What determines public attitudes toward immigration in the Middle East: an analysis at the individual level

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Abstract

Purpose – Surveys in Europe show that immigration is more of a challenge than an opportunity for a significant number of people. However, little attention is given to attitudes toward immigration in the Middle East. This paper examines the effects of personal values and religiosity on the anti-immigration attitudes of citizens in the Middle East and North African countries.

Design/methodology/approach – Utilizing data from the World Values Survey, we analyze how personal values and religiosity affect anti-immigration attitudes in nine Middle Eastern countries. The data covers individual-level data of 9 MENA countries from the WVS Round 7 (2017–2022). Factor analysis is applied as a data reduction method. Afterward, an OLS regression analysis is conducted on the pooled data.

Findings – Anti-immigration attitudes increase with age, education, and religiosity. Personal values such as national pride, support for nationals, and belongingness to one's country significantly affect anti-immigration attitudes. Furthermore, the importance of religion as a measure of religiosity was found to be positively associated with anti-immigration attitudes.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to underexplored literature by investigating how individual-level determinants, such as demographic indicators, personal values, and religious factors, shape anti-immigration attitudes in the MENA context, distinct from European dynamics.

Keywords Anti-immigration attitudes, Religiosity, Values, Behavioral economics, Middle East

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

International migration has become a significant concern globally, prompting political, economic, and social considerations. Effective integration of migrants within host countries depends on attitudes exhibited by residents. Recent political and public debates regarding the place of immigrants in society have evolved from primarily addressing labor market concerns to political, cultural, and social implications, with a specific focus on the issue of national identity (Davidov and Semyonov, 2017). Phenomena such as discrimination, intergroup conflicts, intolerance, and xenophobia can impede immigrants' ability to secure work and housing or develop a sense of belonging in host communities, which threatens social cohesion and collective security (Penninx *et al.*, 2008; Vecchione *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, policymakers need to understand individual-level factors shaping attitudes toward immigration.

There is a growing scholarly interest in determining the causes of individual disparities in attitudes about immigration, particularly in Europe. The inflow of immigrants into Europe has created contradictory attitudes among individuals, ranging from positive to negative (Schahbasi *et al.*, 2021; Davidov and Meuleman, 2012; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). Despite extensive research on anti-immigrant sentiment in Western and Eastern Europe, Canada, and the USA

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(Czaika and Di Lillo, 2018; Semyonov *et al.*, 2006; Bell *et al.*, 2021; Esses *et al.*, 2001; Davidov and Semyonov, 2017), the Middle East and North African (MENA) region has received considerably less scholarly attention, except for few studies (Ceyhun, 2020; Dennison and Nasr, 2020).

Several factors contribute to the relative under-exploration of attitudes toward immigration [1] in the MENA. Firstly, other countries in the region might not be a preferred destination for African and Middle Eastern immigrants [2], compared to Europe. Secondly, following the Arab Spring, local concerns in the MENA countries prioritized issues such as social justice, political rights, and economic reforms. Finally, Western research on attitudes toward immigration has focused predominantly on European perspectives on immigrants, who are more likely to come from less developed or politically and socially unstable regions. We argue that the way Middle Eastern themselves perceive immigration and immigrants has been underexplored, compared to the vast array of research on European countries.

This study extends current research on attitudes toward immigration beyond Europe to the MENA region. The MENA region presents an interesting case for studying public attitudes toward immigration due to its similar cultural, historical, and religious background that most countries in the region share. However, religious, and cultural similarities do not necessarily guarantee favorable attitudes toward immigrants. Furthermore, the presence of political instability, low social trust, and economic hardships in several MENA countries might increase anti-immigration attitudes. Therefore, understanding attitudes toward immigration in the MENA region requires moving beyond simple cultural and religious similarity assumptions.

Our study attempts to depart from the typical Western perspective, instead exploring how individuals within MENA countries perceive immigration. This article aims to answer questions, such as: are the prevailing attitudes toward immigration in the Middle East region predominantly pro or anti-immigration? How are these attitudes shaped by individual-level factors? To our knowledge, limited research exists on these questions within the MENA context.

This study utilizes individual-level data from the World Values Survey [3] (WVS) 7th Wave. The WVS offers a nationally representative [4] sample through cross-national measures of self-reported attitudes. Out of several factors affecting attitudes toward immigration, we focus on individual-level determinants like gender, age, education level, subjective social class, and self-defined religiosity, as well as variables capturing individual values such as degree of national pride, economic perceptions, and belongingness to one's country.

This study examines negative attitudes toward immigration in the MENA region, measured by four latest items in Round 7 (2017–2022) of the WVS that capture respondents' perceptions of immigration potentially leading to undesirable social incidents like unemployment, terrorism, social conflict, and crime. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, and limited data on MENA countries, we focus on attitudes toward immigration as shaped by individual-level variables rather than contextual factors. Focusing on individual-level characteristics allows for a more robust analysis using WVS data and provides a deeper understanding of how underlying attitudes toward immigration are shaped by such drivers. Furthermore, examining individual-level determinants of anti-immigration attitudes in this study will help lay the groundwork for future studies incorporating individual and contextual variables.

