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Attitudes to immigration in the Arab World: Explaining an overlooked anomaly

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Attitudes to immigration in the Arab World: Explaining an overlooked anomaly

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Introduction*

Migration is one of the most important global opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. One of the primary constraints for migration policymakers is public opinion. However, whereas attitudes to migration have been studied at length in certain regions, such as Europe, in the Arab-speaking world – which includes countries of origin, transit countries and host countries – studies are few (though see Dennison and Nasr, 2019; Ceyhun, 2020; Buehler et al., 2020). The objective of this article is to answer the following questions: what are attitudes to immigration in the Arab-speaking world? Are they consistent across the region and are they changing? What social bases does variation in these attitudes have? To what extent can recent policy changes be explained by attitudes to immigration? To our understanding, these questions have not thus far been answered regarding this region in the academic literature.

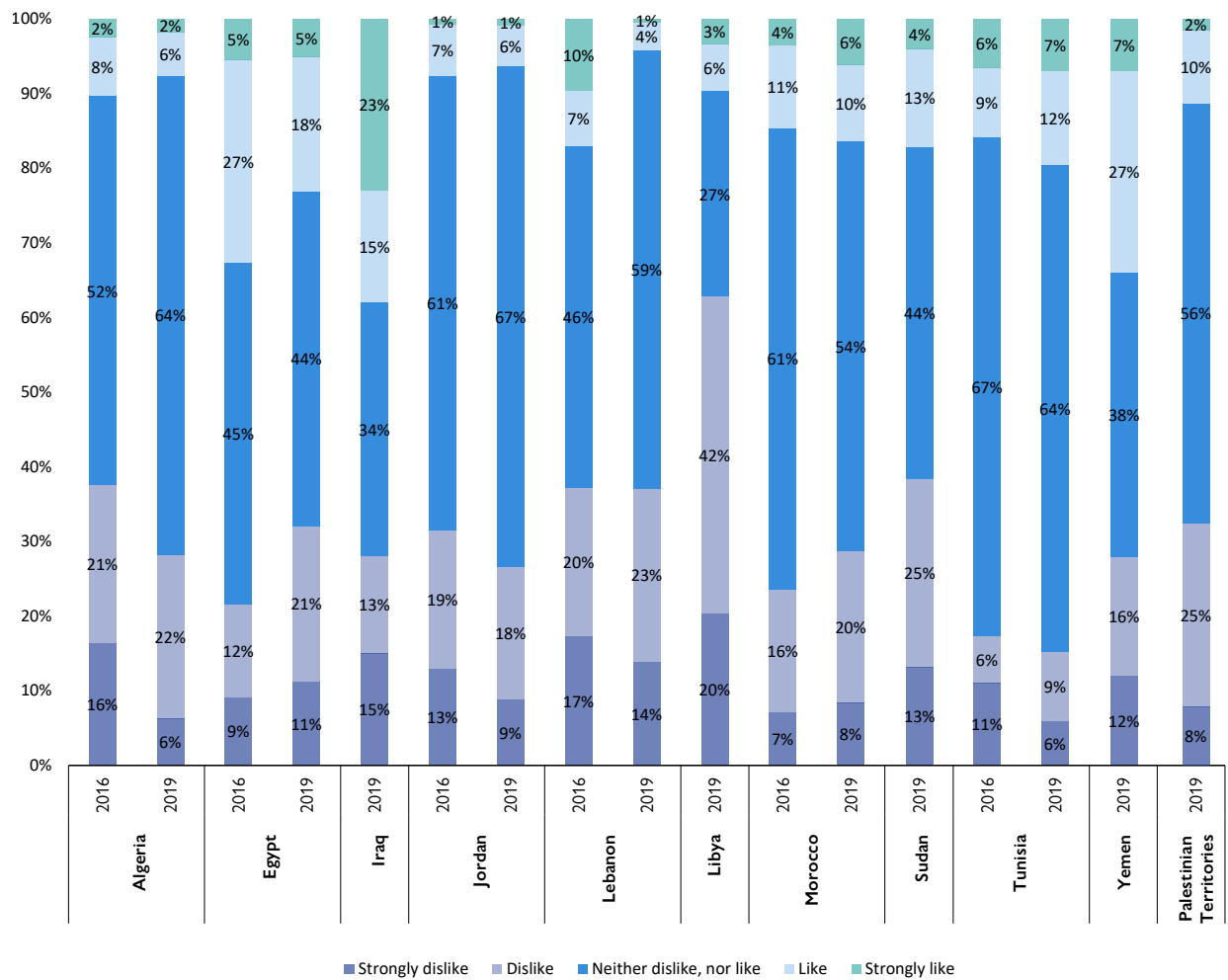
We start by offering a broad description of attitudes to immigration, using quantitative data from across the Arab-speaking world. We also consider the relationship between attitudes to immigration and a number of sociodemographic and attitudinal variables. Next, we consider the salience – or importance – of immigration as an issue in the region. Finally, we consider the key determinants of migration policy change, including public opinion, using qualitative data from four main country cases, selected for their differing geographic positions and experiences of migration: Morocco and Tunisia in North Africa and Jordan and Lebanon in West Asia.

