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Published online: 05 Feb 2020.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Insecurity and political values in the Arab world

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ABSTRACT
Within a few years of the historic Arab uprisings of 2011, popular mobilization dissipated amidst instability in many Arab countries. We trace the relationship between shifting macro-political conditions and individual-level political values in the Middle East, demonstrating that a preference for democracy and political trust are not fixed cultural features of populations but rather can shift rapidly in the face of perceived insecurity. Our empirical analyses employ longitudinal data from the Arab Barometer covering 13 countries and data from the 2015 World Values Survey, which includes both Arab and non-Arab countries in order to benchmark regional developments against global patterns. Our findings contribute to the growing body of research on the political effects of insecurity and oppose culturalist depictions of fixed political attitudes among Muslims in narrow perspectives on the relationship between Islam and democracy.

Introduction

In many countries of the Middle East, the uprisings of 2011 marked an extraordinary mass movement that united broad parts of the population in a push to protest declining socioeconomic conditions and replace autocratic regimes with more open political systems.[1] Within a few years, however, the popular drive dissipated amidst the chaos that ensued in some countries. In this article, we trace the relationship between shifting macro-political conditions and fluctuations in individual-level political values in the Middle East, as reflected in public opinion data. We demonstrate that democratic values can shift rapidly depending on macro-political conditions. This highlights the political effects of insecurity and opposes depictions of relatively fixed political attitudes among Muslims in narrow perspectives on the relationship between Islam and democracy.[2]

Scholars increasingly argue that liberal values are suppressed as perceptions of insecurity rise.[3] The evolution of perceptions of economic and personal insecurity in public opinion, however, has received little attention in research on the Middle East. In the

wake of the Arab uprisings, when instability spiked in Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries, how have perceptions of insecurity evolved and what, if any, is their effect on political values? Has the demand for stability and exhaustion with protest politics fostered openness to autocratic rule?

Based on public opinion data from Arab countries in the past decade, we show that perceptions of economic security reached a high point in 2011 in most countries in the region after which reported levels of insecurity rose sharply. Focusing on two core political values, preference for democracy and political trust, our results indicate that, on average, both were sensitive to perceptions of insecurity: When insecurity levels were relatively low prior to the 2011 uprisings, democratic aspirations rose; When economic and security conditions subsequently deteriorated, the appeal of democracy weakened.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we review recent literature on the influence of insecurity on individual political preferences and derive a set of hypotheses about trends in public opinion in the Arab world. In section three, we define the main concepts employed in the article. In section four, we measure perceptions of security threats in the Arab region immediately prior to and after the 2011 Arab uprisings and benchmark them against global patterns. Section five presents our core empirical analyses, which assess how over-time fluctuations in perceived security threats relate to key political values. The final section concludes with a discussion of the broader implications of these findings.

Insecurity and political values

The link between insecurity and political values, especially scepticism about democracy, has a long genesis but has been making a recent comeback. In 1941, Eric Fromm argued, "Faced with an uncertain world and lack of direction, people will escape from freedom."[4] The current global wave of populisms has led to a resurgence in scholarly interest in the political effects of insecurity. In particular, populism has been related to the rise in economic and political insecurity, brought about by the failure of traditional parties on the left and on the right to deliver on their promises, the challenges of globalization and of technological change, and rising anxieties about identity in the face of fears of mass migration.[5] In some respects, this association between insecurity and illiberal politics is the obverse of a core finding of modernization theory, notably that increased social preferences for democracy are related to rising income.[6]

Some emphasize that liberal values are suppressed as a sense of insecurity rises.[7] A threatened public tends to favour authoritarianism, repression, intolerance, and exclusionist attitudes towards minorities and different political ideologies. At the same time, public opinion exhibits less support for civil liberties and a greater willingness to support war and militarization.[8] Research on the rise of extremism has also demonstrated that particular subgroups of people who feel vulnerable turn to more extremist positions in the face of perceived threats.[9]

Insecurity captures not only concerns about poor outcomes today but also fears about poor outcomes in the future, leading to reduced confidence in one's ability to keep up with current standards of living, anxiety about the physical security of oneself and one's family, and worries that one's country may fall into violence and war.[10] Thus, it is not only or even primarily the poorer members of society who perceive

their future economic security to be at risk, but also the more financially well-off elements who fear that their jobs will be lost due to automation, that their savings will shrink during financial crises, or that their children will receive poor educations due to strained public finances.

While democratization is a complex phenomenon, and arises most proximately from elite interactions, public opinion can still play an important role in determining the relative power of different elite factions and the type of transition that can be negotiated.[11] What then is the linkage between insecurity and individual-level preference for democracy, our first main outcome of interest? Recent studies underscore that both external and internal perceived threats can affect public opinion towards democracy.[12]

How might insecurity affect political trust, our second outcome of interest? Closely related to concepts such as trust in government and confidence in political institutions, political trust is a critical foundation for regime legitimacy and shapes the state's ability to mediate between the demands of competing groups within society. A population that trusts its government shows less cynicism towards politics, while increased legitimacy can improve the efficiency of governance. At the same time, a secular decline in political trust can also reflect increased political sophistication among the general public, and a democratic political culture is characterized by a vigilant rather than unquestioning faith in political authority.[13] How then does it arise? Political trust has been found to emanate from a positive evaluation of the performance of public institutions,[14] and is generally not linked to macroeconomic performance after accounting for corruption.[15] Thus, political trust may arise from perceptions rather than objective realities and may be shaped in part by individual- or at least group-level experiences.