Theoretical background

In 2016, the MENA region was the largest source of refugees globally. Lebanon and Jordan are the host nations for approximately 60% of the refugees in the region. Few studies examine attitudes toward immigration and immigrants in the region. For example, Ceyhun (2020) used

insights from the Arab Barometer to compare how Arab countries perceive immigrants. Also, Dennison and Nasr (2020), compared how attitudes toward immigrants differ in some Arab countries.

The last wave of the WVS (2017–2022) included a module exploring public opinions on immigration's impact on social and economic phenomena. Across the 9 MENA countries, most respondents perceived immigration as increasing social conflict (87.3%), increasing unemployment (90.2%), and crime rates (82.5%). Except for Iraq, most respondents identified the main negative effect of immigration as increasing unemployment. Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey exhibited high concerns for immigration's role in social conflict, terrorism risks, and crime. Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Iran displayed moderate negativity toward immigration. A common concern across 9 MENA countries was immigration's role in increasing unemployment. These differences in anti-immigration attitudes might reflect differences in each country's experiences, and the volume of immigrants and refugees they host.

Iraq

Compared to other MENA countries, Iraq exhibits significantly lower levels of negativity toward immigration, although the country suffered from economic, political, and social instability for decades. This is reflected by data from the WVS (2017–2022), showing 14.6% of respondents associating immigration with increased social conflict, unemployment (7.1%), terrorism risk (14%), and crime rates (15.8%). This low negativity toward immigration can be attributed to the historically low volumes of immigrants and refugees it receives. As of May 2023, Iraq hosted about 300,000 asylum seekers and refugees. About 91% of all refugees live in the Kurdistan region (UNHCR, 2023). Furthermore, many Iraqis emigrated to other countries, after the Gulf War. Such experiences can be the reason for empathy toward immigrants shown by Iraqis.

Jordan

The data from the WVS (2017–2022) shows that Jordan displays the highest level of negativity toward immigration was exhibited in Jordan, among the nine MENA countries examined. Most of the respondents in Jordan linked immigration to About 88 and 91.3% of respondents in Jordan linked immigration to increased social conflict (88%), unemployment (91%), terrorism risks (83%), and crime rates (82.5%). The significant negativity toward immigrants in Jordan can be attributed, partly, to economic challenges and the country's long history with immigrants and refugees.

Before 2003, Jordan's open-door policy welcomed workers from Egypt and refugees whenever a regional conflict took place, such as the Gulf War and the Syrian Civil War. However, by 2015, the Syrian refugee population formed 9% of Jordan's population, placing a significant financial burden on the country, estimated at $4.2bn in 2016. Given this influx, it is not surprising that immigrants and refugees were perceived to destabilize the country economically and pose pressure on domestic resources and job markets. Jordanians, over time, have sought protection in the labor market from immigrants due to the high unemployment rates (Achilli, 2015; Dennison and Nasr, 2020).

Turkey

Turkey exhibits high negativity toward immigrants, attributed largely to the high volumes of immigrants and refugees. The WVS (2017–2022) shows that approximately 72.5% of Turkish respondents associated immigration with increased unemployment, social conflict (64.1%), terrorism risk (62.9%), and crimes (63.4%). Such perceptions of immigration align with Turkey's regional role as a home to 3.5 million refugees and asylum seekers receiving

international protection (UNHCR, 2023). This, in turn, imposes social and economic burdens on the Turkish economy.

Consequently, Turkey is the case for several studies on attitudes toward immigrants and refugees. Previous research discovered that many Turkish respondents associate Syrian refugees with harming the economy, taking over jobs, and draining the state's resources (Erdogan, 2018, 2020). Morgul and Savaskan (2021) conducted a survey of Turkish focus groups about their attitudes toward Syrian refugees. Most participants believed they had a religious duty toward migrants based on Islamic solidarity, but they still worried about the material and economic consequences.

Lebanon

Apart from Palestinians and temporary exclusions stipulated through agreements with the UNHCR, Lebanon does not recognize the right to refuge. The country aims to maintain the political balance between different political and religious factions. Also, it aims at the preservation of the demographic balance that is at the heart of the nation-building process. Also, the surveillance system (Kafala) reserves jobs for immigrants, which can reduce potential pressures on the Lebanese labor market. However, the Lebanese still worry about immigration, particularly refugees' effects on security, and domestic demand (Tabar, 2010; Dennison and Nasr, 2020).