Attitudes to immigration

In this section we describe attitudes to migration in the region. In particular, we consider variation by types of attitude, by country and over time. In figure 1 we show how citizens in the Arab-speaking world responded when asked if they would like, dislike or not care about having an immigrant or foreign worker as a neighbour, as taken from 2016 and 2018/2019 Arab Barometer, which uses face-to-face interviews in the respondent's residence and probability sampling. In every country and every year except Libya in 2019, a plurality responded neutrally, stating that they would not care or neither liked nor disliked the prospect. In 2019, Tunisia displayed the least negativity – with only 15 per cent saying they would not like having such a neighbour. In Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Iraq and Yemen, respectively, 27 or 28 per cent responded negatively. Finally, there was the greatest negativity in Egypt (32%), Lebanon (37%), the Sudan (38%), Libya (62%) and the Palestinian Territories (33%). In terms of change over time, there is a relative consistency during this short period, as we would expect from studies elsewhere of attitudes to immigration (Dennison and Geddes, 2018). However, Algeria, Jordan and Tunisia reported less negativity, whereas Egypt and Morocco reported slightly higher negativity and there was no change in Lebanon.

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Figure 1: “Would you like having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours, dislike it, or not care/neither dislike, nor like?”



Source: Arab Barometer, Wave 4 and 5; fieldwork in 2016 and 2018/2019, 1200/2400 observations per country and territory.

In table 1, we demonstrate how the above attitudes relate to social and attitudinal characteristics using a number of predictors as tested elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). First, with gender, we can see that, although within some countries there are significant differences in the proportion of negativity by gender, these differences are not consistent. Second and by contrast, in nine of the 11 countries and territories, there was a greater propensity towards negativity with age, the only exceptions being in the Sudan and the Palestinian Territories. Third, in every country except Jordan, Lebanon and Libya, we see that more education is associated with less negativity towards immigration – though this difference varies from the very slight (the Sudan and the Palestinian Territories) to very large in a number of countries. Fourth, in every country and territory except the Palestinian Territories and Yemen, those in a better financial situation are more positive to having immigrants as neighbours, although this relationship is not always linear: in six countries those whose income “doesn’t cover costs” are more negative than the most deprived group suffering “significant difficulties”. This curvilinear relationship is in line with findings in advanced democracies. Onto psychological predictors, in eight of the 11 countries, those who believe that democracy is ineffective at maintaining order display greater negativity to immigrants, in line with what we would expect from elsewhere whereby those particularly concerned by order oppose immigration. However, this does not seem to relate to one’s evaluation of his/her personal safety, which has no prevalent cross-country relationship with attitudes to immigrants as neighbours. Finally, in eight countries, again, we see that those who consider themselves more religious are more likely to display negativity to immigrants in social terms.

