

What Affects Attitudes Toward US-Related Conspiracy Theories in the Arab Middle East? *

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What explains variation in citizens' belief in US-related conspiracy theories in the Arab Middle East? Some scholars have argued that anti-US sentiment or individual-level characteristics identified in other contexts can explain the Arab public's belief in these conspiracy theories; others have argued that citizens of autocracies are more likely to trust such theories. We explore these claims using a conjoint experiment with representative samples from 10 Arab countries. We find that extant explanations do not do a good job of describing the variation we observe—e.g., correlation with anti-US sentiment depends on the conspiracy theory, and belief in these conspiracy theories is not more common in more authoritarian regimes. Instead, we find Sunni-Shia sectarianism and exposure to foreign intervention in violent conflict to be the dominant factors explaining trust in US-related conspiracy theories in the Arab Middle East.

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1 Introduction

During President Obama’s second term, US policy in the Middle East primarily focused on two fronts: the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS¹) on the one hand and the potential for (and later realization of) a nuclear deal with Iran. The US’s military and diplomatic intervention in both of these cases was significant; a wave of victories for ISIS led to US supplies and air support for ISIS’s adversaries, while in response to the growing threat of a nuclear Iran, the Obama administration introduced a road-map to limit Iranian nuclear ambitions. Both of these interventions also produced something potentially unexpected: conspiracy theories, circulated in Arabic-language media, about the sinister motives for the US’s actions in these arenas. In the news and on social media, many claimed that ISIS was really a creation of the US, fabricated in order to justify intervention and the destabilization of the region (Mackey, 2014; Romney et al., 2021). One 2016 survey put support for such theories at 67% in Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Nyhan and Zeitzoff, 2018). On the other hand, the announcement of the Iran nuclear deal sparked discussion of secretive US-Iranian ties, including some claiming that Obama was secretly a Shia Muslim (Taylor, 2016).

Conspiracy theories like this are by no means isolated or unique to the Arab Middle East. For instance, researchers in the US, such as Oliver and Wood (2014), also regularly find high levels of belief² in conspiracy theories (including many in the US who also believe that Obama is a secret Muslim). But the Arab Middle East does provide an important context to study conspiracy theories related to US foreign policy. Previous work has established the importance of anti-US sentiment to conspiracy theories in the Arab Middle East (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2004; Jamal et al., 2015; Nyhan and Zeitzoff, 2018); others have highlighted the use of conspiracy theories by autocrats in the region, purportedly to craft national narratives or to distract (Gray, 2010; Wedeen, 2019; Alrababa’h et al., 2021). However, a lack of cross-national data has made it difficult to evaluate belief in conspiracy theories across the region. Is belief in US-related conspiracy theories merely a function of anti-US sentiment or other

¹Known by many acronyms—IS, ISIL, and Daesh are common alternatives—we use ISIS because it is one of the most common.

²We interchangeably use the terms “belief” and “trust” to indicate a state of mind in which someone believes the conspiracy theory to be accurate.

micro-level factors? Does the use of conspiracy theories by regional autocrats mean that belief in US-related conspiracy theories is higher in more authoritarian contexts?

In this paper, we provide surprising answers on both of these fronts using a pre-registered³ conjoint design. This conjoint experiment was administered in 10 Arab countries as part of the 2018–2019 Arab Barometer survey, which included a module that asked participants to rate their level of trust in a hypothetical news story. One of the aspects of the news story we varied was the subject matter, where two of the possible subjects were US-related conspiracy theories, the first a news story stating that the US's purpose in entering a nuclear agreement with Iran was to weaken Sunni Arab states (US-Iran CT) and the second one arguing that the US was purposefully helping the Islamic State gain power in Syria and Iraq (US-ISIS CT). We benchmark these against two other hypothetical stories, one that argues that US intervention in the region is in line with Arab interests (US-Positive) and the other that the US pursues only its own interests (US-Negative). We also use this experiment to examine other factors that might affect belief in these stories, manipulating the story source (US or in-country) and medium (traditional vs. social media) and examining how effects vary by salient individual-level attributes like education and views toward the US.

