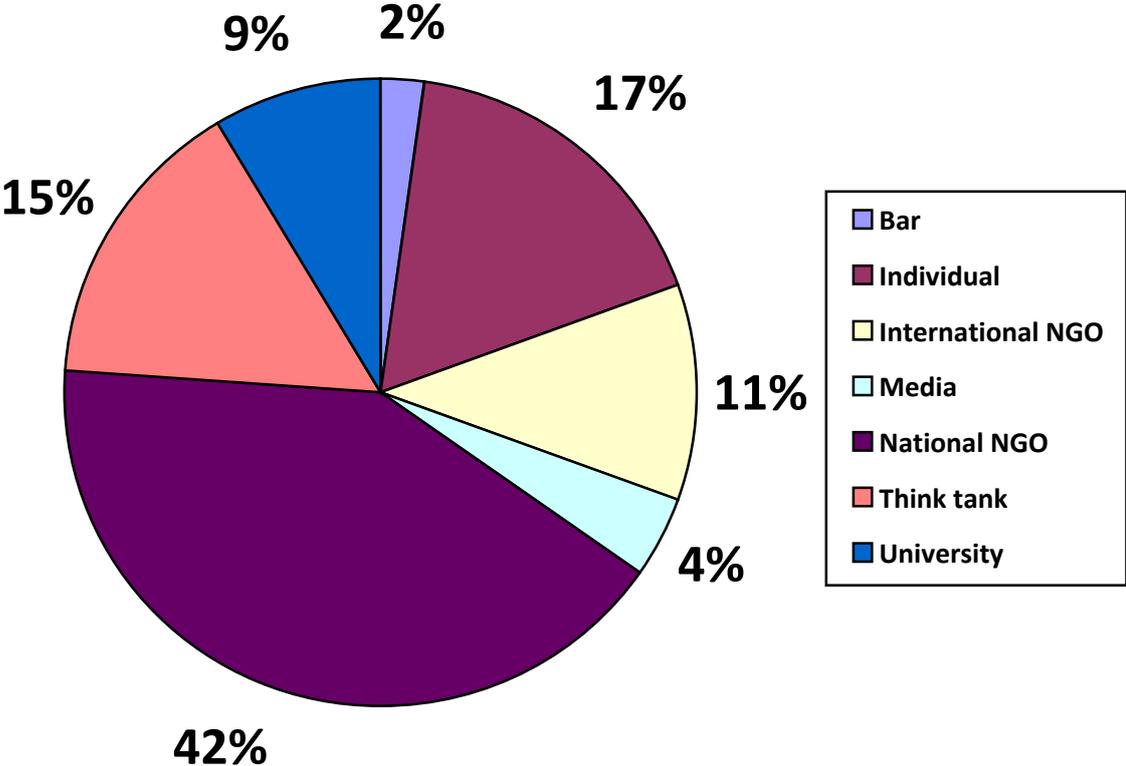
The evaluations are representative of the different geographic regions, with about half of the Arab League members represented. We can observe a sensible evolution between the panel distribution and the effective evaluators distribution. This might be explained by national differences, such as civil society organizations presence and freedom of action.

Regarding the type of institution, there is an interesting evolution between the panel ventilation and the evaluations received. For instance, the diplomatic missions in Geneva did not take part in the evaluation. This might be caused by a certain reserve duty or other unidentified constraints. On the other hand, we can note that the rates of return of the individual experts and the think tanks are substantively higher than the other categories. This can be explained by the mode of inquiry that favoured direct contacts with every single participant. Furthermore, the relatively small rate of return of the universities is to be understood by the time of the survey, July being an official academic holiday.