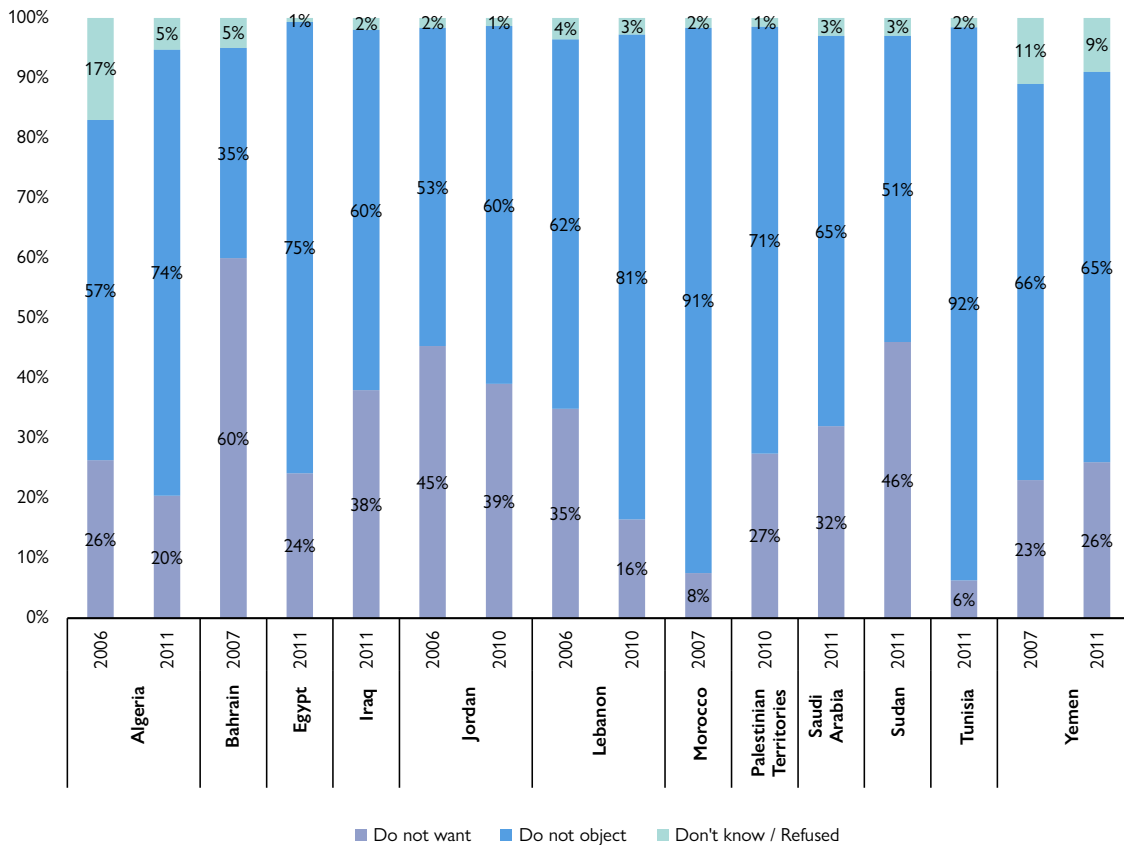
Table 1: Percentage answering that they would “strongly dislike” or “dislike” having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours by social and attitudinal groups and country/territories

	Algeria	Egypt	Iraq	Jordan	Lebanon	Libya	Morocco	Sudan	Tunisia	Yemen	Palestinian Territories
Gender											
Male	28	29	31	26	36	64	23	36	15	28	35
Female	28	34	25	27	38	59	33	39	14	27	30
Age											
18–35	24	29	27	25	36	57	22	36	10	26	33
36–50	30	31	30	29	38	65	32	41	16	31	33
51+	32	39	29	28	38	74	40	36	20	29	30
Education											
None / primary	35	33	29	26	33	60	38	39	19	30	34
Secondary	22	33	27	26	40	57	23	34	12	28	31
Tertiary	21	26	26	28	37	64	18	38	9	22	33
Income situation											
Able to save	23	27	25	22	43	50	21	50	13	33	27
Covers costs	31	30	26	27	35	63	30	33	11	35	31
Doesn't cover costs	33	29	30	29	37	67	29	39	14	29	37
Significant difficulties	25	44	34	25	39	65	31	35	20	23	29
Democracy ineffective at maintaining order?											
Agree	33	40	24	32	36	63	36	42	14	39	35
Disagree	26	27	32	24	38	62	27	33	15	23	32
Evaluate your personal safety											
Ensured	31	30	28	26	38	61	28	40	14	29	31
Not ensured	18	38	29	29	35	64	28	31	16	26	34
Religiosity											
Religious	31	35	26	27	42	65	30	38	18	30	32
Somewhat religious	29	29	29	27	35	66	32	38	13	27	32
Not religious	20	26	35	17	36	51	14	40	14	22	34

Source: Arab Barometer, Wave 5; fieldwork in 2018–2019, 1200/2400 observations per country and territory.

Previous waves of the Arab Barometer – held in 2006–2007 and 2010–2011 – asked the same question regarding attitudes to immigrants as neighbours. As shown in figure 2, in these two earlier waves, possible responses were either “do not want” or “do not object”, more limited than the five-unit scale used in 2016 and 2018–2019, making comparisons over the already particularly eventful time-period more difficult. We can see in both waves and in every country the majority of respondents stated that they “do not object”, with the sole exception of Bahrain in 2007. This majority varies from being very large (91% in Morocco in 2007 and 92% in Tunisia in 2011) to very slight (53% in Jordan in 2006 and 51% in the Sudan in 2011). The cross-country trends that we observed from 2016 and 2018–2019 in figure 1 were similar a decade earlier. Within countries, we see greater positivity over time to having immigrants as neighbours in three countries that were surveyed in both 2006 and 2010–2011 – Algeria, Jordan and Lebanon – with very slightly greater negativity over time in Yemen.

