Levels and Determinants of Social Trust in the Arab World

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Abstract

This study examined both the levels and determinants of social trust in the Arab World. The study is based on cross-regional data aimed at identifying patterns that illustrate which countries in the Arab World are most trusting while also explaining the underlying causes of such patterns. Moreover, this study was conducted within a framework dealing with social trust as a concept separate from its counterpart - state benevolence - in seeking to determine what causes social trust to lend itself both to democratic and nondemocratic systems of governance. It gave specific attention to discrepancies with regard to social polarization and alienation both within and among Arab countries, attributing such patterns to the effects of economic liberalization policies, democratization efforts and differing group opinions on the desired role of religion as a social and political actor within the state apparatus.

Keywords: social trust, political trust, state benevolence, public opinion, Arab World

1. Introduction

While this research is primarily concerned with the social as opposed to the political aspect of trust in the Arab World, it is necessary to point out the fact that both facets of trust are crucial to efforts towards democratization - an observation that takes on particular importance given recent democratization efforts in the Arab World. Furthermore, social trust plays an important role in relation to political confidence even in authoritarian states. Indeed, just as social and political trust can lend support to democratic institutions and systems of governance, social trust can positively affect authoritarian states as well (2007, p.1328). Social trust, in short, differs from political trust in that the former refers to trust between people while the latter refers to trust between citizens and their governments. Some even argue that in addition to the importance of social and political trust in relation to both democratic and nondemocratic systems of governance, state benevolence defined as demonstrations of 'goodwill' by the state plays an important role in the lending of social trust to authoritarian states (2014, p.385). Consequently, this article seeks to examine - in addition to the various theories of trust - both the levels and determinants of trust in the Arab World through cross-country analysis. This analysis includes the identification of patterns that illustrate which people in the Arab World are more trusting than others while also seeking to explain the underlying causes of such patterns. Necessarily, it is first important to clarify what is meant by social trust.

Social trust is perhaps best understood when juxtaposed with social polarization and alienation, which refers to the division of society into small groups that share common values and view other groups as having values and interests that conflict with their own. In short, social trust can be defined as "the belief that others will not deliberately or knowingly do us harm, if they can avoid it, and will look after our interests, if this is possible" (2005, p.311). In a similar manner, social trust has been referred to as "one of the most important synthetic forces within society” (1950, p.326). Lastly, social trust "is at the centre of issues pertaining to practical, daily life, including happiness, optimism, well-being, health, economic prosperity, education, welfare, and participation in community and civil society. Some authors
attribute social polarization and alienation in the Arab World to the predominance of a primordial social structure. Regardless of the main culprit, however, internal competition within a society is the main feature of such polarization and alienation. In other words, such internal competition is an illustration of a lack of social trust. Furthermore, levels of social trust in the Arab World differ both internally and externally, i.e. both within and among Arab countries. For example, countries such as Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia are subject to a greater level of internal competition than their Arab counterparts and countries such as Jordan and Algeria exhibit discrepancies in their internal levels of personal and social trust. In the case of countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Yemen, such discrepancies are even more pronounced. This is likely a result of differing opinions among groups regarding the desired role of religion as a social and political actor within the state apparatus. As previously mentioned, democratic transition in general and efforts toward democratization in the Arab World in particular are closely linked to levels of social trust. Economic liberalization policies, as well, have a debatable effect on social trust - especially internally - on the basis of varying income levels. Egypt, for example, in suffering the economic crisis of 2008, experienced greater class division as a result of the economic policies that were implemented. Interestingly, Turkey, during the same period of time, avoided similar class conflict by instituting its own brand of economic policies. Nonetheless, efforts towards democratization - however closely related to economic policies those efforts may be - seem to be the single-most important determinants of social trust or lack thereof. Indeed, the past quarter of a century has shown that discrepancies among populations in the Arab World with regard to internal levels of social and personal trust are more pronounced in countries that had either undergone or continue to undergo democratization.