Geographic evaluators ventilation



Ventilation by category of the evaluators



Results

Overall evaluation

The first questions focused on the general evaluation of the legal search engine in terms of qualities and usefulness. The first returns provide a positive appreciation by the evaluators:

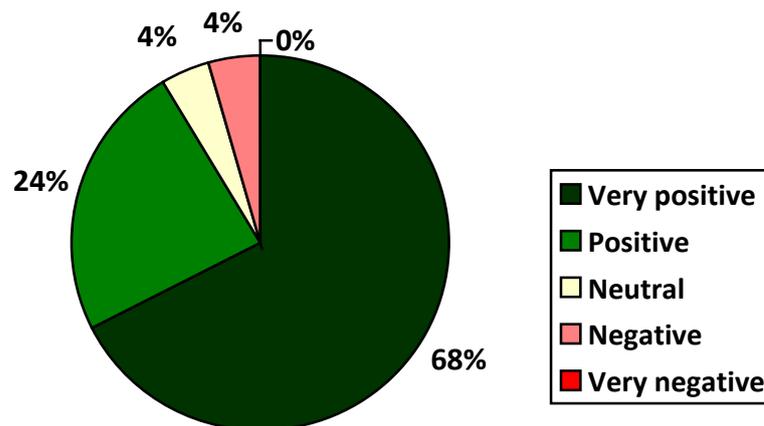
92% of the evaluators expressed an overall positive impression on Qanouni, including 68% of very positive impression.

96% of the participants considered Qanouni as useful, including 66% of very useful.

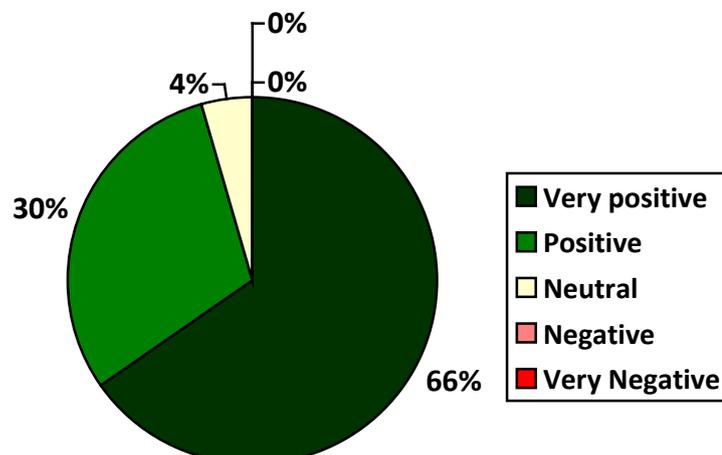
85% of the panel would recommend the legal search engine to others.

It has to be mentioned that 15% of the users would not recommend it as it is. Our investigation with those concerned revealed that their answers were caused by the temporary nature of the legal search engine and the fact that at the time of the survey, several features still needed to be modified and improved. Those features have been corrected since then.