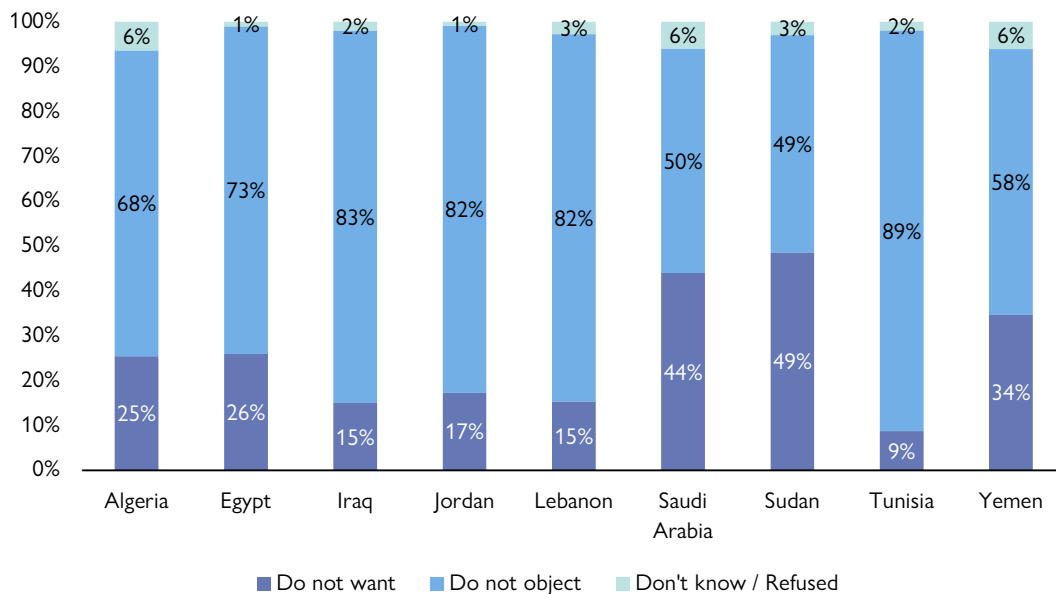
Figure 2: How would you feel about immigrants or guest workers/expatriate workers as neighbours?



Source: Arab Barometer, Wave 1 & 2; fieldwork in 2006–2007 & 2010–2011, ~1200 observations per country and territory.

In 2011, the Arab Barometer also gauged public opinion on attitudes to having refugees, specifically, as neighbours. The responses are shown in figure 3. In Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen, attitudes to refugees were more negative than to immigrants and guest workers, whereas the opposite was true in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon – all of which have given refuge to or sent large numbers of refugees in recent decades. That said, these figures are now considerably out of date given the events that have transpired since.