By comparing results within and between countries, we find that belief in US-related conspiracy theories often goes against expectations, including our pre-registered hypotheses. First, belief varies much more than would be expected based on anti-US sentiment alone. Additionally, the degree of authoritarianism at the country level is not associated with increased belief in such conspiracy theories. Rather, citizens of the Arab Middle East have a nuanced and country-specific view of US-related conspiracy theories, with each country's geopolitical situation mattering more than other factors. In particular, belief in US-related conspiracy theories is highest in countries with a politicized and tense Sunni-Shia divide and with exposure to foreign intervention in local conflicts—in our sample, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen—in a way that does not always track with other measures of anti-US sentiment.⁴ Our results help us better understand the nature of misinformation in the Arab Middle East. Specifi-

³LINK TO PRE-REGISTRATION REDACTED FOR REVIEW.

⁴For instance, Lebanon has the lowest level of trust in the US-Negative story in our sample, in spite of having the third-highest level of trust in the US-ISIS conspiracy theory.

cally, it helps us understand more who will believe US-related misinformation and why—crucial steps toward being better able to combat misinformation.

In this paper, we first outline the literature on micro- and macro-level factors thought to determine belief in conspiracy theories, as well as the literature on the role conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes and in the Middle East. We then outline our design, hypotheses, and method of analysis. Afterward, we present our results, first showing results across all countries in our sample as a whole and then showing results for countries individually. After examining the results for our pre-registered hypotheses, we turn to an explanation of country-level variation that focuses on sectarianism and interventionism. Lastly, we conclude with a brief discussion of further research necessary in this area.

2 Belief in Conspiracy Theories

We focus on *current* and *salient* US-related conspiracy theories in this paper, which are characterized by three particular elements. First, they provide an explanation for an important (and generally negative) political development in the region, such as the rise of ISIS or an agreement that benefits Iran in the case of the conspiracy theories we chose. In other words, the conspiracy theory is relevant to timely political issues in the region. Second, the theory ascribes responsibility for this political development to the US. The US is not necessarily the only responsible party, but it is one of the main ones. Third, and most importantly, the US’s purported responsibility for this development goes strongly against their publicly-stated positions, thus either explicitly or implicitly ascribing to the US surreptitious and nefarious motives. Note that this differs from some definitions of conspiracy theories (e.g. [Oliver and Wood, 2014](#)) in not emphasizing the framing of the conspiracy theory in terms of a struggle between good and evil or a counter-mainstream account (p. 953). For the sake of consistency with the other treatment levels in our design—which discuss the role of the US in the region, either positively or negatively—we keep the language of our conspiracy theories as neutral as possible, though we think many in the region would find the good/evil and counter-mainstream

framing to be implied.⁵

Additionally, we do not consider the veracity of the conspiracy theory as an essential characteristic in our definition. This may surprise some readers, who would consider the lack of veracity—the presence of patently false or outlandish claims—to be a defining feature of a conspiracy theory. We consider this potential characteristic of a conspiracy less useful in our context. First, when looking at conspiracy theories across countries and cultures, what appears patently false in one may not in another. Second, there are historical instances of conspiracies that do turn out to be true; to use a historical example from the region that is still often cited, the French and British really did secretly coordinate to divide the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Belief that such secret coordination took place should still be accurately characterized as believing in a conspiracy theory. Third, we consider it important to focus on the context and circumstances that give rise to conspiratorial interpretations of politics rather than the veracity of such interpretations. For these reasons, we do not consider the veracity or lack thereof for a particular theory to be a defining characteristic of a conspiracy theory.⁶

What have other researchers said about belief in conspiracy theories, in the Middle East or elsewhere? Broadly speaking, the literature on conspiracy theories can be characterized as focusing on both *micro*- and *macro*- level factors that may effect belief in conspiracy theories.