Libya

Libya has a unique position distinguishing it from other MENA countries. Since the Arab Spring in 2011 and the toppling of the Gaddafi regime, Libya has been suffering from ongoing conflicts, political instability, and the absence of a central government. Also, the country acts as a crossroad for migrants willing to reach Europe through the Central Mediterranean (UNHCR, 2018), which means it has a different experience with immigration and immigrants. Unfortunately, these immigrants can be detained and exposed to detention or die trying to reach Italian coasts. Europe supports the Libyan Coast Guard to increase its capacity and restrict the crossing to Europe and Italian ports. Political and social instability in Libya makes it challenging to conduct research. However, in 2021, research on immigrants' human rights in Libya reported they were blamed for spreading the COVID-19 pandemic (OHCHR, 2021).

Morocco

Morocco is a country of destination, emigration, and transit. It is a host to regular immigrant workers from Sub-Saharan and West African migrants, willing to secure jobs. These immigrants fill jobs in the agricultural sector. It also functions as a transit route for irregular immigrants and refugees willing to reach Europe for a better life.

Several Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) tried to tackle the situation of immigrants and refugees in Morocco. In 2013, Morocco adopted a humane asylum and immigration policy to meet its regional and international human rights commitments. Several measures were taken by the Moroccan authorities to regularize undocumented immigrants and refugees and ensure their protection against inhumane treatment, including victims of human trafficking (Jamal, 2021).

The WVS (2017–2022) shows moderate levels of anti-immigrant attitudes in Morocco. Approximately, 43.2 and 39.7% of respondents reported immigration to increase social conflict, and risks of terrorism, respectively. Immigration led to higher unemployment, as reported by 55% of respondents, and increased crime rates, according to 36% of respondents. Such moderate rates can be attributed to that Morocco is the only MENA country that has

tried to follow a comprehensive and humanitarian immigration reform, which aims to grant immigrants and refugees the right to life, access to education and healthcare, and employment.

Tunisia

Like Morocco, the WVS (2017–2022) shows moderate levels of anti-immigrant attitudes in Tunisia. About 44.1 and 45.8% of respondents reported immigration to increase social conflict, and risks of terrorism, respectively. Immigration led to higher unemployment, as reported by 61% of respondents, and increased crime rates, according to 41% of respondents.

Unlike other MENA countries, Tunisia lacks a formal asylum system, but it does collaborate with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to act in this capacity. Before the Arab Spring, Tunisia's migration policy was more ambiguous than Morocco's, focusing on the punishment of irregular migrants and human traffickers. After the Libyan Civil War, the state implemented an open-door policy to a significant influx of refugees. However, given the lack of asylum rules, these refugees had no legal status. In 2015, Berriane *et al.* (2015) found that the Tunisian population has an uncertain attitude toward Libyan refugees, but still acknowledges their economic investments.

Iran

In Iran, WVS (2017–2022) shows about 39.4% responded that immigration increased social conflict, unemployment (71.5%), terrorism risks (58.2%), and crimes (42%). Iran, unlike other MENA countries, is not a transit or destination country. However, the country has received refugees from Afghanistan and Iraqis. In 2011, the country had the world's second-largest population of refugees, after Pakistan. In recent years, immigration policies in Iran have been inconsistent, restricting access to education and healthcare for Afghan refugees. Furthermore, the phenomenon of "Afghan phobia" has been rising in the country owing to the "open borders" lenient policy, the economic crisis, and sanctions.

Egypt

The WVS (2017–2022) shows that most Egyptian respondents associated immigration with higher social conflict (59%), unemployment (72.8%), crime (50.6%), and terrorism (60.1%), respectively.

Egypt is a country of transit, destination, and origin. It has been a host for thousands of refugees and refugees of different nationalities. It has been a major player in the humanitarian crisis within the MENA region. North African immigrants willing to cross to Europe used Egypt as a transit point via the Mediterranean. In July 2022, migration stock in Egypt was about 8.7% of the total population. About 80% of this population is originally from Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Most immigrant workers in Egypt work in the informal/private sector and have no work contracts (IOM, 2022).

Most immigrants and refugees access public services such as education and health. They are also supported with residency, multi-sectoral services, and counseling on civil status. Given the rising poverty, unemployment, cost of living, and recent economic reforms in Egypt, refugees and asylum seekers share similar socio-economic situations, adding to them the administrative and legal barriers.

Formation of public attitudes toward immigration

Two theoretical frameworks define how attitudes toward immigration are formed: the Intergroup Contact Theory (ICT) and the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT). The ICT explains positive attitudes, whereas ITT explains the formation of negative attitudes. The ICT argues

that when people interact socially with those outside their group, they learn about their problems and become more tolerant (Côté and Erickson, 2009; Doebler, 2014). A higher level of social interaction facilitates the assimilation process, which might promote positive attitudes toward immigration (Doebler, 2014). Callens *et al.* (2015) found that the more personal networks are established with immigrants as friends, the more positive attitudes become toward them. Similarly, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) and Verkuyten *et al.* (2010) found that attitudes toward outgroups were positively affected by a positive contact experience with these outgroups.