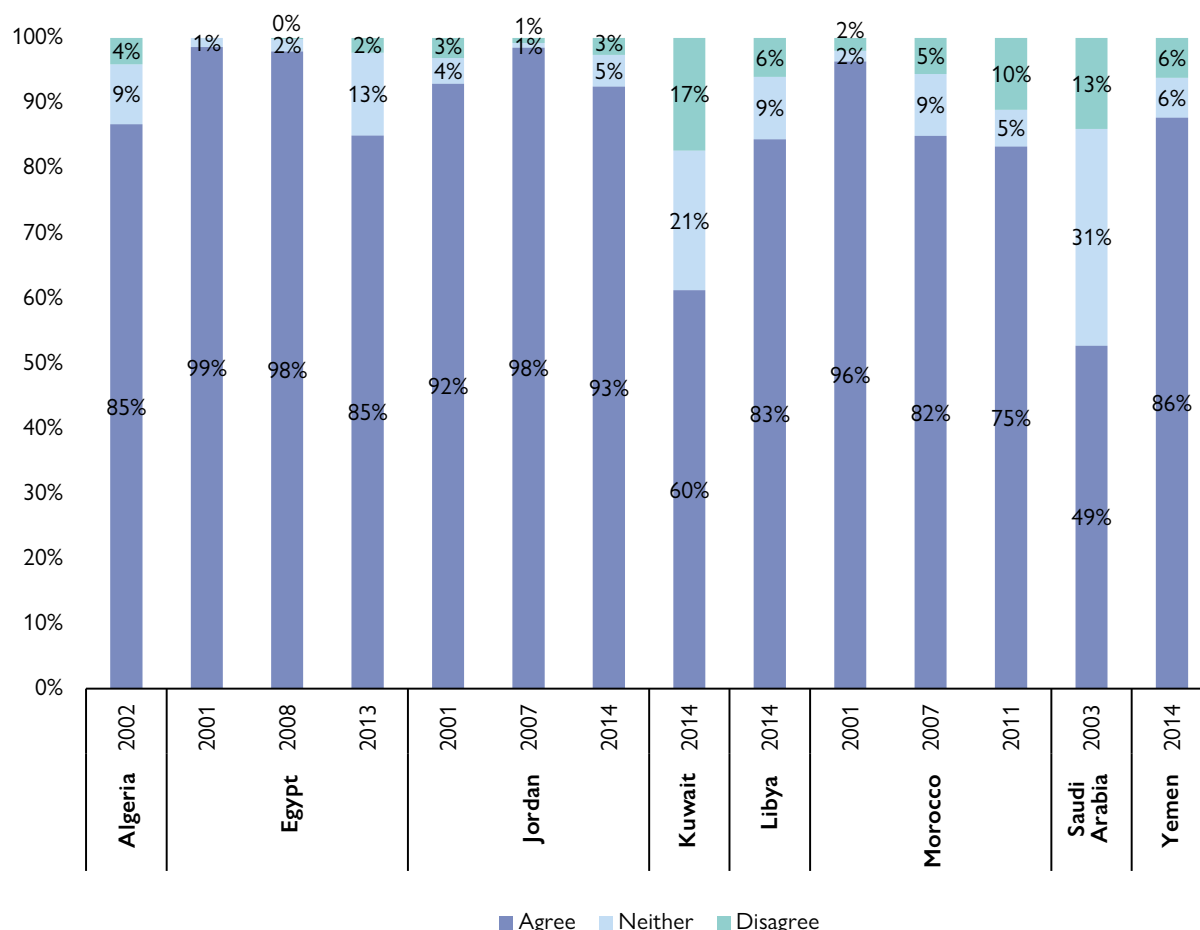
Figure 3: How would you feel about refugees as neighbours



Source: Arab Barometer, Wave 2; fieldwork in 2010/11, ~1200 observations per country.

The World Values Survey asked Arab-speaking countries about their attitudes to immigrants in the labour market – specifically, whether employers should give priority to citizens rather than immigrants. The results show overwhelming support for priority for nationals, with the exceptions of Kuwait in which the majority is only 60 per cent and Saudi Arabia, where only 49 per cent agree. However, it is notable that in the three countries that were surveyed more than once – Egypt, Jordan and Morocco – support for priority for nationals over immigrants dropped over the latter two waves – by 13 per cent, 5 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively.

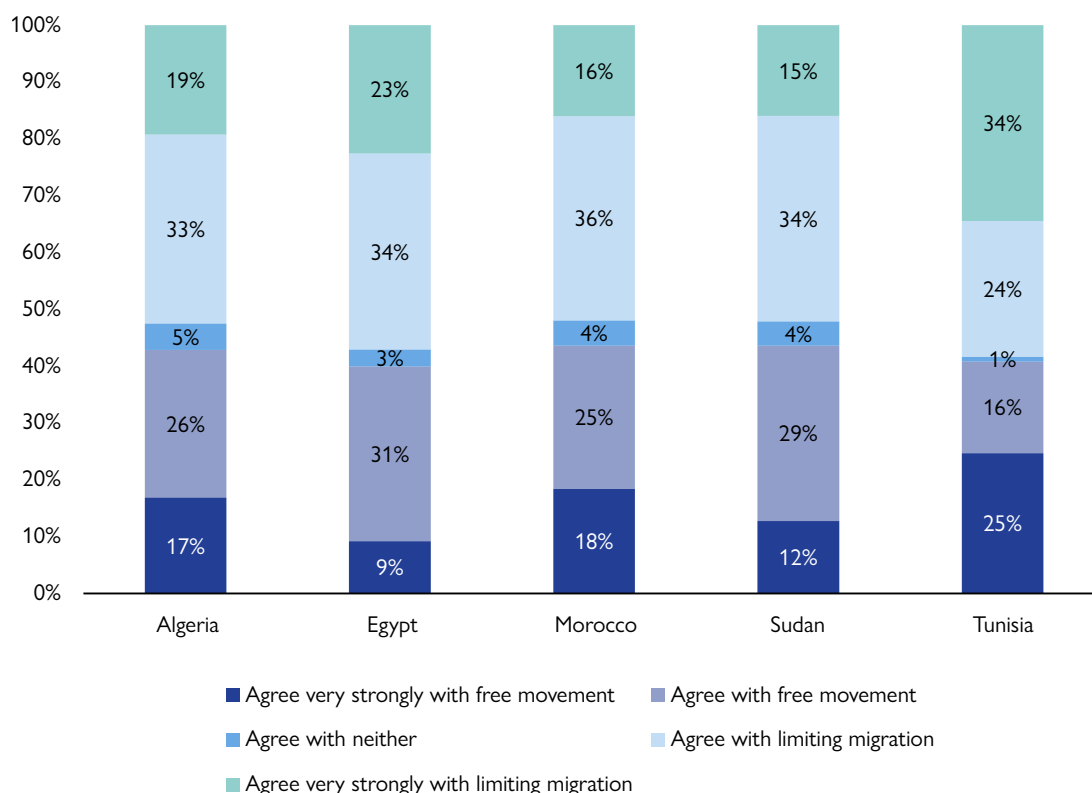
Figure 4: “When jobs are scarce, should employers give priority to people from this country rather than immigrants?”