Research on political values in the Middle East highlights a number of related outcomes. Some focus on how the demand for democracy is associated with religious values,[16] finding high average levels of support for democracy in the Middle East, including among those who express sympathy for political Islam.[17] At the same time, governments in the region use fear-mongering to their advantage, cueing threats of takeover by extremist Islamist groups to temper the demand for political liberalization.[18] Moving away from religion, Benstead's "consequence-based" theory holds that the belief that democracy will have negative consequences for stability and economic prospects is the most important predictor of weak support for this type of political system.[19]

Recent studies examine how political values shifted in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Based on analyses of multiple waves of the Arab Barometer, Robbins finds little change in support for democracy, except in Tunisia: While Tunisians have become more concerned about the negative effects of democracy, Egyptians largely attribute poor political outcomes to the Muslim Brotherhood rather than democracy.[20] Spierings shows that political trust declined in the aftermath of mass mobilization in countries that experienced democratic reform or regime change.[21] Similarly, Mazaheri and Monroe contend that lower-middle class entrepreneurs supported mobilization against incumbent authoritarian regimes in 2011 but opposed it once protracted instability started to hurt their businesses.[22]

Existing research on insecurity, as well as the growing body of public opinion research on the Arab region, raise critical questions about the political effects of insecurity: In the face of insecurity, how do political values evolve over time? What is the

relationship between changing perceptions of insecurity and shifting support for preference for democracy and political trust? Do individual perceptions or country-level trends matter more, in affecting political values?

Existing research gives rise to two core hypotheses that we explore in this article. First, we expect that rising insecurity will make people less trustful of democratic systems, and more demanding of strong man rule. Hence, *we expect that the preference for democracy will decline with rising insecurity (H1)*. At the same time, *we propose that rising insecurity is associated with reduced political trust (H2)*, particularly because the role of government in ensuring security has been at the heart of social contracts across the Middle East.[23] Next, we describe the key concepts and measures as well as the data employed in our empirical analyses.

Concepts, measures, and data

In this section, we first focus on core political values, our outcomes of interest, and next on distinct dimensions of insecurity, our primary independent variables. In our empirical analyses, we mainly use indicators from the Arab Barometer, with four waves covering 13 countries over the period 2007–2018. We also use data from the World Values Survey of 2015, which include 12 Arab countries and 55 other countries around the world. While the former is useful for studying shifting public opinion in the Arab region over time, the second is valuable for benchmarking developments in the region against global patterns.[24] (See Table A1 in the online appendix for a description of available data from both survey projects.)

Political values: preference for democracy and political trust

How should we conceptualize and measure our core outcomes of interest – preference for democracy and political trust? Following Berger and Ciftici,[25] we distinguish between preference for democracy as a regime type and evaluations of democratic performance. Towards this end, we first use Arab Barometer data to construct a variable tapping into "preference for democracy" based on responses to the question: "To what extent do you think democracy is appropriate for your country?"[26] To evaluate relative preferences vis-à-vis performance, we use two alternative measures. Following Inglehart and Norris,[27] the first subtracts the level of support for "strong authority" from the main variable described above. The second is an index of average responses to three statements, including: "Under a democratic system, the country's economic performance is weak"; "Democratic regimes are indecisive and full of problems"; and "Democratic systems are not effective at maintaining order and stability."[28] (The online appendix describes the statements, construction and coding of these different versions of the first dependent variable.)

Turning to the conceptualization and measurement of political trust, most social science research employs a battery of questions asking about respondent levels of trust in a variety of political institutions and offices at the national and subnational levels, including from the executive, legislative, and judicial branches as well as law enforcement. In our analyses, we measure political trust with the following question: "How much trust do you have in government?" Robustness checks use different measures of political trust in other state institutions (such as the parliament, police, and army), regressed on the predictors separately.

In our analyses, we normalize both indicators of these outcomes to range from 0 to 1, with a value of 1 representing the highest levels of preference for democracy and greater political trust.

Finally, we run similar analyses using World Values Survey data to make international comparisons. To measure preference for democracy, we use a question that asks respondents to rank the values that are connected to democratic and to authoritarian environments. (For more detail, see the online appendix). For trust in government, the questions in the World Values Survey and Arab Barometer are identical.

Insecurity

What is "insecurity" and how can we measure perceptions of security threats? Policy and academic discourse about threats encompasses several dimensions of security threats, notably physical threats to individuals (i.e. personal security), threats to macroeconomic performance and general welfare (i.e. economic security), and threats to the nation (i.e. political security).[29] Moreover, these diverse types of threats are not objective sets of conditions but rather are constructed narratives, depending in part on media framing, and are subject to manipulation by political elites.[30]

Questions from the Arab Barometer that can be tracked over time allow us to measure two dimensions of insecurity – economic and personal. For economic security, we use the following request: "Evaluate the current economic situation in your country." A question about the respondent's sense of safety – "Do you currently feel that your own personal as well as your family's safety and security are ensured or not?" – taps into the concept of personal security. Both variables are normalized to range from "0" to "1" with a value of "1" denoting "most secure."