With regard to micro-level factors, much of the literature is concerned with levels of belief in conspiracy theories and what causes some individuals to be more prone to belief in conspiracy theories than others (Douglas et al., 2017; Tingley and Wagner, 2017; Pennycook and Rand, 2019; Lyons et al., 2021). This research has generally found that belief in conspiracy theories is high and that the individuals who tend to believe in them have unique characteristics that differentiate them from others. For instance, Oliver and Wood (2014) examine five years of surveys in the United States, finding that

⁵If anything, we think our definition could bias results toward higher levels of support for our conspiracy theories—as highlighted in Section 4, we still find fairly low levels of support for the conspiracy theories compared to our positive/negative benchmarks.

⁶Considering our two conspiracy theories in light of this characteristic, we argue that both would still meet this criteria, though the US-Iran conspiracy theory is more ambiguous.

50% of the population endorse at least one conspiracy theory. They also find that some traditional theories about belief in conspiracy theories, such that it is related to authoritarian attitudes or political conservatism, do not fully explain individual-level belief in their survey data. Rather, they find that belief is strongly predicted by a predisposition to believe in other unseen and intentional forces. Other research has found similar results. [Uscinski et al. \(2016\)](#) look at how individuals interpret informational cues based on their partisanship and “conspiratorial predisposition,” finding that such predispositions can lead to an interpretation of the cue in a conspiratorial manner. Other research [\(Flynn et al., 2017\)](#) has also emphasized the importance of motivational reasoning—the tendency to pursue the goal of reaching a desired conclusion rather than accuracy—in the information processing of those who believe in political misinformation.

On the macro-level side, research has emphasized the role of larger-scale forces that can affect belief in conspiracy theories. For instance, one of these is the rise of social media and the effect that it may have on belief in conspiracy theories. [Munger et al. \(2017\)](#) for instance examine exposure of citizens in a panel to misleading information on social media in the leadup to the 2015 UK elections, finding that partisan misinformation is effective in getting users to change their views. [Guess et al. \(2019\)](#) also find that social media engagement is correlated with the endorsement of conspiracy theories and other toxic messages. Although research focused on the Arab Middle East has not explicitly focused on testing similar claims, there has been recent research that highlights the role of social media. For instance, [Jamal et al. \(2015\)](#); [Romney et al. \(2021\)](#) find that conspiracy theories about the US are common in Arabic-language Twitter.

In addition to social media, another macro-level factor that has guided theorizing on US-related conspiracy theories in the Middle East is the history of US intervention and anti-American sentiment in the region. Public opinion toward and historical experience with the US both make the Arab Middle East an ideal context in which to study attitudes toward US-related conspiracy theories. The Middle East has a history of experience with Western foreign intervention, including real plots against Middle Eastern powers that still color Arabs’ views toward the West. For example, politicians and citizens

alike reference secret arrangements like the Sykes-Picot agreement (which led to French and British mandates over the region post World War I) and the Balfour declaration (a statement by the British government declaring support during WWI for a Jewish home in Palestine) in declaring that machinations by foreign powers are afoot to this very day (Gray, 2010; Silverstein, 2000). This experience adds to the plausibility of foreign conspiracies for Arab publics in the region. Additionally, there is strong negative sentiment toward the US across the region, and this negative sentiment is rooted in US intervention in the region, particularly since the War on Terror (Jamal et al., 2015; Lynch, 2007).

In this context, researchers have focused on both the demand and supply sides of conspiracy theories and misinformation. With regard to micro-level factors on the demand side, researchers have studied factors similar to those in the US context. For instance, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2004) have looked at the role of level of education and media consumption in belief in US-related misinformation in the Middle East. Nyhan and Zeitzoff (2018) have also explored these factors in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where they find that predispositions against the West or Jews are accentuated by higher levels of political knowledge, in line with a story of motivated reasoning. On the supply side, some argue that conspiracy theories in the Middle East are used by authoritarian regimes to distract from domestic challenges Gray (2010). More recent research examines how regimes' responses to instances of violence can cause the promulgation of conspiracy theories Koehler-Derrick et al. (2022) and how they are used as diversion in the face of such threats (Alrababa'h et al., 2021). This is in line with literature from other contexts, such as Russia (Yablokov, 2015; Rozenas and Stukal, 2019) and Venezuela (Hernández, 2008) where similar motivations are outlined for their authoritarian regimes.