Source: World Values Survey, 2001–2014; ~1200/3000 observations per country.

Finally, the Afrobarometer survey, which uses clustered, stratified, multistage, area probabilities and face-to-face interviews, asked North Africans in 2014 and 2015 which of the following they agree with more: free movement of people in North Africa or government controls over cross-border movement. When presented with such a trade-off, a slim majority of respondents agree with border control (52% in Algeria, 56% in Egypt, 52% in Morocco and 58% in Tunisia), with a slight minority of 49 per cent in the Sudan. This suggests that North Africans are more positive to migration of fellow North Africans than of other groups, given the sizeable minority of respondents who expressed support for complete North African free movement (43%, 40%, 43% and 42%, respectively).

Figure 5: Which of these statements do you agree with more? “People living in North Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries” or “Because foreign migrants take away jobs, and foreign traders sell their goods at very cheap prices, governments should protect their own citizens and limit the cross-border movement of people and goods”



Source: Afrobarometer, 2014–2015; ~1200 observations per country.

Overall, we see a number of clear trends. First, the majority of citizens in almost every country considered display positivity or indifference when asked about social attitudes to immigrants. Second, age, education, income, attitudes to democracy and religiosity predict attitudes to immigration in a fairly consistent way across the region that is in line with findings in advanced democracies. Third, attitudes to refugees tend to differ from those of other immigrants. Fourth, by contrast, in almost every country at every time point, the vast majority of citizens display anti-immigration attitudes regarding the labour market, with almost unanimous belief in all countries considered that employers should give priority to citizens, with two exceptions: the smaller majority in Kuwait and the half of the population in Saudi Arabia. However, attitudes to both immigrants as neighbours and as participants in the labour market are generally becoming more positive over time. Finally, attitudes to regional free movement of persons is divided roughly equally across countries.

The salience of immigration in Arab-speaking countries

We now consider how important citizens in the Arab world consider immigration to be as an issue. In this sense, we continue the work of scholarly literature in Europe (Dennison and Geddes, 2018; Dennison, 2019a and 2019b), which showed how the salience (or importance) of immigration – the proportion of the population that considers immigration one of the most important issues affecting their country – has radically altered the politics of Europe in recent years, via the emotional activation of pre-existing preferences towards immigrants and immigration policy.

With this in mind, we now consider the salience of immigration as a political issue using evidence from the Arab Barometer series of surveys from 2006 to 2017. The Arab Barometer offers respondents a number of potential “most important challenges” facing their country, as well as giving them the option of answering “other” and inserting their own “most important challenge”. Immigration was not offered as a potential response by the survey team. However, the proportion responding “other” – in which respondents could have placed immigration related issues – was far lower than the suggested issues, notably the economic situation, corruption, security and, in some countries, foreign interference or occupation.

We also examined the responses given by those who initially responded with “other”. “Immigration” was only mentioned by one individual in any country across the time series – in Morocco in 2016. The only migration-related issue mentioned by a large number of people (more than 1%) is that of Syrian refugees, mentioned by 34 per cent of Jordanians and 43 per cent of Lebanese as an important issue in 2016. At the time of writing, the 2018–2019 Arab Barometer data had just been released, however, information on what individuals responding “other” gave as their reason has not been released. In most cases, “the economic situation” and “financial and administrative corruption” remained the most important two challenges. However, it should be noted that 32 per cent of Moroccans listed “other” in this most recent wave. We will have to wait to see if this “other” included migration related issues. Overall, we can conclude that immigration is a low salience issue in most of the Arab-speaking world.