We also use data from the World Values Survey in order to be able to measure how insecurity in the Arab region compares to levels around the world. Only Wave 6, fielded in 2015, includes questions on insecurity, but it has the advantage of covering 12 Arab countries. (Previous waves only included five Arab countries.) Several questions address the distinct types of insecurity we address in the article. For perceptions of economic security, one question asks if the respondent is "worrying about losing your job" or "giving your children an education." To assess personal security, we use a question that asks, "How secure are you in your neighbourhood?" Again, responses are normalized to range from 0 to 1, with 1 meaning most secure.

Cases

We focus in particular on the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, the countries where the Arab Spring started, Jordan and Morocco, where protests were less extensive, and two countries with high natural resource endowments, Iraq and Algeria. Collectively, these countries provide broad variation in political regime types – including both republics and monarchies – and political economy types – including both oil-poor and oil-rich economies. This breadth of cases enables us to explore the extent and limits of the applicability of our main hypotheses. In some analyses, we incorporate the full set of available country cases as robustness checks. Table 1 provides summary statistics of the Arab Barometer variables used in our analyses for both the set of six countries of focus, and the 13 countries for which data is available.

Table 1. Summary statistics.

	6 focus countries				13 countries			
	Mean (or %)	SD	Min	Max	Mean (or %)	SD	Min	Max
Preference for democracy	0.59	0.28	0.00	1.00	0.59	0.29	0.00	1.00
Political Trust	0.48	0.36	0.00	1.00	0.45	0.37	0.00	1.00
Economic Security (ES) county/time	0.39	0.11	0.17	0.58	0.37	0.14	0.10	0.80
Political Security (PS) county/time	0.62	0.13	0.32	0.90	0.58	0.13	0.26	0.90
ES individual	0.00	0.25	−0.58	0.83	0.00	0.25	−0.80	0.90
PS individual	0.00	0.26	−0.90	0.68	0.00	0.26	−0.90	0.74
PI individual	0.00	0.25	−0.60	0.75	0.00	0.25	−0.62	0.88
PI county/time	0.44	0.09	0.25	0.60	0.43	0.12	0.12	0.62
Male	0.50	–	–	–	0.50	–	–	–
Female	0.50	–	–	–	0.50	–	–	–
Age 18–29	0.36	–	–	–	0.36	–	–	–
Age 30–49	0.43	–	–	–	0.43	–	–	–
Age 50>	0.22	–	–	–	0.22	–	–	–
Edu-low	0.48	–	–	–	0.48	–	–	–
Edu-middle	0.33	–	–	–	0.33	–	–	–
Edu-high	0.19	–	–	–	0.19	–	–	–
Income (1st quartile)	0.30	–	–	–	0.30	–	–	–
Income (2nd quartile)	0.25	–	–	–	0.25	–	–	–
Income (3rd quartile)	0.24	–	–	–	0.24	–	–	–
Income (4th quartile)	0.22	–	–	–	0.22	–	–	–

Note: Means are over all countries and waves (with no weighting). The six focus countries are Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, and Iraq. The other countries are Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen.
Sources: Arab Barometer, Waves 1–4.

Insecurity in the Arab region: cross-national comparisons in global perspective

In this section, we first focus on a snapshot of insecurity within the Arab region and then situate it in global comparative perspective. Next, we highlight shifting patterns of these outcomes before, during, and after the uprisings. Figure 1(a and b) plot measures of economic and personal security for all Arab countries, and for other countries around the world, as deviations of national averages from the global mean using the most recent wave of data from the 2015 World Values Survey.

These graphs provide a good sense of the standing of citizens of Arab countries – and in the region as a whole – vis-à-vis each type of insecurity. As a group, in 2015 most Arab countries had relatively low levels of economic security, especially in comparison with levels at the outset of the uprisings in 2011 as measured by the Arab Barometer, but above average levels of personal security, compared with other countries around the world, as seen in data from the World Values Survey. These patterns are in line with the general diagnosis that the region suffers from economic stagnation,[31] but does not feature high crime rates, particularly in comparison with regions such as Latin America.[32]