Overall impression of the international legal search engine



Usefulness of the search engine

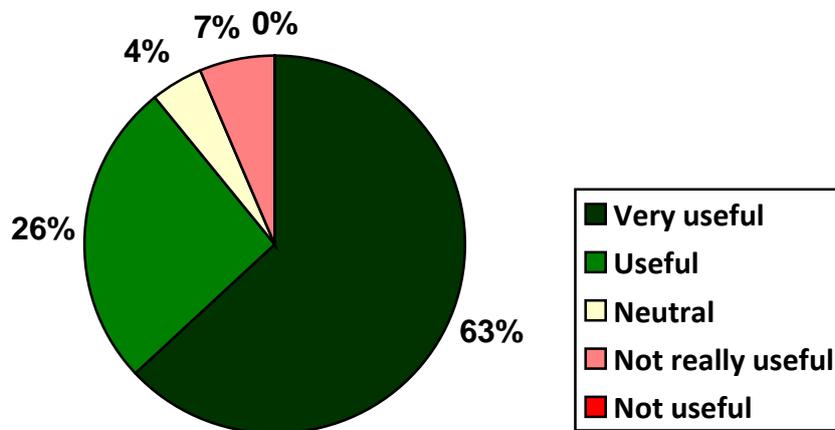


Assessment of the main functionalities

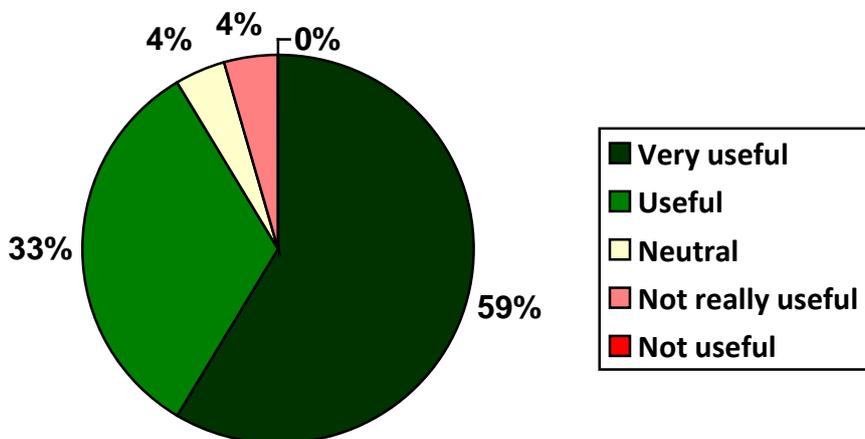
This part further explores in details the point of view of the users concerning the main functionalities of the legal search engine. We proposed four choices that represented the decisive objectives that were to be achieved by the creation of this engine.

The evaluators confirmed that between 85% and 96% of the participants regard the four main functions of the legal search engine as very useful or useful. The function that had the highest rate of “very useful” is the ability to identify obligations of States regarding a particular issue, with 63% of “very useful” and 26% of “useful”.

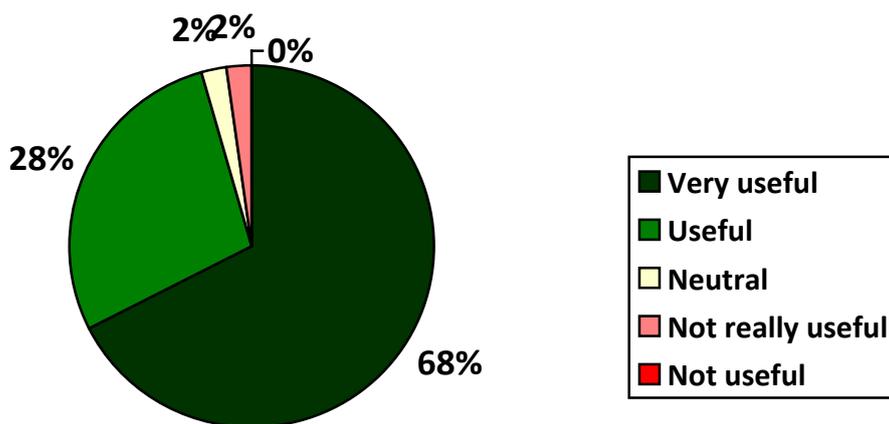
Ability to identify obligations of a State regarding a particular issue (ex: Arbitrary detention, corruption, death penalty, etc)