2. Literature Review

There is a striking lack of previous research specific to social trust in the Arab World, complicating efforts aimed at reviewing previous work. Indeed, the small range of available publications deal with social trust not on its own merits but in relation to both political trust and state benevolence. Broadly speaking, social trust has only been dealt with within the context of democratization in the Arab World. Accordingly, "most studies do not take into account the ways nondemocratic conditions structure levels of generalized social trust" (2007, p.1328). Nonetheless, previous research can serve to provide great insight into the phenomenon of social trust in the Arab World - particularly with regard to this article's specific aims of determining what causes social trust to lend itself both to democratic and nondemocratic systems of governance, how levels of social trust differ regionally from one Arab country to another as well as what determinants might explain the underlying causes of such patterns.

In setting out the framework for this literature review, it is important to establish and delineate the two different schools of thought regarding the topic of social trust. The first school of thought can be referred to as the "personalized" theory of social trust. This theory conceptualizes social trust as a feature inherent to the individual either as a trait or as a feature of his/her socio-economic situation, i.e., as gender, income, age, class or education related. The second school of thought can be referred to as the "systemic" theory of social trust. This theory views social trust as inherent to social and political institutions as opposed to the individual (2003, p.312).

In line with the previous assertion that social trust is central to happiness, health, wealth, general wellbeing and citizenship, "personalized" theories of social trust entail conceptualizing social trust as a feature of the sociopsychological makeup of individuals, i.e. as being a component of the individual personality that is socialized at a young age and is effected by post-childhood experiences, particularly those related to trauma (2003, p.95). "Personalized" theories also closely link social trust with self-control and optimistic attitudes towards one's life. Similar to the sociopsychological feature of "personalized" theories, such trust is developed at an early age - particularly during childhood - but in this case, claims to be heavily influenced by the parents of the individual in question. Lastly, "personalized" theories of social
trust involve the demographic makeup of a particular individual. Such views give special attention to job satisfaction, causes of stress, family income, etc.

"Systemic" theories of social trust, unlike "personalized" theories of social trust, give special attention to the macro-level objective origins of social trust in society, or lack thereof (2003, p.312). For example, "systemic theories" look at the institutional rather than individual elements of trust in a society. Such theories point to the importance of habit in developing trust through voluntary relationships among individuals in a group setting. Accordingly, empathy is more easily developed among individuals the more that they come into contact with each other and the more they get used to dealing with each other. Such theories also give great importance to informal daily relationships - for example, between family and friends and in the workplace - rather than formal relationships. Lastly, "systemic" theories attempt to draw correlations between individual feelings as related to perceived situations of conflict in one's nation. Such conflict could relate to immigration concerns, class conflict, national security, etc.

3. Method and Sample

Social trust has been measured by cross-national attitudinal surveys such as the World Values Survey, by regional attitudinal surveys such as the European World Social Survey and by national attitudinal surveys such as the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). Important to recall is the previous assertion that the past quarter century has shown that discrepancies among populations in the Arab World with regard to internal levels of social and personal trust are more pronounced in countries that had either undergone or continue to undergo democratization. At the same time, however, there seems to be a higher level of trust in certain situations with outcomes that seem undemocratic - for example, more confidence with existing regimes, support for gender inequality and support for religious leaders. Nonetheless, employing cross-regional analysis as a research method will help us to identify patterns that illustrate which people in the Arab World are more trusting than others while also trying to explain the underlying causes of such patterns.

This study made use of the World Values Survey Wave 6 data (2010-2014). The sample used was comprised of 15,524 respondents, with a total of 13 countries included in the analysis, including Libya, Lebanon, Turkey, Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, Palestine, Algeria, Qatar, Egypt, Iraq, Yemen and KSA. Socio-demographic factors that this study accounted for include sex, age, education and country of residence. Additionally, interpersonal trust, general trust (by gender), general trust (by age), general trust (by education) and levels of social trust as related to family, neighborhood, personal acquaintances, people met for the first time and people from other nationalities were measured. In order to measure general trust, the following question were put forth to respondents: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?" Similarly, in order to measure interpersonal trust, the following question was put forth to respondents: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?"