These patterns yield several observations for the six countries at the core of our analysis. First, all of these countries except Jordan are around or below the global average for measures of economic security, again attesting to the dire economic situation across the region. The measure is lowest in Tunisia, followed by Egypt and Algeria. The data seem to suggest that people evaluate security performance based on a comparison with recent history, as opposed to objective measurement of absolute levels of security, as Van Erkel and Van der Meer argue.[33] With respect to personal
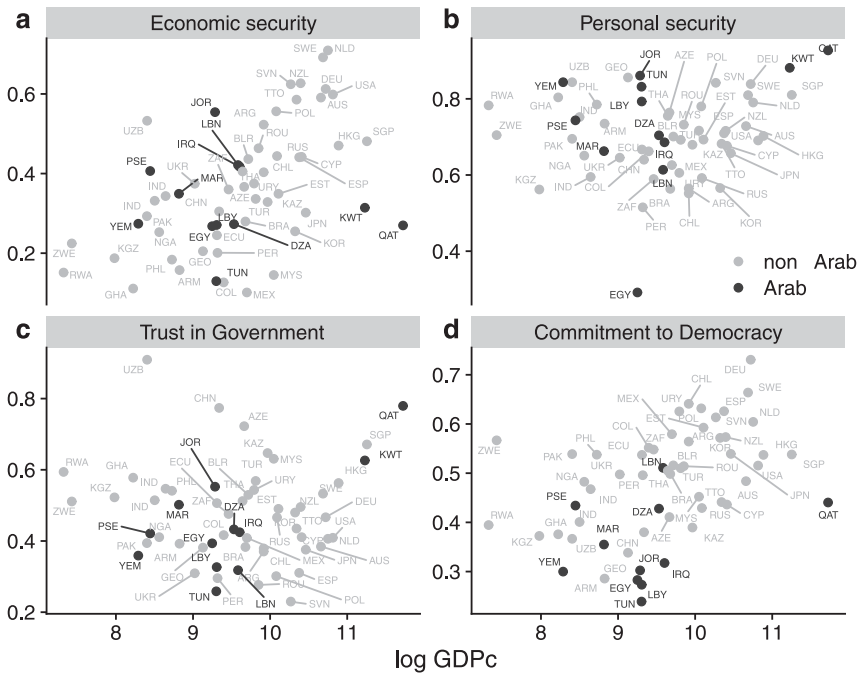
Figure 1. (a–d) Economic and personal insecurity, preference for democracy, and trust in government, in the Arab countries and around the world. Source: World Values Survey, Wave 6; for GDP per capita, World Development Indicators 2015.

security, by contrast, all countries of the region are above the global average, although Morocco and Iraq score around the global average.

The multiple waves of the Arab Barometer enable us to provide a snapshot of over-time trends in the selected countries. National measures of economic insecurity derived from the surveys reveal large cross-national variation, ranging from values of 0.1–0.6, and substantial variation over time within the same country. (See Figure 2.)

Several countries exhibit a U-shaped, cross-time pattern of economic and personal security, with high levels prior to the uprisings, a deterioration afterwards, and a partial recovery by 2015, with some variation around this pattern.

Focusing first on economic security, in the case of Egypt, perceptions of this outcome collapsed between 2011 and 2013 and sharply recovered between 2013 and 2015. Tunisia also witnessed a collapse in the first period, but with no recovery in the second period, when the decline continued. In Jordan and Morocco, there was an Egypt-like decline followed by a recovery, but the level of economic security was higher throughout, and variation over time in the two countries was smaller. Finally, in oil-rich Iraq and Algeria, shifting patterns of economic security were distinct, with economic security following the oil price cycle, rather than regional political trends mapping onto waves of mobilization during the Arab uprisings. In these countries, perceptions of economic security fluctuate with oil prices until 2014 and collapsed thereafter.[34]

Trends with respect to personal insecurity are broadly similar to those of economic security in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, while distinct patterns in the other countries
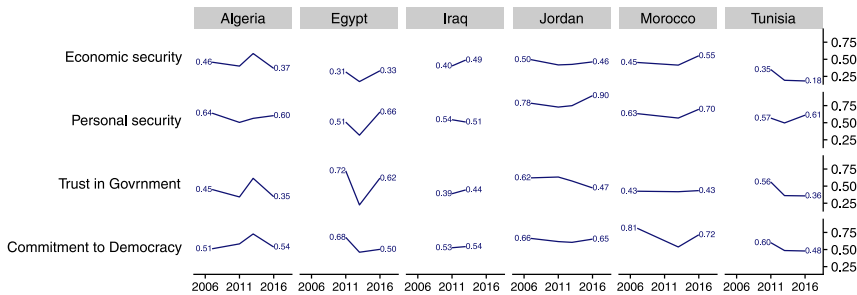
Figure 2. Cross-time values of security and political values in selected Arab countries. Source: Arab Barometer, Waves 1–4.

reflect specific political developments. In Algeria, personal security improved continuously after 2011, likely continuing a trend emanating from the end of its civil war, which lasted from 1991 to about 2002. In Iraq, personal security deteriorated between 2011 and 2013 with the rise of the Islamic state, even as economic security rose with the price of oil. In Tunisia, personal security recovered from 2013 to 2015, while economic security continued to deteriorate. Although this variation in cross-national trends may seem idiosyncratic, it allows us to explore better how political values are related to various forms of security, as discussed in the next section.

Several observations emerge from these patterns and trends. First, the countries where the Arab uprisings originated – Tunisia and Egypt – had lower levels of economic and personal security at the onset of mass mobilization in late 2010 and early 2011 in comparison with Algeria, Jordan, and Morocco – all countries where the uprisings were less extensive or popular demands stopped short of calling for regime change. Second, the rise of economic and personal insecurity was most marked in Tunisia and Egypt, and less pronounced in Morocco and Jordan, no doubt a reflection of varied levels of change and upheaval after the uprisings. Third, perceptions of economic insecurity in the oil-rich countries, Algeria and Iraq, again generally tracked oil prices rather than other regional trends related to cycles of political mobilization.[35]

The evolution of political values in the Arab region

In this section, we use Arab Barometer data to study the evolution of political values over time in the countries in the sample. After discussing changes in political trust and the preference for democracy in the Middle East, we estimate the relationship between these values and measures of insecurity. At least two waves of data are available for each of the 13 countries covered in the survey project. Among our six countries of focus, Iraq has only two points, but the other countries have three or four points each.