The intergroup contact hypothesis was first formulated by Allport (1954), who argued that for attitudes to change based on interactions, some social conditions must be present. Members of diverse groups should have equal status, have common goals, and be cooperative. Also, if such interactions are authorized by institutional support (i.e. costume, the law), and lead to the pursuit of a common interest for both groups, the effects of the contact can be greater (Berg, 2020). However, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that negative attitudes are reduced even under superficial contact, but to a lesser degree. Also, contact between individuals and groups of different status or geographical areas reduces negative attitudes and increases intergroup friendship (Berg, 2020).

The ITT builds on the idea that in host countries, migrants and newcomers can be considered deviant groups who are culturally alien to the host country's sociocultural context. They might hold unfamiliar social practices and norms and might have distinct appearances or dress (Oyamot *et al.*, 2012). The way original inhabitants feel threatened by immigration can result from a "realistic threat" or a "symbolic threat." People's fears linked to security and economic concerns describe a realistic threat felt by the dominant racial/ethnic group through competition over resources and power. Immigration increases competition for business or jobs, threatening citizens' social status and economic well-being (Côté and Erickson, 2009).

A symbolic threat is related to the ingroup's cultural values, identities, religion, and ideologies (Morgül and Savaşkan, 2021). When migrants are perceived as a competing group to original citizens, a negative attitude toward them can result from economic competition (Côté and Erickson, 2009). Immigrants are perceived as harming several societal, cultural, and economic factors, including resources, crime, living conditions, social values, and social welfare (Davidov and Semyonov, 2017).

Drivers of attitudes toward immigration

Several studies attempted to examine how attitudes toward immigration are affected by either individual-level characteristics or contextual variables. The first line of research argues that attitudes and perceptions of individual people rather than the country's macroeconomic conditions affect attitudes toward immigration (Sides and Citrin, 2007). Individual drivers include personal attributes (such as gender, education, or age), internal factors (values and psychology), immediate surroundings (such as the number of immigrants in the neighborhood), and interpersonal experiences. The second line of research argues that attitudes toward immigration are shaped according to contextual drivers such as civil society campaigns and government policy (Norris and Inglehart, 2009; Davidov and Semyonov, 2017), unemployment rate, GDP per capita (Brenner and Fertig, 2006), economic insecurity, and income distribution (Morgül and Savaşkan, 2021).

Personal values such as closedness to one's nation and belongingness to the collective shape how individuals view outside groups such as immigrants. According to research by Zarate and Shaw (2010), those who strongly identify with a group identity, such as a nationalist identity, are more likely to hold prejudices toward distinct groups. Vecchione *et al.* (2012) argued that individuals adopting universalistic values are more likely to have positive

attitudes toward immigrants. In their study, Altinbaşak-Farina and Güleryüz-Türkel (2017) used a variable capturing the idea of people's unity with nature and their world. They used a value dimension called "peace with the world" that captures caring for the world and unity with nature. Similarly, Pinillos-Franco and Kawachi (2018) measured individuals' attachment to their community using two questions on the degree of emotional attachment they felt toward (1) country and (2) Europe.

The degree of national pride is a major influencing factor shaping attitudes toward outgroups. The more people feel attached to their national pride can lead to less favorable attitudes toward immigrants, since it creates a sense of national superiority and nationalism (Davidov and Semyonov, 2017; Mayda, 2006; Bell *et al.*, 2021).

Additionally, the degree of general trust prevalent in society can influence attitudes people hold toward immigrants. Social trust is the trust that reflects a general faith in humankind, and it is the type of trust that contributes to tolerant attitudes toward outgroups such as immigrants (Uslaner, 2002). Previous research found that in countries with high levels of social trust, people exhibit fewer hostile attitudes toward immigrants (Mitchell, 2021). When citizens generally have an abstract trust, they are less likely to perceive outgroups such as immigrants as a threat.

Similarly, economic attitudes toward economic insecurity, income distribution, and economic inequality significantly shape public perceptions of migrants (Morgül and Savaşkan, 2021). Esses *et al.* (2001) argue that individuals hold more negative attitudes toward immigrants when they are against accessing resources by immigrants.

A significant strain of literature focuses on religiosity's role in shaping attitudes toward immigration. Religion influences how people shape their attitudes, whether positive or negative (Doebler, 2014). Ben-Nun Bloom *et al.* (2015) found that the religious identity of individuals shapes attitudes toward social groups. However, previous research shows mixed results on the effect of religiosity on attitudes toward immigration (Auguste, 2019; Davidov and Meuleman, 2012). For example, Shirokanova (2015) and Norenzayan (2014) associate higher religiosity with positive outcomes such as solidarity and attitudes toward outgroups. Other researchers, however, associated higher religiosity with increasing social intolerance and skepticism toward outgroups (Hood *et al.*, 2009).

In terms of gender differences, prior literature shows mixed empirical findings. While several studies find that women hold fewer hostile attitudes toward immigrants than men (Semyonov *et al.*, 2006; Côté and Erickson, 2009), others reported no to insignificant effects of gender differences on attitudes toward immigration (Davidov and Meuleman, 2012). The existing literature shows that skepticism toward migrants increases with age (Schahbasi *et al.*, 2021; Davidov and Semyonov, 2017; Semyonov *et al.*, 2006; Scheepers *et al.*, 2002; Davidov and Meuleman, 2012).