Public attitudes and migration policy in the Arab-speaking world

Although the countries of the Arab world vary considerably in the status of their regimes (Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2019 Democracy Index), it is by now well-established that public opinion can strongly influence policymaking regardless of regime type (Chen and Xu, 2017). With this in mind, we consider it plausible that the salience of immigration, or lack of it – relative to other political issues – is likely to dictate the extent to which public attitudes to immigration affect public immigration policy in the region. We consider the role of public attitudes, as described above, in determining immigration policy in four countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon.

Morocco

Prior to the late 1990s, there were few clear governmental policies dealing with immigration in Morocco besides some piecemeal security measures. However, after the May 2003 Casablanca bombings, the Government started taking clear policies toward immigration, naming irregular immigration a criminal offence for the first time and later creating the Migration and Borders Surveillance Office, which took charge of fighting migrant-smuggling networks. In 2004, Morocco and Spain created joint coastal patrols to work in the Strait of Gibraltar as well as in the Atlantic between Morocco and the Canary Islands (Lahlou, 2006:121). State immigration policy in Morocco was at least in part based on security and geopolitical considerations, with cooperation

with European countries seen by the Moroccan Government as way to enhance economic cooperation (Fargues and Fandrich, 2012). The year 2013 saw a radical change in Moroccan immigration policy. King Mohammed IV admitted human rights violations towards immigrants and a new, more rights-based immigration policy was announced, specifically directed towards irregular immigrants (Lahlou, 2018:7). Following this, the Moroccan Government conducted two amnesties of irregular immigrants.

There is some evidence that public opinion was against immigration flows at the time of the more restrictive policy changes (Berriane et al., 2015; Kimball, 2017), particularly in terms of competition for jobs, and a result of media framing (including on “invading black locusts”) as well as the growth of Christian communities from sub-Saharan Africa. However, Cherti and Collyer (2015) argue that the key determinant behind the radical 2013 change was again geopolitical considerations, with Morocco by then keen to reorient itself towards Africa and ingratiate itself with sub-Saharan governments.

Tunisia

In Tunisia, pre-Arab Spring migration policy was vaguer than in Morocco but included criminalization of irregular immigration and traffickers. Tunisia does not have a formal asylum system but it permits the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to work in this field. Following the descent of Libya into civil war, the Tunisian State adopted an open-door policy to massive incoming migration of refugees. These refugees, however, had no legal status in the absence of laws regulating asylum and some of them stayed on tourist visas. Berriane et al. (2015) show an ambivalent attitude among the Tunisian public toward Libyans, with their investment into the economy celebrated. However, the immigration of irregular sub-Saharan African workers, was received more negatively by the Tunisian public (Natter, 2018).

The absence of a clear migration policy response can be seen as a consequence of these ambivalent attitudes in the Tunisian public. However, it seems more likely that the vagueness results from it being a low salience issue, particularly in the context of the struggles over democratization (Dennison and Draege, 2020). Several interviews were conducted recently by Roman and Pastore (2017) in Tunisia with a number of civil society activists, decisionmakers and academics, with the vast majority confirming that unlike in Europe, immigration is not a salient issue. For instance, an interviewee stated that, “contrary to in the European Union, in Tunisia no political party has used migration-related issues in political terms; migration is not the object of nationalist or xenophobic political positions; actually, it is not the object of political debate at all” (Roman and Pastore, 2017:9). This evidence, particularly in the case of Tunisia, supports the above data.

Jordan

Before 2003, Jordan had an open-door policy to labour immigrants coming from Arab countries, especially Egypt, and to refugees coming from the West Bank after 1948 and 1967, Iraq and Kuwait after 1991, and the Syrian Arab Republic between 2011 and 2014. Jordan, having initially granted nationality to migrants from the Palestinian Territories living in the West Bank from the 1950s onwards, started adopting a stricter policy toward refugees fleeing the Iraq war in 2003, still, however, granting a 30-day allowance to those fleeing the war and showing flexibility. This situation changed in 2005 after terrorist attacks leading to stricter measures both in terms of denial of entry and repatriating thousands of Iraqis who exceeded their permit. The same pattern was repeated with Syrian refugees after 2014, who, by 2015, constituted 9 per cent of Jordan’s population and were a heavy financial burden on Jordan, estimated at USD 4.2 billion in 2016 (Achilli, 2015:5). These costs were added to the termination of one of the most vital trade routes to Jordan through the Syrian Arab Republic and the competition Jordanians found in labour market from the Syrians. In addition, refugees affected the real estate market as rents doubled and tripled in some areas.