Before delving into national patterns, how do political values in the Arab world compare internationally? In Figure 1(c and d), we use World Values Survey data from surveys administered around 2015 to make these international comparisons. The figures reveal that national averages for preference for democracy in Arab countries tend to be low by global standards. This value is the lowest in Tunisia, and quite low in Egypt, the originating countries of the Arab uprisings, and it is also low in Jordan, which witnessed significant demonstrations. On the other hand, reported values of trust in

government are more widely dispersed, with Tunisia exhibiting among the lowest levels of this variable in the world and Qatar showing among the highest. By global standards, Jordan and Morocco have relatively high values of trust in government. Beyond the average levels of these political values in the Arab world, we are especially interested in whether these values have been relatively constant over time or if they fluctuate, especially in line with changes in perceived insecurity.

Returning to the evolution of political values over time as measured by the Arab Barometer, Figure 2 depicts cross-time changes in preference for democracy and political trust in the six Arab countries of interest. Across the region, both political values tend to fall after 2011 and to recover somewhat afterwards in the non-oil countries, as is most evident in Egypt. In Tunisia, the two political values decline in both periods, with no recovery (yet) in 2016, explaining why they are extremely low by international standards in 2015. In Jordan and Morocco, the variation is less marked across time, although trust in government declines in both periods in Jordan. (It is worth noting that Jordan has exhibited relatively high levels of this value in regional comparative perspective and this drop therefore brings it more in line with regional averages.) The pattern in Algeria and Iraq are clearly different, to some degree following trends in the global price of oil, the mainstay of these two economies.

Thus, in broad terms, the data support our two core hypotheses – notably, that increased insecurity is associated with declining preference for democracy and trust in government. The relationship is somewhat weaker when national average levels of perceived economic and personal security diverge, as is the case in Algeria and Iraq, where specific political developments – such as memories of civil war or ongoing political violence – may account for distinct trends in the different dimensions of insecurity.

To assess the association between insecurity and political values more rigorously, we develop a linear regression model by regressing political values on measures of perceived security. Two different measures capture perceived security at the national, aggregate level, by using the country/wave average, and at the individual level, expressed in terms of a deviation from the country/wave average. (The latter measure varies in an interval from −.9 to +0.9, as shown in Table 2.) With only six countries, we use country fixed effects to neutralize national-level specificities in these variables and focus instead on explaining variation through time. We estimate the following model, using the Arab Barometer data:

$$Y_{ijk} = b_0 + b_1 \text{Sec}_{ijk} + b_2 \text{Sec}_{j,k} + b_3 X_{ijk} + b_4 C_k + e_{ijk} \tag{1}$$

where Y_{ijk} is the political value of interest, estimated for individual i (about 1000 per country/wave), year j (five waves), and country k (six, and 13 Arab countries); Sec_{ijk} is the individual perception of insecurity as it deviates from the country/year average; X_{ijk} is a vector of individual-level demographic variables including age, gender, education, and income; Sec_{jk} is the national average of security perceptions in country/year; C_k refers to country fixed effects; e is the error term. We report cluster robust standard errors with a degrees-of-freedom adjustment for the small number of clusters to account for clustered sampling at the country-time unit and avoid underestimated uncertainty in the regression coefficients.[36]

Table 2 shows the results of these models with the six countries of our sample,[37] which reveal how support for each political value varies by social groups, and

Table 2. The relationship between security and political values (six countries).

	Preference for democracy		Trust in Government	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Econ Security – individual	0.150***		0.457***	
	(0.023)		(0.029)	
Econ. Security – national	0.811***		1.353***	
	(0.138)		(0.302)	
Personal Security – individual		0.150***		0.345***
		(0.025)		(0.034)
Personal Security – national		0.160		0.693
		(0.189)		(0.359)
Political Islam – national	0.087	0.284	0.588*	1.066*
	(0.275)	(0.330)	(0.289)	(0.420)
Political Islam – individual	0.003	0.003	0.046	0.052
	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.031)	(0.035)
Female (0/1)	0.021***	0.025***	0.030***	0.040***
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.011)
Middle age 30–49	0.005	0.003	0.023**	0.016
(reference = <30)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.011)
Age 50+	0.011	0.006	0.056***	0.044*
	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.017)
Mid-education	−0.015*	−0.017*	−0.031**	−0.037**
(reference = low education)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.011)	(0.012)
High-education	−0.008	−0.011	−0.049***	−0.058**
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.012)	(0.018)
Income 2nd quarter	0.007	0.015	−0.007	0.009
(reference = 1st quarter)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.014)
Income 3rd quarter	0.006	0.012	−0.007	0.013
	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Income 4th quarter	−0.006	0.008	−0.013	0.021
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.021)
Observations	15,523	15,600	16,060	16,138
R^2	0.095	0.062	0.227	0.146
Adjusted R^2	0.094	0.061	0.226	0.145
Residual Std. Error	0.256	0.260	0.311	0.327
	(df = 15505)	(df = 15582)	(df = 16042)	(df = 16120)

$*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$; $***p < 0.001$.
Notes: Results are based on linear models with fixed effects for country (not shown) with standard errors clustered at the country/year. Data from the six selected countries. For economic and personal security, individual-level variables are measured as deviations from the country mean, and at the country level in absolute terms.

provide insights into how these values change with rising insecurity – both at the national and individual levels.