4. General Trust

Given that greater levels of trust tend to be more present in wealthier, more established democracies - especially those that are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), such as Scandinavia, the following democratic values can be looked at as determinants of trust: good governance, absence of corruption, safety from crime, national wealth accumulation, low levels of income inequality and egalitarian values. Accordingly, social trust can be found to be most prevalent in Nordic countries in which all of the following conditions are found in great combination: Protestantism, economic prosperity, political integrity as opposed to political corruption,
equality, homogeneity with regard to ethnic makeup, lack of class conflict, democracy and a thriving civil society (2005, p.323). While the sociopolitical conditions of Nordic countries undoubtedly differ from the sociopolitical conditions of the Arab World, the previously mentioned attributes that are believed to foster social trust can be looked at as determinants both in a macro-level globalized setting as well as the micro-level particularized context of the Arab World. Indeed, looking at the political makeup of the countries surveyed in the following data, such as the democratic values, are reliable as determinants of social trust.

4.1. General Trust (by Country)

"Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?"

[Graph showing general trust by country with data points for Egypt, Qatar, Libya, Lebanon, Turkey, Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, Palestine, Algeria, Qatar, Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, and KSA (1999-2004).]

General trust by country is depicted in the graph above. Egypt and Qatar maintain similar levels of interpersonal trust at 21%, while Libya, Lebanon, Turkey, Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, Palestine and Algeria share levels of interpersonal trust ranging from 11%-18%, with Libya and Lebanon tied at 11%, Morocco and Jordan at 13% and Palestine and Algeria at 18%. Iraq, Yemen and KSA show a dramatic increase in general trust in comparison with the previously mentioned countries, leading researchers to question how strong a role their geographical proximity to one another may play in determining their comparatively high levels of social trust.
4.2. General Trust (by Gender)

General trust (by gender) is depicted in the graph above. When asked if most people can be trusted, 53% of males responded positively in comparison with females at 47%.

**Figure 1: General Trust by Country and Gender (KSA not included)**

Figure 1 represents a country specific breakup of trust-levels (by gender) in the various countries of the region. The previous figure showed how men are slightly more trusting than females in the region. These results did not change much when analyzed through individual countries. However, the women of Palestine, Lebanon and Qatar are more trusting than their male counterparts. This was most true in Qatar where 54% of female respondents indicated that they believe most people can be trusted.
4.3. General Trust (by Age)

General trust (by age) is depicted in the graph above. When asked if most people can be trusted, 21% of the 15-24 age group responded positively, 62% of the 25-54 age group responded positively and 17% of the 55+ age group responded positively. It is obvious that the middle cohort (25-54) shows a dramatic increase in levels of trust in comparison with the other two age groupings.

Figure 2: General Trust by Country and Age (KSA not included)

Figure 2 presents a country specific breakdown demonstrating how age affects trust levels in various Arab countries. The results show that higher levels of trust held by middle-aged people stays constant throughout the Arab world. Youth respondents from Algeria demonstrated higher levels of trust than their counterparts across the Arab world. In Algeria, 27% of the population aged between 15-24 believes that most people can be trusted. Only 16% of he youth in Morocco and Turkey believe that most people can be trusted, making the youth populations of these two countries the least trusting in the region. 70% of Qataris aged between 25-54 believe that most people can be trusted. The elderly (aged 55+) in Libya were
the biggest outlier in this poll. Only 7% of Libyans above the age of 55 believe that most people can be trusted; a proportion significantly lowers than the region-wide average of 17%.

4.4. General Trust (by Education)

General trust (by education) is depicted in the graph above. When asked if most people can be trusted, 19% of those with no formal education responded positively, 35% of those with less than secondary education responded positively, 29% of those with secondary and less than BA education responded positively and only 16% of those with a BA or higher responded positively. It is ironic that although the data shows a correlation between increased levels of social trust and increased educational attainment levels starting at the 'less than secondary' level, there tends to be slight shift when it comes to the 'secondary and less than BA' group and an even more dramatic shift at the 'BA+' group.
Figure 3 gives a country specific breakdown of how education affects levels of public trust. The positive correlation between public trust and a less than Secondary education remains evident. The biggest outlier was Egypt where 18% of citizens possessing less than a secondary education believe that most people can be trusted - a significantly lower proportion than the 35% average in the region. Conversely, 50% of Tunisians and Algerians with less than a secondary education believe that most people can be trusted. Moroccans who have no formal education are more trusting than their counterparts in the region. 50% of uneducated Moroccans believe that most people can be trusted, a significantly higher proportion than seen in the region as a whole (19%). Similarly, a high proportion of uneducated Yemenis (40%) believe that most people can be trusted.
5. Social Trust (by Country)