The existing literature shows that higher education is associated with less negative attitudes toward immigrants (Schahbasi *et al.*, 2021; Semyonov *et al.*, 2006; Davidov and Meuleman, 2012; Mayda, 2006). Herreros and Criadio (2009) found that people with high education levels are less likely to report immigration to harm the economy. This relation between education and anti-immigration attitudes can be explained in two ways. First, immigrants are more likely to work in low-skilled manual jobs, which means they would be complementary rather than a substitute for highly educated workers. Second, educational institutions tend to foster acceptance of diverse cultural values (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010).

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this research, we focus on the individual-level determinants of attitudes toward immigration, rather than examining contextual variables. Specifically, we

investigate how personal values and socio-demographic characteristics shape these attitudes. Our analysis utilizes data from the WVS (2017–2022). The full data set surveys more than 80,000 respondents in 64 countries. In this study, we limit our analysis to only nine MENA countries available in the dataset, resulting in a total sample of 12,321 respondents.

Dependent variable

Following the convention in the literature (Semyonov *et al.*, 2006; Czaika and Di Lillo, 2018), we construct a measure of anti-immigrant attitudes using four relevant items from the WVS (2017–2022). These items probe respondents' perceptions of immigration's impact on (1) raising the crime rate, (2) increasing unemployment, (3) causing social conflict, and (4) increasing the risk of terrorism. Participants expressed their opinions on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Disagree to 3 = Agree. After rescaling the responses to a 0–1 range, we created an index representing anti-immigration attitudes by averaging scores across the four questions (Mean = 0.67, SD = 0.32). Higher scores reflect higher skepticism toward immigration. The index shows strong internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha = 0 0.842).

Independent variables

Given the categorical nature of the original WVS data, we use the *Min-Max* normalization method to allow for equal weighting during analysis. This transformation rescales the data onto a 0–1 scale to overcome the problem of non-normal data distribution and allow for proper statistical analysis, particularly the construction of summated indices. We conducted a factor analysis through the principal component analysis (PCA) as a data reduction method due to the considerable number of WVS questions, as shown in Table 1.

By classifying items that cluster together, a factor analysis allows scholars to ensure those items measure the same concept. Factor scores are computed as summated indexes rather than utilizing the factor scores. Summated indices combine multiple variables measuring a specific construct into a single variable to improve the overall reliability of the measure (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Table 1 presents the WVS items and their corresponding loadings.

Dimensions	Indicators	Loadings
Belongingness values	Feel close to your district or region	0.870
	Feel close to your village, town, or city	0.847
	Feel close to your country	0.770
	Cronbach's Alpha	*0.823*
World values	Feel close to the world	0.888
	Feel close to your continent	0.826
	Cronbach's Alpha	*0.816*
Economic values	Competition is good or harmful	0.800
	Governments vs individuals responsibility	0.731
	Success: hard work vs luck	0.678
	Cronbach's Alpha	*0.588*
Attitudes toward immigration	Increases the crime rate	0.817
	Increases the risks of terrorism	0.809
	Leads to social conflict	0.790
	Increases unemployment	0.782
	Cronbach's Alpha	*0.819*

Note(s): Loadings are based on factor analysis conducted on original WVS data normalized using the Min-Max Method. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis; Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization. Such indices are constructed as summated scales

Source(s): Table created by the authors

Table 1. Indices were constructed using WVS indicators and corresponding loadings on factor analysis

Based on the factor analysis results in Table 1, we combine three WVS items loaded into a single factor to create a three-item summated index (Mean = 0.37, SD = 0.24), capturing citizens "economic attitudes in the MENA region". These three WVS items ask respondents about their views on (1) government versus individual responsibility, (2) whether competition is good or harmful, and (3) whether, eventually, hard work usually leads to a better life or if success is more a matter of connections and luck.

Factor analysis shows three WVS items capturing the degree to which respondents feel close to their (1) district and region, (2) village, town, or city, and (3) country. We combine these three items to create a summated index of "belongingness values" that captures the sense of belonging and connection that individuals feel to their local environment, encompassing their village, city, and country levels (Mean = 0.87, SD = 0.19). Similarly, we use two WVS items to create an index of "world attitudes" (Mean = 0.64, SD = 0.32). This index measures individuals' perspectives on the broader world and captures respondent' feelings of closeness to (1) the world and (2) their continent. We expect that individuals with a stronger sense of belonging to the external world are less likely to exhibit negative attitudes toward immigrants.

Alongside summated indices based on the factor analysis, we incorporate individual WVS questions to reflect specific concepts. For example, to capture the concept of national pride, we use a single WVS item asking respondents, (1) "*How proud are you to be of this country?*" (Mean = 0.65, SD = 0.16). Also, we measure the "perception of immigrants as an economic threat" by a single WVS question asking respondents, "*When jobs are scarce, employers should prioritize people of this country over immigrants.*" (Mean = 4.3, SD = 0.97).