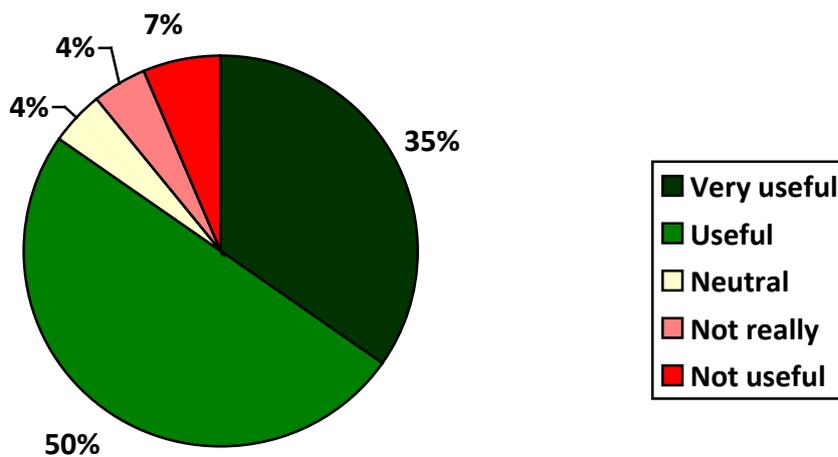
Accessing specific conventions



Accessing the list of conventions signed by a State



Identifying articles within a treaty that relate to particular topics

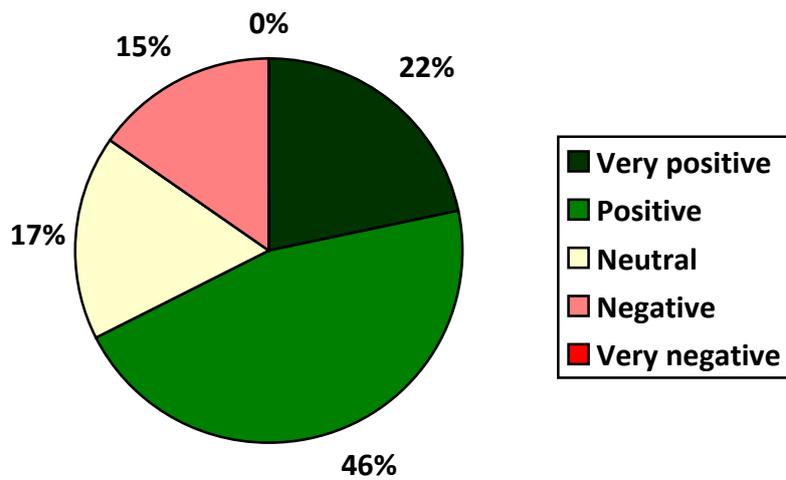


Performance of the legal search engine and technical issues

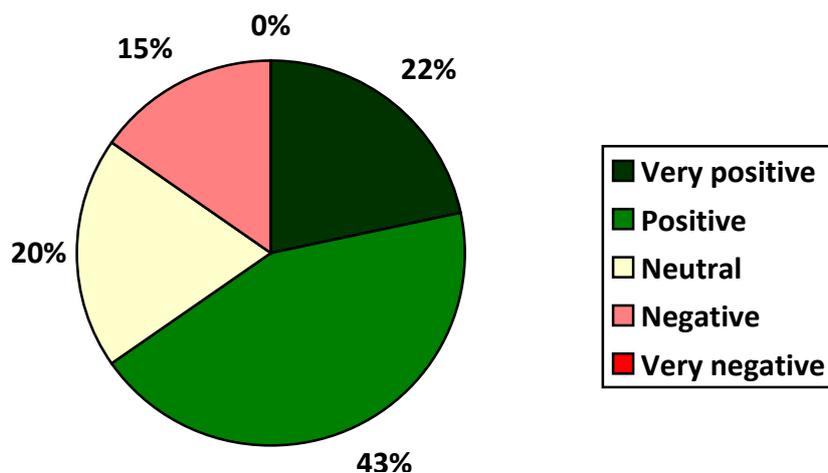
The following section presents the evaluation of the legal search engine's performance with regards to seven parameters.

The results highlight that approximately 80% of the participants share a positive evaluation of the performance of the legal search engine. However, 15% of them do not consider the results always relevant and do not have positive assessment of the logic and coherence of its structure. This percentage can be explained by the temporary nature of the legal search engine at the time of the survey. Those results enable us to identify improvements that can be done.