The results show that the two measures of perceived insecurity – and both at the individual and country levels – are strongly correlated with political values.[38]

Several aspects of the main results are worth elaborating. First, the preference for democracy is positively associated with the national averages of economic security, as well as with the individual-level perceptions of economic security and of personal security. However, the national level of personal security plays no significant role in shaping the preference for democracy.

Second, and similarly, political trust is also positively correlated with both national and individual levels of economic security, a finding in line with the general claim that government performance is a predictor of this outcome.[39] It is also correlated with individual perceptions – but not national averages – of personal security. Of the two dimensions of security, national-level perceptions of economic security – with coefficients of

about 1.4 in Table 2 – have the largest substantive association with political trust, indicating that economic shocks at the national level may magnify the impact of perceived economic factors on political trust. This large macro-level effect is supplemented by individual-level perceptions of economic and personal security, which exhibit positive effects that are also important but smaller in magnitude and are strongly statistically significant.[40] Thus, individual political trust fluctuates at the country level, mainly according to shifts in national average levels of economic security, with smaller additional effects for individuals who report higher (or lower) levels of economic and political security than the national average.[41]

At the national level, then, the country average of economic security is positively associated with both political values, although it exhibits a larger correlation with political trust than with the preference for democracy. An important takeaway may be that the national "mood" on economic security has a great effect on political values. People seem to worry greatly about the economy – and, specifically, about the inability of government to address national economic challenges – and not merely their own personal economic concerns. For example, people may lose trust in their government when youth unemployment is high, not just because their own children risk unemployment but also because they fear the potentially destabilizing effects for the country as a whole. In such circumstances, individuals may conclude that democratic governance is less desirable, preferring strong man rule as a more certain route to economic stabilization.

A different pattern holds for personal security. In this case, individual perceptions, rather than the national average, are more consequential. Here, individual perceptions of personal security shape both preference for democracy and trust in government, whereas the proverbial national mood does not. The fact that personal security is not a major issue at the national level for most Arab countries in comparison with other global regions accords with these findings.[42]

The dynamics of political values may result from evolving attitudes towards Political Islam rather than changes in perceptions of insecurity. As some argue, low attachment to democracy in the region could be due to a fear of takeover by extremist Islamist groups. If this were the case, we should observe that declining preference for democracy and trust in government would arise in conjunction with an increase in national support for Political Islam.[43] Alternatively, at the individual level, others argue that supporters of Political Islam favour democracy,[44] and that they tend to distrust non-Islamist government,[45] although others argue for the opposite.[46]

To test the effects of attitudes towards Political Islam in our dataset, we use two questions in the Arab Barometer: "Is your country better off if religious people hold public positions in the state?" and "religious clerics should have influence over the decisions of government." (See the online appendix for the precise coding of the variable.) When used at the individual level, we centre the variable at the country-year mean.

We find no relation between all our measures of preference for democracy and attitudes towards Political Islam at the national level. However, individual-level support for Political Islam and support for democracy are weakly correlated (and, within different countries, the results exhibit weak statistical significance and changing signs). When exploring the determinants of trust in government, we find a strong positive relationship with both the individual and national averages of attitudes towards Political Islam, suggesting that Islamist sympathizers favour quietism in politics. (These results also hold at the individual country level, as shown in Tables A7 and A8 in the online appendix.) In sum, these findings counter the notion that shifting support for

Political Islam rather than perceptions of insecurity are at the basis of the observed changes in political values during the period of investigation.

The results presented thus far depict the average relationship between security and political values in the Middle East. But the experiences of countries vary. Most resemble the average pattern, whereby increased economic and personal security are associated with greater preference for democracy and political trust. Figure 3(a and b) depict the relationship between the different national averages of economic security, with preference for democracy and political trust, respectively.

Both figures indicate relatively tight positive correlations, with clear upward slopes and a somewhat steeper slope in the case of trust in government.[47]

Considering the spread of countries around the estimated slopes in Figure 3(a and b), several outliers stand out. First, while Tunisia is below the line, indicating that after the uprisings (and even in 2016) Tunisians have had very low levels of preference for democracy and political trust, these outcomes hold in the context of very low perceptions of economic security. These dynamics in Tunisia, then, are in line with our theory, with an inverse relationship between insecurity and these political values. Second, public opinion in Egypt in 2013 exhibited a below the line level of trust in government and an above the line level on preference for democracy. Thus, even though both values deteriorated in Egypt at this time, preference for democracy did not deteriorate as much as might be anticipated given the marked drop in economic security, while political trust deteriorated more than might be expected. This may reflect the deep mistrust in the Morsi government, which we now know was partly manufactured by domestic and regional opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood.[48] Third, Jordan is generally above the regression line for political trust but below it for preference for democracy, while the reverse holds in Morocco. It is as if the average Jordanian is more conservative than the modal citizen in the region, while the average Moroccan is more liberal. This finding deserves further investigation given that the two middle-income monarchies are often compared, and calls into question the claim that monarchies enjoy a legitimacy advantage over republics in the Middle East.[49]
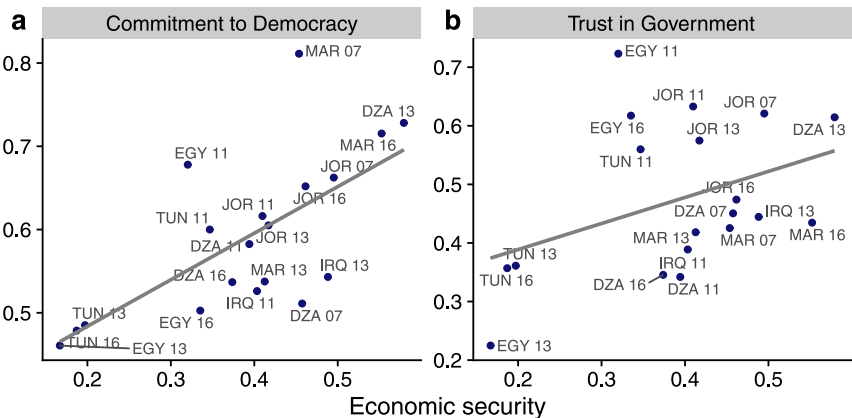