Another WVS item is used to assess how citizens in MENA countries evaluate "immigrants' perceived impact on development," we use a single WVS item asking "*We would like to know your opinion about the people from other countries who come to live in your country-the immigrants. How would you evaluate the impact of these people on the development of your country.*"(Mean = 2.34, SD = 1.05).

Finally, we include a measure of general societal trust level derived from a single WVS item: "*Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people.*" Respondents The corresponding answer, "most people can be trusted," reveals general societal trust. We recode the item into a dichotomous scale: "1 = most people can be trusted; 0 = need to be very careful".

Religiosity is measured using two WVS items: self-religiosity and intensity of belief. Self-religiosity is measured by a single WVS item asking respondents how they self-define themselves as religious, non-religious, or atheist. Intensity of belief is measured through a WVS item asking respondents about the importance of religion in their lives.

We use WVS questions that reflect the socio-economic profiles of respondents as main covariates in the analysis, including gender, age, education, and subjective social class. Gender takes the value one if male or zero if female. Education is encoded as 1 = lower education, 2 = middle level, and 3 = higher education; age is encoded as 1 = 16–29 years, 2 = 30–49 years, and 3 = 50 and more. Subjective social class equals one if low social class, two if medium level, and three if high social class; self-defined religiosity has three categories: 1 if answered as an atheist, two if non-religious, and three if religious.

Analysis

Following prior literature, some individual-level characteristics are included as controls. These include gender, education, social class, age, and self-religiosity. We run a linear regression analysis that includes indicators of personal values, namely national pride, world values, belongingness values, economic values, and intensity of belief. Independent variables' Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) are calculated to check for multicollinearity. The

independent variables have acceptable VIFs, all below the accepted threshold of 10 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Our model has a weak explanatory power, as shown by the low coefficient of determination R^2. However, low values of R^2 are common in social sciences, mainly when studies include individual-level data analysis (Langbein and Felbinger, 2006). Table 2 reports the linear model results predicting skeptical attitudes based on personal values.

Results and discussion

Results from the regression analysis are shown in Table 2.

Sociodemographic variables

We find no statistically significant association between gender and anti-immigration attitudes in the Middle East. This finding aligns with the findings of Davidov and Meuleman (2012), who found no differences between females and males in their attitudes toward European immigration. However, Semyonov *et al.* (2006) found that women were less likely to show negative attitudes toward foreigners. Also, Côté and Erickson (2009) and Schahbasi *et al.* (2021) argue that women can be more tolerant than men.

From the perspective of ICT, it is possible that levels of interactions between citizens and immigrants do not differ significantly for all genders in MENA. However, further examination is needed to understand these results, since it is expected that men have more opportunities for interactions with immigrants based on workplace or social incidents, given the sociocultural context of MENA countries. Moving to the ITT, economic concerns were shown to be the highest threat perceived by MENA citizens. Such negative perceptions might be a general concern shared by households and employees, regardless of their gender.

	b	*(SE)*	*z*-value	CI (95%)	
Gender *(ref. female)*	0.007	(0.013)	−0.56	−0.034	0.019
Age *(ref. 16–29 years)*					
30–49	0.045	(0.016)	2.75	0.013	0.078
50 and older	0.113	(0.018)*	5.98	0.076	0.150
Education *(ref. low)*					
Middle	0.082*	(0.016)*	5.02	0.050	0.114
Higher	0.047	(0.017)	2.68	0.012	0.082
Social class *(ref. low class)*					
Middle	−0.038	(0.014)	−2.71	−0.066	−0.010
High	−0.309*	(0.069)*	−3.75	−0.389	−0.122
Religiosity *(ref. atheists)*					
Non-religious	0.340*	(0.063)*	5.32	0.214	0.465
Religious	0.328*	(0.063)*	5.19	0.204	0.453
Economic values	−0.100	(0.027)*	−3.66	−0.153	−0.046
Belongingness values	0.051*	(0.015)*	3.45	0.022	0.081
World values	−0.024*	(0.007)*	−3.20	−0.039	−0.009
National pride	0.056*	(0.011)*	4.83	0.033	0.078
Belief intensity	0.033	(0.013)	2.55	0.007	0.059
Social trust	−0.117*	(0.020)*	−5.63	−0.158	−0.076
Economic perception	−0.243	(0.006)*	−36.13	−0.256	−0.230
Job threat	0.0241*	(0.007)*	3.41	0.010	0.038
Constant	1.05	(0.090)*	11.70	0.879	1.23
F (17, 10,529) = 115.76					
R-squared = 0.1530					

Note(s): N = 10,547, robust standard errors are reported to account for heteroscedasticity, *$p < 0.05$

Source(s): Table created by the authors

Table 2. Linear regression of attitudes toward immigrants in MENA countries

Age turns out to have a positive effect on anti-immigration attitudes. Compared to the reference group (16–29 years), older people hold higher negative attitudes toward immigrants than younger reference groups. These findings are consistent with previous findings (Schahbasi *et al.*, 2021; Davidov and Semyonov, 2017; Semyonov *et al.*, 2006). Such findings provide interesting insights. Compared to the older people who have already established their career and retirement plans, younger people seem to worry less about how immigration would pose a realistic threat affecting their access to jobs or opportunities. Other factors contributing to this finding and worthy of further investigation can be social media and internet access. In a globalized world, younger people interact more with immigrants and refugees, even virtually. This, in turn, can reduce anti-immigration attitudes among younger people.