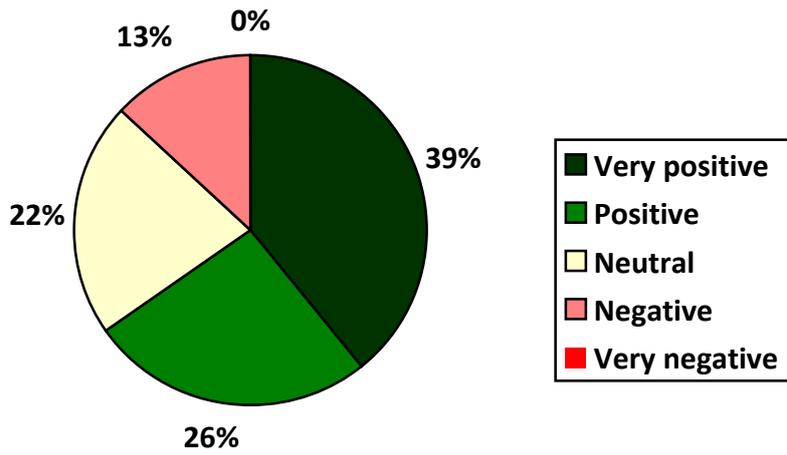
Clarity



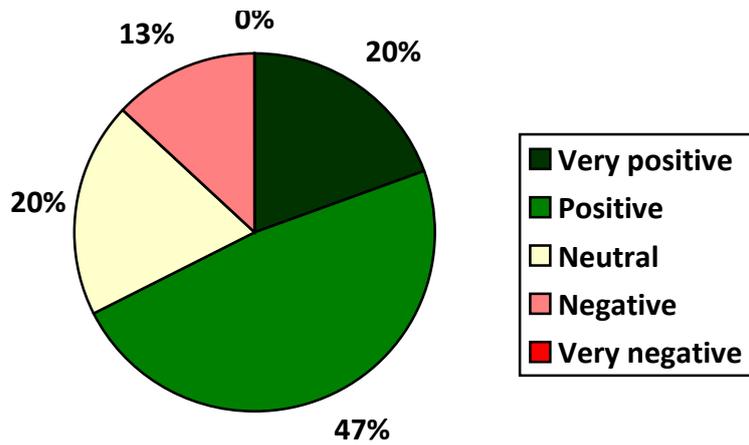
Logic and coherence of the structure



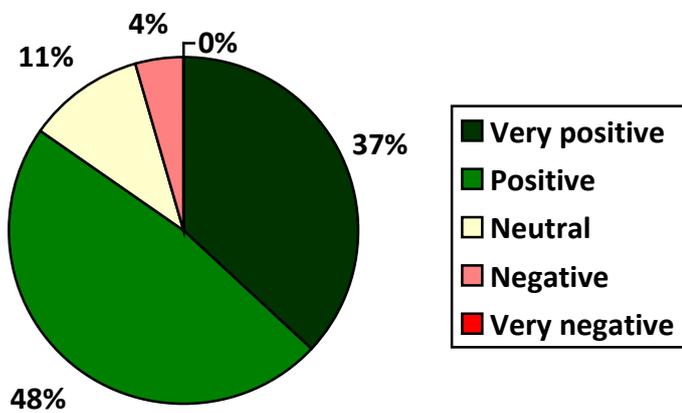
Relevance of the results



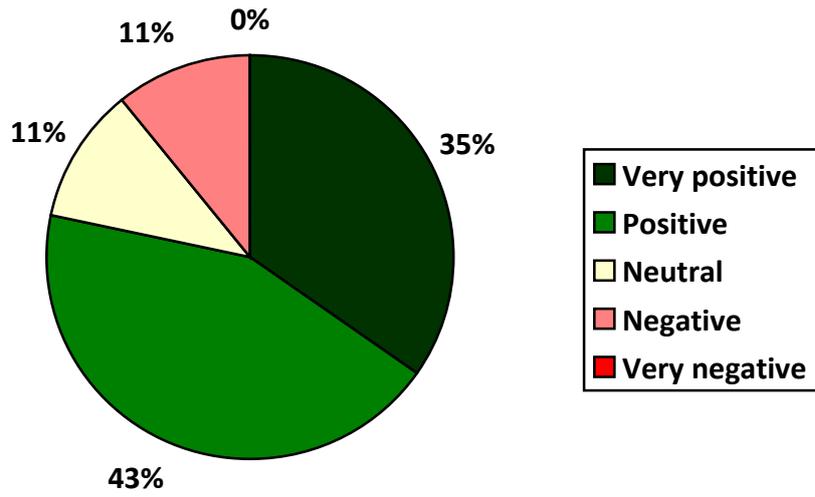
Simplicity



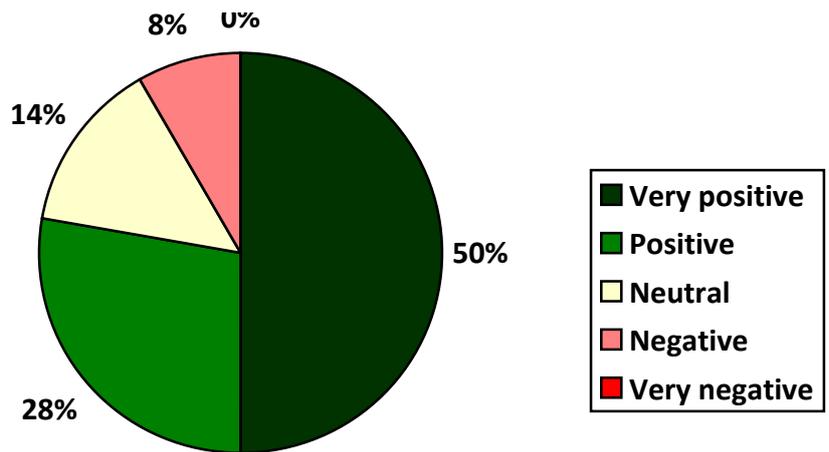
Speed



Thematic scope



Visual appeal

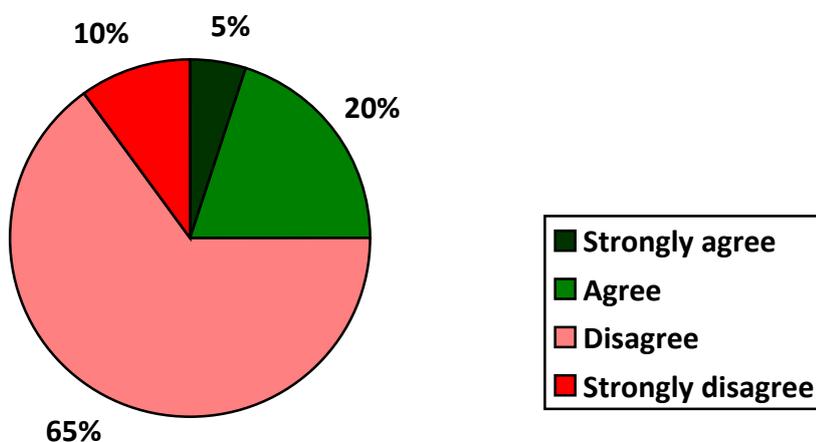


Views on the scope covered by Qanouni

Finally, we inquired the opinions of the evaluators about a possible extension of the scope covered by the legal search engine.

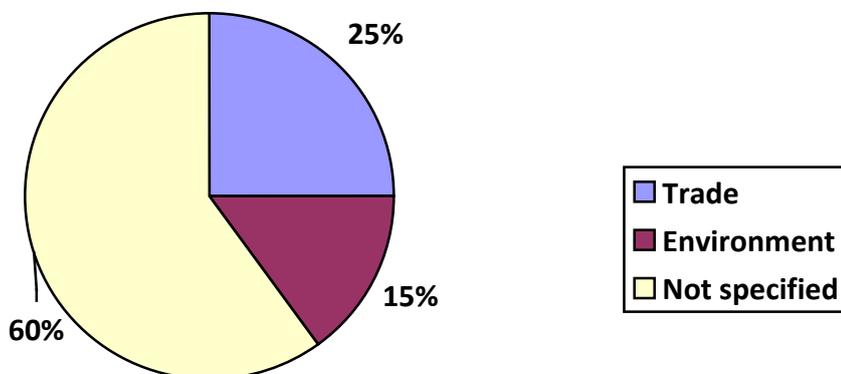
75% of the evaluators considered the scope covered by the legal search engine sufficient and do not believe that it should be extended. This result has to take into account the activity of the evaluators who are all specialized in human rights and humanitarian law issues, and who may not need an extension of the scope already covered.

Extension of the scope covered by the search engine



To what fields in particular?

For those who were in favour of an extension of the scope, they were invited to precise their interest.



Additional comments

In the final part of our inquiry, the participants had the opportunity to give their opinion on several aspects of Qanouni, including the main advantages and disadvantage of the legal search engine, their suggestions related to its future development, the possibility of training their organisation and their ideas on how to publicize this engine. The results are presented in the following graphics.