Figure 3. (a and b) Evolution of economic insecurity and political values in selected Arab countries over time.

Source: Arab Barometer, Waves 1–4. Source: Arab Barometer, Waves 1–4.

We also explore the effects of security on population subgroups disaggregated by education, age, income, and attitudes towards Political Islam. (See Table A9 in the online appendix.) At the national level, the relationship between economic security and political values is positive and significant but weaker for personal security. With some exceptions that we note in the online appendix, particularly with regard to personal security and higher age cohorts, the findings do not vary much by population subgroups. The results are also robust to alternative indicators of preference for democracy and trust in government.

Conclusion: the autocratic paradox

The findings of this article undercut the depiction of stable political values in the Arab region undergirding an autocratic bargain in which populations give up voice in exchange for economic security. Instead, we show that perceived insecurity affects the preference for democracy and trust in government in Arab countries. Since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011, this bargain has faced major challenges by a new generation of activists who are eager to demand more social and political rights. Thus far, such demands have largely generated instability, yielding a violence trap rather than a stable governance arrangement in some contexts. As we show, protracted instability – and a spike in perceived insecurity – have thus far induced mass public opinion to become less sanguine about democracy as a system of rule. Nonetheless, renewed protests in some countries indicate this is not a stable equilibrium.

Arab societies have been stuck in an autocratic paradox: Despite broad discontent, would-be reformers have been unable to build and sustain the broad social alliances that could bring about political change, and efforts to usher in political transitions are vulnerable to breakdown in the face of instability. The political incentives created by these dynamics encourage manipulation on the part of incumbent rulers. Governments are tempted to mimic democratization in order to try to satisfy reformist elements of society. The use of patronage, and related appeals to particular ethnic or tribal groups close to the political elite, are important tools, but when the opposition gains ground, some rulers may calculate that repression will be effective to stem the threat, thereby generating increased insecurity. Paradoxically, it is precisely these conditions of insecurity, brought about by the push towards political opening, that can undermine the emancipative drive.

A key question for the future is whether the relationship between insecurity and political values is a structural characteristic that will persist, or whether it will weaken over time as populations learn lessons from ongoing political developments. The main sources of discontent underlying the Arab uprisings of 2011 have not disappeared and may even have intensified, albeit under distinct political conditions. The proverbial wall of fear has been broken, social media remains an active sphere for dissent, and soldiers cannot shoot demonstrators indiscriminately, although regimes in countries experiencing full-blown civil wars are more overtly repressive, claiming that violent suppression of opponents defends against extremist elements. While the period leading up to the uprisings exhibited relatively high levels of economic and personal security in many countries, the subsequent period has been characterized by high economic instability and, in some contexts, conflict and political violence. These conditions have arguably helped to restore and reinvigorate autocracy, except in Tunisia. As the security situation slowly improves after the post-2011 chaotic years, will the proverbial

Arab street be reinvigorated? In 2019, in places where insecurity has declined, protest politics seems to have returned. Mass mobilization rocked Jordan and Morocco in 2018, and two of the region's most longstanding autocratic rulers – in Sudan and Algeria – were ousted in 2019. Yet a new pattern may be emerging, in which protracted economic insecurity is driving demands for fundamental regime change, as in Lebanon. Moreover, activists have learned to avoid demobilization when armies displace dictators, to insist on extracting more concessions from the powers-that-be, and to avoid being divided along identity lines. The future is uncertain, but far from uniformly dark.