The following responses were received when individuals were asked who they can trust completely (by country). In terms of trust towards people of another nationality, Lebanon ranks the highest, with Qatar following. Respondents from Palestine demonstrated the lowest level of trust for others of other nationalities. In terms of trust towards people of another religion, Lebanon similarly ranked highest, with Qatar and Egypt following suit. Jordan, Libya and Morocco rank similarly in their levels of trust towards people of another religion. Again, Palestine recorded the lowest level of trust for others from another religion. With regard to trust towards 'your neighborhood', greater discrepancies are apparent when comparing the country data. For example, Egypt ranks higher than Lebanon, unlike the previous two data entries; Qatar holds a rank similar to Libya and Tunisia, unlike the previous two data entries, in which it ranked immediately below Lebanon as a country exhibiting great levels of trust towards people of other nationalities and religions. Ironically, Lebanon ranks lower than Palestine in terms of trust towards 'your neighborhood'. In terms of trust towards 'people you know personally', Egypt similarly ranks highest, while Libya and Qatar share a similar rank and a steady increase in trust is exhibited when comparing Palestine, Iraq and Jordan. Lebanon's results intersect with regard to 'people you know personally' and 'people of another nationality' and Egypt tops other countries with a response of 61% with regard to 'people you know personally'. Interestingly, Lebanon has the lowest level of complete trust for the family in comparison with the results from other countries, however, at a mere 66% compared with Egypt at 99%.

6. Hypotheses
The hypotheses that were tested include:

- **H1**: Females are more trusting than males
- **H2**: The elderly are more trusting than younger cohorts
- **H3**: The higher the education of individuals, the greater their level of trust

H1 was confirmed with regard to 'General Trust (by gender)'. Indeed, when asked if most people can be trusted, 53% of males responded positively in comparison with females at 47%. According to the results
of the t-test, there is a significant difference between male and female attitudes regarding General Trust, where the p-value = 0.002 and it is significant at the 5% level. H2, on the other hand, was contradicted in terms of 'General Trust (by age)'. Indeed, the data shows that the elderly and the young are less trusting than others. According to the results of the ANOVA test, there is a significant difference between age groups' attitudes regarding General Trust, where the p-value = 0.006. The testing of H3 produced interesting results in that in examining 'General Trust (by education)', rather than finding a strong correlation between higher educational attainment levels and higher levels of trust, results showed that the higher the education of individuals, the lower their level of trust. According to the results, there is a significant difference regarding education levels in relation to General Trust, where the p-value = 0.000.

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7. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine both the levels and determinants of social trust in the Arab World. Through cross-regional analysis, it identified patterns that illustrate which people in the Arab World are more trusting. Interestingly, two out of the four hypotheses put forth were contradicted. This is particularly relevant given the previous assertion that social and personal trust has a greater impact in countries that have undergone or are currently undergoing a process of democratization. The most noteworthy result, perhaps, involves the fact that Lebanon's level of complete trust in people met for the first time and people from other nationalities is not rooted in its level of complete trust in the family or neighborhood. Such a finding sheds light on the importance of outside sources in fostering potential for social trust, in line with the "systemic" as opposed to "personalized" theory of social trust examined previously (2003, p.312). Regardless of the importance given to the internal or external spheres on one another and the impact of these spheres - namely the family and neighborhood as opposed to outside
sources - on individual levels of trust, four main determinants are arguably universal in remedying social distrust and thus also in promoting higher levels of social trust. They include: crime reduction, the elimination of political corruption, the enhancement of municipal performance and efforts towards addressing inequality.

References