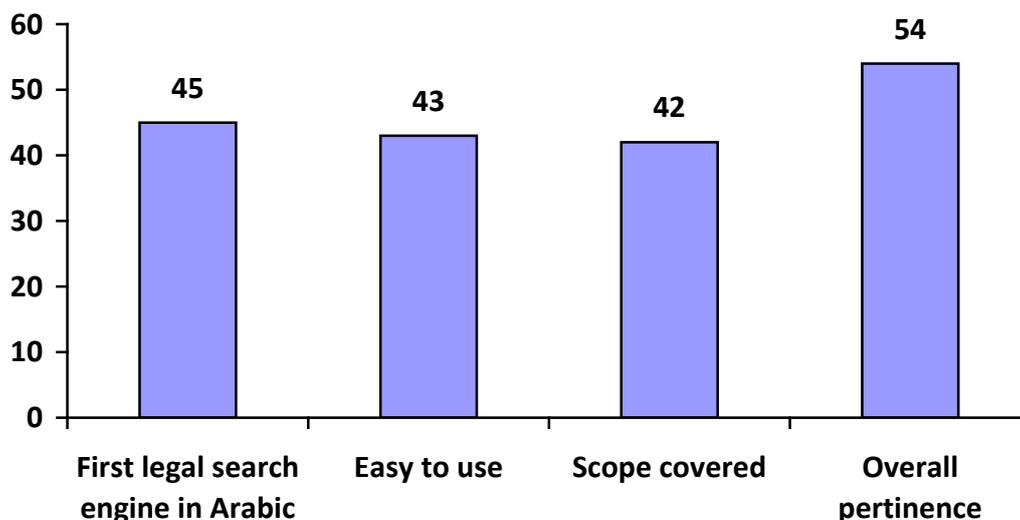
More than half of the participants view the legal search engine's overall pertinence of the legal search engine as its main asset. A slightly lower rate also views its simplicity and scope covered as its main advantages.

The main disadvantages are the absence of certain conventions in Arabic, as well as some problems with the classification of some conventions. All the existing conventions in Arabic were integrated into the legal search engine and the conventions that were not integrated in Arabic had no official Arabic version. However, we integrated those latter ones in English into Qanouni. The apparent confusion in the classification of the conventions was caused by a technical problem, which has been identified and resolved thanks to the survey.

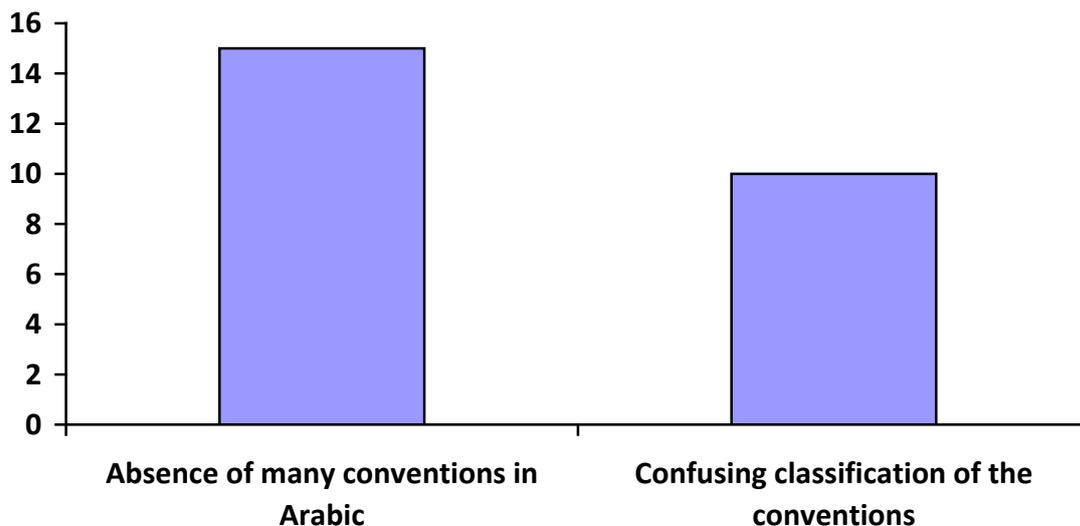
15% of the evaluators considered useful to organise training in their countries. However, several evaluators mentioned that the manual and the videos that are available on www.qanouni.org were sufficient.

Some evaluators presented some ideas on the promotion of the legal search engine in Arabic countries. The main ideas are the utilisation of new social networks such as Facebook as well as the bilateral exchange of web links.