Notes

1. Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta, *The Arab Uprisings*.
2. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*; Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*; and Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy."
3. Foa and Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation"; Inglehart and Norris, "Trump and the Populist" Burke, Kosloff, and Landau, "Death Goes to the Polls"; and Rodrik, "Populism and the Economics."
4. Cited in Feldman and Stenner, "Perceived Threat and Authoritarianism," 741.
5. One line of this debate centres on whether the rise of populism in the West correlates more with the rise of economic insecurity or with a xenophobic reaction to cultural insecurity generated by increased migration (or a perceived threat of migration). For the different poles in this debate, see, respectively, Rodrik, "Populism and the Economics"; and Inglehart and Norris, "Trump and the Populist."
6. See, for example, Boix and Stokes, "Endogenous Democratization"; Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy"; and Przeworski and Limongi, "Modernization."
7. Burke, Kosloff, and Landau, "Death Goes to the Polls"; Foa and Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation"; Inglehart and Norris, "Trump and the Populist"; and Rodrik, "Populism and the Economics."
8. Burke, Kosloff, and Landau, "Death Goes to the Polls"; Davis and Silver, "Civil Liberties vs. Security"; Inglehart and Norris, "Trump and the Populist"; Motyl, Hart, and Pyszczynski, "When Animals Attack"; Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro, *Selling Fear*; and Onraet, van Hiel, and Cornelis, "Threat and Right-Wing Attitudes."
9. Canetti-Nisim et al., "A New Stress-based Model"; and McGregor and Jordan, "The Mask of Zeal."
10. Inglehart and Norris, "Trump and the Populist"; Rothwell and Diego-Rosell, "Explaining Nationalist Political Views."
11. Collier, *Paths Towards Democracy*; and Slater, *Ordering Power*. For related claims with respect to the Arab uprisings, see Bellin, "The Puzzle of Democratic Divergence"; Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds, *The Arab Spring*; and Cammett, "Transition Experiences and Relevant Lessons."
12. Miller, "Individual-level Expectations"; and Miller, "Economic Threats or Societal Turmoil?"
13. Citrin, "Comment."
14. Hardin, "The Public Trust"; Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters*; Levi and Stoker, "Political Trust and Trustworthiness"; Mishler and Rose, "Trust, Distrust and Skepticism"; Newton and Norris, "Confidence in Public Institutions"; Whiteley et al., "Why do Voters Lose Trust."
15. However, Van Erkel and Van der Meer show that political trust may derive from comparisons to prior economic performance of one's own country; Van Erkel and Van Der Meer, "Macroeconomic Performance," 177–97.
16. Al-Ississ and Diwan, "Preference for Democracy"; Jamal, "When is Social Trust"; Robbins, "After the Arab Spring"; Tessler, "Islam and Democracy"; Gao and Tessler, "Gauging Arab Support"; and Tessler, *Public Opinion in the Middle East*.
17. Tessler, "Mapping and Explaining Attitudes."
18. Lust, "Missing the Third Wave."
19. Benstead, "Why do Some Arab Citizens."
20. Robbins, "After the Arab Spring."
21. Spierings, "Trust and Tolerance."

22. Mazaheri and Monroe, "No Arab Bourgeoisie."
23. Cammett et al., *A Political Economy of the Middle East*.
24. Some contend that public opinion data on the Arab region are unreliable, however, Benstead's cross-national data analysis holds that the quality of survey data for Arab countries are consistent with that of other global regions. Benstead, "Survey Research in the Arab World."
25. Berger, "Sharīʿa, Islamism and Arab Support," 314; and Ciftici, "Modernization, Islam, or Social Capital," 1450.
26. Jamal, "Reassessing Support for Islam"; Robbins, "After the Arab Spring"; Tessler, "Islam and Democracy"; and Tessler, "Mapping and Explaining Attitudes." While all of these questions are measured on a four-point scale in the Arab Barometer, these studies code the responses dichotomously (i.e. agree/disagree). As we show below, coding choices affect the analyses in important ways.
27. Inglehart and Norris, "Islamic Culture and Democracy."
28. These variables are highly correlated, with correlation coefficients of about .5 in all cases.
29. Stevens and Vaughan-Williams, "Citizens and Security Threats."
30. Campbell, *National Deconstruction*.
31. Cammett et al., *A Political Economy of the Middle East*; World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, 117–48.
32. Vilalta Perdomo, Castillo, and Torres, *Violent Crime*.
33. Van Erkel and Van Der Meer, "Macroeconomic Performance."
34. Oil prices were at their zenith in 2011, and economic growth in the region was positive and rising, having caught up with middle-income country growth in the mid-2000s for the first time in two decades; Cammett et al., *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, ch. 2. Note that we lack data on Iraq during the second period.
35. In Tables A2 and A3 in the online appendix, we explore the results by population subgroups.
36. Abadie et al., "When should You Adjust."
37. In the online appendix, we present in Table A4 results using a larger dataset of all 13 Arab countries available in the Arab Barometer dataset. The results are largely similar although, as expected, more variables achieve statistical significance in the larger dataset.
38. While both the national and personal measures of insecurity use similar point scales, their effects are not directly comparable since the first is expressed in absolute terms, and the second in deviation from the country/wave measure.
39. See, for example, Levi and Stoker, "Political Trust and Trustworthiness."
40. When increased from the minimum value of −1 to the maximum of +1, individual-level perceptions of economic and personal security add .92 and .7 points to trust in government, respectively.
41. Table A5 in the online appendix shows results of models using disaggregated measures of trust in separate political institutions rather than the combined measure.
42. Robustness checks shown in the online appendix confirm that these patterns do not depend on the set of focus countries selected, or on the particular way in which the main variables are measured. (For example, see Table A6 in the online appendix for results with alternative measures of preference for democracy.)
43. Lust, "Missing the Third Wave."
44. Tessler, "Religion, Religiosity."
45. Berger, "Sharīʿa, Islamism and Arab Support."
46. Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 117–8; and Lakoff, "Debate."
47. In addition, we ran models at the country level, but only as a function of personal perceptions of security given limitations in data availability. (See Tables A7 and A8 in the online appendix for these results.) While the size of the statistical significance of the effects of insecurity on political varies by country, they have the same sign across all countries.
48. Ketchley, *Egypt in a Time of Revolution*.
49. Menaldo, "The Middle East."

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Funding

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