A negative relationship exists between subjective social class and anti-immigration attitudes. Compared to those from low subjective social classes, people from middle and higher subjective social classes display lower levels of hostility toward immigrants. Earlier studies found supporting results that financially vulnerable individuals who are unemployed, have low incomes, or have limited educational opportunities are more likely to hold anti-immigration attitudes (Scheepers *et al.*, 2002; Davidov and Meuleman, 2012). Immigration is more of a realistic threat to vulnerable people and those from lower social classes, who might fear losing their already limited economic security. Furthermore, people from higher social classes are less likely to perceive immigrants as a threat in terms of competition for their jobs or social position.

Previous research finds that higher education is associated with less negative attitudes toward migrants (Schahbasi *et al.*, 2021; Semyonov *et al.*, 2006; Davidov and Meuleman, 2012). Surprisingly, we find that higher education is associated with more negativity toward immigrants. This phenomenon can be attributed to the nature of the countries examined in this study, in which immigration is more likely perceived as a threat, increasing unemployment opportunities and social conflict, as shown by WVS data. People with higher education levels in MENA countries might see immigrants as competitors threatening their job security or social position. For example, some Turkish citizens reject low-salary jobs, which highly skilled immigrants can accept.

Personal values

The results show a positive relationship between the degree of national pride and anti-immigration attitudes. When people have a stronger sense of national pride, they become more reluctant toward outsiders, such as immigrants. National pride can be linked to maintaining group identity, which means prioritizing their ingroup. This can reduce group interactions with immigrants, which increases anti-immigration attitudes. From a cultural lens, a powerful sense of national pride can perceive immigration as a more symbolic threat to the national and cultural identity of the host country, leading to higher negativity toward immigrants.

The explanatory variables we utilized to capture citizens' "perceptions of economic issues" such as the government's intervention in the economy, and whether competition was harmful or beneficial provide insightful findings. The regression results show that citizens' economic perceptions are negatively related to the anti-immigration attitudes they exhibit. As people hold onto world-favoring, integrated economy, and free economic perspectives, anti-immigration attitudes become less prevalent, as they are less likely to perceive immigrants as a threat to their economic well-being. Furthermore, individuals holding more positive economic perceptions might interact more with immigrants through work or social organizations. Such group interactions can reduce negative attitudes they may hold toward immigrants.

Concerning perceptions on immigration, we observe a negative relationship between development perceptions of immigrants and anti-immigrant attitudes. When immigrants are perceived to have a good impact on a country's development (e.g. investments), original inhabitants are less likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes. On the other hand, when inhabitants perceive immigrants as an economic threat to jobs and well-being, their skepticism will rise. These findings follow the economic threat theory that emphasizes that anti-immigrant attitudes increase when individuals feel their job security is threatened by immigrants (Farashah and Blomquist, 2020). Furthermore, a positive perception of immigration in the domestic economy will foster intergroup interaction between citizens and immigrants. They can cooperate for common goals and shared visions for the country's future. This, in turn, will reduce anti-immigration attitudes.

While attitudes of belonging show a positive relationship, attitudes toward the world are negatively related to anti-immigration attitudes. People with a powerful sense of ingroup identification are more skeptical toward immigrants, whom they perceive as an outgroup threatening their ingroup identity. Furthermore, this will reduce intergroup interactions, which will increase anti-immigrant attitudes.

In comparison, people more outward-oriented to their world will exhibit less negativity toward immigrants. People who consider themselves a part of the outside world, such as their continent, are more sympathetic and open to diversity. They are less likely to perceive immigrants as an economic or cultural threat. Therefore, they might have more intergroup interactions with immigrants.

Religiosity-related variables

The regression results show that both religiosity variables have a positive association with anti-immigrant attitudes. A higher level of religiosity is associated with a higher level of negativity toward immigration. Also, the degree of importance people place on religion is associated with higher negativity toward immigrants. Related results were found by Norenzayan (2014), who argued that individuals who are more devoted to religion focus their kindness and support on their groups. In a similar argument, Hood *et al.* (2009) argued that an individual's level of intolerance increases with their level of religiosity. It can be that more religious people have fewer interactions with those outside their close groups or religious communities, which leads to more negativity toward immigrants.

However, Islam and Christianity emphasize tolerance as a core teaching (Doebler, 2014). This means that general conclusions cannot be made about this negative relationship between religiosity and intolerance without considering other contextual and sociodemographic variables.