Some Jordanians who welcomed Syrian refugees initially were reported to have become hostile as a consequence of these perceived negative effects on their already uneasy economic life (ibid). After 2014, Syrian refugees became one of the Jordanian public's most salient political issues, creating something of a constraining dissensus for the Government that responded with more restrictive measures: daily repatriation of irregular workers reached 80–100 workers per day (ibid). Over a longer period, however, Jordanians have sought protection in the labour market from immigration in the context of high unemployment rates, with professional associations often opposing the recruitment of foreign labour and the Ministry of Labour responding by listing professions exclusive to Jordanians.

Lebanon

Lebanon does not recognize the right to asylum, with the exception of Palestinians as well as some temporary exceptions defined via agreements with the UNHCR. Furthermore, the category of irregular migrant does not exist and there are no laws regulating foreign workers, instead, there is a supervision system (Kafala) similar to the system applied in the Gulf. This system includes low-skilled jobs (e.g. construction, sanitization, etc.) that the Lebanese avoid, and, therefore, arguably does not impose “pressure” on the Lebanese labour market (Tabar, 2010:12–13). The Lebanese Government has often adopted restrictive policies to the 1.5 million Syrian refugees it has received and considers their status as temporary. The Lebanese Government first denied entry to migrants from the Palestinian Territories living in the Syrian Arab Republic, limited admission of Syrian refugees to extreme humanitarian cases and rejected 60 per cent of the refugees coming to the Lebanese borders from the Syrian Arab Republic. In addition, anti-refugee stances were taken after the crisis with insistence that the impact of the crisis on Lebanon must be lessened (McKernan, 2019).

One factor that stands behind restrictive immigration policies in Lebanon, especially with respect to refugee integration, is the protection of the demographic balance that lies at the very core of the nation-building process (Dorai and Clochard, 2006:13). As such, whereas in Jordan, migrants from the Palestinian Territories received citizenship, in Lebanon they have been denied citizenship so as not to change the political balance between different political and religious groups in Lebanon. However, public opinion towards Syrian refugees is also highly negative. As Chaaban et al. (2018:10) note, “Syrian refugees were targeted in the Lebanese election campaign, which employed an increased anti-refugee rhetoric demanding their return.” As already shown, a large fraction of the Lebanese hold anti-immigrant attitudes. In a report titled “Have the Lebanese become fed up with Syrian refugees”, the majority of interviewees confirmed that public opinion in Lebanon is becoming increasingly antagonistic (BBC Arabia, 2017), contrary to evidence from the earlier Arab Barometer outlined above. The reasons for this anti-refugee stance are multiple, but the main concerns tend to be related to security, public order, the economy and labour market competition, as well as the prices of real estate units that are said to have doubled as a consequence of the increasing demand created by Syrians.

Overall, we see that, in Morocco and Tunisia, immigration was too low salient an issue for public opinion to play an important role in dictating migration policy, which was, instead, determined by geopolitical and security considerations, if at all. In Jordan and Lebanon, however, while immigration policy was also dictated by other issues – regional instability, constitutionalism – the issue seems to have become salient in public life, leading to some effect of public attitudes, particularly regarding the labour market, on policy.

Discussion

This article overviews public attitudes to migration in the Arab-speaking world and considers their effects on migration politics and policies in the region. We show that attitudes to immigration in the Arab world are notable in a number of ways. Although citizens show relatively little xenophobia in their personal lives, when it comes to the labour market there is considerable anti-immigration sentiment. There are also consistent social predictors of negativity, including age, education, income, attitudes to democracy and religiosity. However, until now, this has had relatively little effect on the politics and policies of the region. Although older studies had assumed that this is because of the hybrid nature of the region's political regimes (Natter, 2018), we argue, instead, that it is likely to be because of the low salience of immigration as an issue in the region. People in the south of the Mediterranean care in the first place for economic issues, such as unemployment, inflation, corruption, in addition to security matters – which makes migration issue salience to look minimal. In the eastern Mediterranean, this is less true, exacerbated by recent events, which we show in our qualitative, policy section. Moreover, we argue that attitudes to immigration affect policies if and when immigration is intimately linked to high salience issues, like economics and security, particularly since 2011, which, again, we provide qualitative evidence to support. Despite that, so long as immigration fails to excite Arab publics directly, their governments will continue to enjoy greater flexibility in their migration policy than their European equivalents.

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