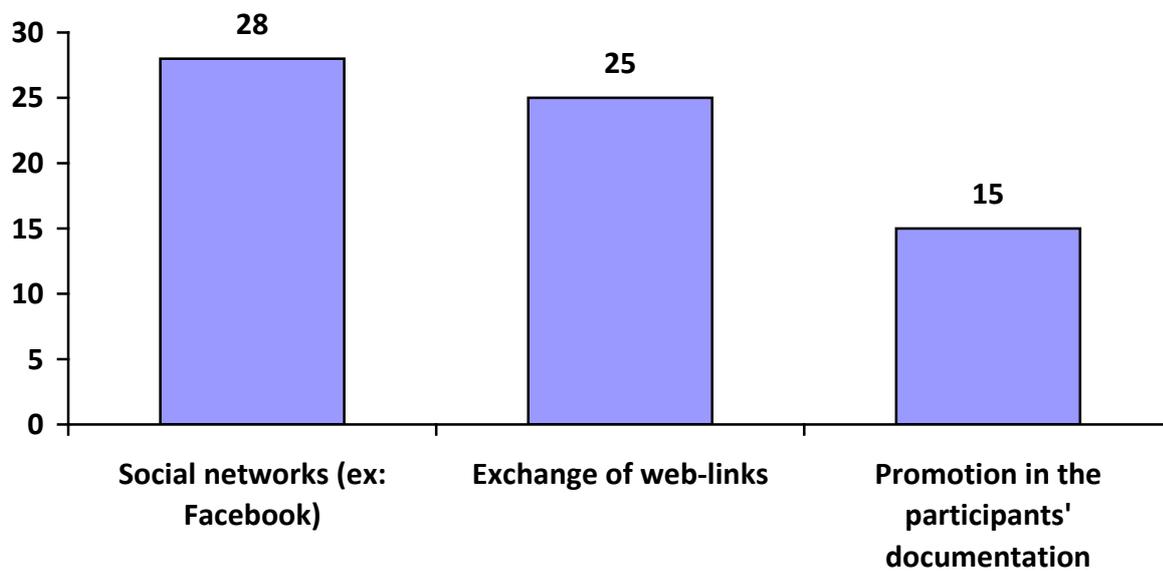
Strengths / advantages



Weaknesses / disadvantages



How to publicize the legal search engine?



Conclusions & recommendations

The first conclusions that we can draw from the evaluators are rather positive. It confirmed the positive feedbacks received when we presented Qanouni at the UN Human Rights Council session in June. The subsequent phone contacts and emails with the evaluators led us to the conclusion that the creation of an Arabic language legal search engine on international law filled a long-standing vacuum. Many contacts highlighted the previous lack of information available on international law, human rights and humanitarian law on the Internet as well as in the broader academic environment. Qanouni seems to fulfil a real need, in particular for grass root organizations. The large majority of them also confirmed our preliminary assumption that this Arabic legal search engine was likely to improve the comprehension and understanding of international law in the MENA region. The aim and purposes of our legal search engine were also well received and understood.

The survey corroborates the highly positive views held by the large majority of the evaluators and their acknowledgement of the usefulness of the legal search engine.

More than 85% of the participants confirm their interests in the four main functions of the legal search engine as well as their usefulness. As regards to practical issues, its overall performances were also widely recognised. For example, approximately 75% of the panel view its clarity, logic and coherence, general relevance, thematic scope and simplicity as positive or very positive. Graphically speaking, nearly 80% of the panel are pleased with the legal search engine.

This survey contributed to a large extent to improving our understanding of the users' needs and expectations, as well as to identify possible improvements. For instance, it enabled us to solve minor remaining issues pertaining to the classification of the conventions.

Recommendations

The survey enabled us to identify uncovered expectations and some measures that could be adopted:

- **To provide official UN translation of the missing conventions in Arabic**
Qanouni already covers the Human rights and humanitarian law conventions having an official Arabic version. For the other human rights and humanitarian law conventions, we have integrated them in another language of their official versions. It would be very useful if the UN could provide official translations of those latter conventions to be integrated into Qanouni.
- **To provide more information and support on international law in Arabic**
The interaction with the evaluators turned visible a strong interest by many organizations to benefit from a more direct support and assistance on international law. This could be provided through the setting up of an online forum, a FAQ and some support provided by mail. It could also include some local and remote trainings on international law and on the use of Qanouni.
- **To maintain and update Qanouni on an on-going basis**
We need to define the strategy to maintain and update Qanouni, in particular to update the ratifications data, as well as the integration and indexation of new relevant conventions. Mandat International will explore possible partnerships or projects for that purpose.