Conclusion

This article highlights the anti-migrant sentiment of citizens in nine different MENA countries, using individual data from WVS Wave 7. It was an exploratory study for closer inspection of how immigration and immigrants are perceived by the public in MENA countries; the public that resides in a region with similar cultural, religious, and historical heritage.

Given the similar cultural, historical, and religious heritage MENA countries share, we expected national pride not to be a primary concern, such as is the case in European attitudes toward immigrants who can be viewed as outgroups alien to European culture. However, results show a significant effect of national pride on anti-immigrant attitudes in MENA countries, something that has also been found in past research but needs further attention in future research. Put differently, it is worth examining how citizens in MENA countries

evaluate the concept of national pride and perceive immigrants' role as a threat to that concept.

Our study shows that religiosity positively correlates with anti-immigration attitudes. We argue that people who are more religiously devoted might have more negative attitudes if religiosity makes them isolated or reduces their social interactions. It can be that religious people would have less interaction with immigrants, and as a result, they have more negative attitudes. This means we cannot draw general conclusions about this relationship between religiosity and anti-immigration attitudes without considering other contextual and sociodemographic variables.

Implications

The findings of this study may present a starting point for further research that would examine the issue of public opinion on immigration and immigrants in the MENA region. Despite insights that surveys such as the WVS provide, there is a need for a more in-depth multi-level approach considering the cultural, political, and economic makeup of the region.

Within the bounds of our paper, we argue that unfavorable attitudes toward immigration in the MENA region are more likely based on "realistic economic" concerns. Immigrants are more likely to be considered as an economic threat by citizens in the host MENA country. Such a conclusion is based on regression results showing that individuals with high levels of education and those from lower subjective social classes have higher levels of negativity toward immigrants.

We discussed regression results in detail in terms of both ICT and ITT. However, future research should dive deeper into the "ITT and ICT theories and how they affect attitudes toward immigrants under different conditions, considering factors such as gender, education, and economic status, in addition to country-level factors.

Also, not all MENA countries have the same experience with immigration and immigrants. For example, Libya is a transit point for migrants willing to reach Europe. Also, we saw how active civil organizations in Morocco contributed to changes in immigration policy in favor of immigrants and refugees. This implies there might be more intergroup interaction between citizens and immigrants, making it compelling to approach the issue of anti-immigrant attitudes from a distinct perspective. For example, how immigrants themselves perceive their interaction experience.

Furthermore, we have to consider that religiosity has several dimensions, which will shape attitudes toward immigration. For example, Stouffer (1955) found a negative relationship between religious commitment and tolerance in the US and that people who attended religious services more frequently were more intolerant compared to those who never or rarely attended religious services. Putnam and Campbell (2010), however, discovered that non-religious individuals' prosocial attitudes were positively influenced by church attendance.

Other factors that we expect to strongly affect public discourse on immigrants include social media platforms (e.g. Twitter). The way immigrants are framed in media plays a critical role in whether citizens accept or reject immigrants. Furthermore, applying frameworks such as "intergroup interaction theory" can provide valuable insights into how diverse types of interactions shape such attitudes and under which conditions. Also, research can include factors such as voluntary membership in organizations (e.g. charity, religious, mutual-help groups), which affect how individuals perceive outgroups. For example, it was seen how civil society groups and activists in Morocco had a key role in supporting refugees and immigrants.

Limitations

While the WVS Wave 7 provides a good foundation for analyzing attitudes toward immigration in the MENA region, data limitations on attitudes toward immigration and their

evolution in the MENA prevent analyzing trends in immigration-related attitudes over time. Also, the WVS questions do not explicitly distinguish between immigrants and refugees. People might misinterpret the word "immigrant" or "immigration," particularly if they are unfamiliar with the way immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers differ. Finally, since attitudes toward immigrants reflect individual opinions, future research should consider employing qualitative fieldwork (e.g. focus groups, interviews) alongside quantitative methods. Such methodological triangulation can unleash more insights into the nature of factors shaping attitudes toward immigrants. Also, multi-level analyses considering individual and country-level variables will unleash more insights into cross-country differences in attitudes toward immigration. When more data becomes available, future studies can include more countries in comparative studies, with sociocultural, historical, and institutional factors.

Notes

1. There is no difference between attitudes toward immigration and immigrant (Arikan and Ben-Nun Bloom, 2012).
2. Immigrants are individuals leaving their countries to settle in another, and they move by choice. On the other hand, refugees are individuals who have left their home country by force because of war or civic violence, and they seek international protection in the host countries.
3. In the early 1980s, the European Values Systems Study group started a study program of values via public opinion surveys. The study was renamed as the World Values Survey.
4. Each nation surveyed is divided into zones. Two-stage sampling is used to select a random respondent within each zone. Proportionate stratification to select households at random is included in the first stage. In the next phase, a single adult (18 years or older) is chosen randomly.

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