These studies have taught us much about conspiracy theories in a variety of contexts, including in the Arab Middle East. However, there are important limitations that our study works to fill. With regard to micro-level factors, extant studies have focused on just one or two countries, so we do not know the explanatory power of these factors across contexts. Lack of cross-country data also means we do not have empirical tests for how the degree of authoritarianism affects belief in conspiracy theories.

Our study fills this gap through its unique, cross-country design, which allows us to address these questions. The next section discusses our design, hypotheses, and method of analysis.

3 Research Design

To test both the micro- and macro-level factors underlying belief in conspiracy theories in the Arab Middle East, we ran a survey experiment as a part of the Arab Barometer Wave V, which was administered in 2018 and 2019 in twelve Middle Eastern countries. The survey consisted of a large battery of questions, with our experimental manipulation sandwiched in the middle.

Detailed information on the Arab Barometer’s survey methodology is available on their website.⁷ For the Arab Barometer wave V, our experiment was administered to participants in 10 countries: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen.⁸ Half of the sample in each country—11,674 subjects in all—were assigned to receive our conjoint manipulation.⁹

Prior to and following our experimental manipulation, participants were asked questions on participant demography (e.g. gender and age), participants’ views on the economic health of the country (e.g. the direction of the country and the current state of the economy), politics (e.g. support for and trust of various government institutions, corruption, and elections), and other questions about views on and participation in society (e.g. questions on civic engagement). Questions administered after the experimental manipulation include questions on participant well-being and home life, identity and religious practices, culture, international relations, and additional demographic questions. The experiment was situated approximately halfway through the survey.

⁷Additional information here: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/methodology/>.

⁸Administration of our experiment was considered too sensitive for the other two countries surveyed, Libya and Kuwait.

⁹Because of small non-response rates or refusal of treatment, our analyses generally have a slightly smaller n-size than this. See Section A of the Online Appendix for more information on the sample size in each country; the n-size for each of our analyses can be viewed in the supporting tables in Section E.1 in the same Appendix.

3.1 Experimental Manipulation

The experimental manipulation began with an introduction of the conjoint task. Participants were read the following statement:

*Many factors can affect how much we trust the content we come across in the news. I will now read to you a summary of two news items that you might come across when reading, watching, or listening to the news. I am interested in your level of trust toward these two items and whether you would share it with friends.*¹⁰

Participants were then read descriptions of two stories, one after the other. Participants were not asked to compare the stories; instead, outcomes were measured after each one was read. The conjoint features that were manipulated can be found in Table 1, and they include the *Source*, the *Medium*, and the *Subject Matter* of the story. The different levels for each feature result in $2 \times 2 \times 4 = 16$ total possible combinations, and each participant was read two randomly chosen versions out of these sixteen. The italicized portions of the text in the table shows text that was read to respondents.

Of particular note are the variations in the Subject Matter conjoint element. Two of the stories (2 and 3) mimic common conspiracy theories regarding, respectively, ulterior US motives for entering the Iran agreement and US support for ISIS. Two non-conspiratorial stories serve as benchmarks—as noted in the theory section, this is important to help us distinguish belief in conspiracy theories from anti-US sentiment more generally. The first, story 1, portrays a positive view of US involvement in the region that was intended to go against subjects’ predominant beliefs, providing a lower benchmark. The other, story 4, portrays a non-conspiratorial but negative view of US involvement in the region. This was chosen as a comparison because it reflects commonly-held beliefs about the results of US intervention.

After each story, participants were asked two outcome questions. For the first, the enumerator asks if they think the story they were read is trustworthy and asks participants to rate the story it on a 1–4 scale (1 = Untrustworthy, 4 = Trustworthy). For the second, the enumerator asks how likely they

¹⁰The Arabic original for this and the rest of the treatment can be found in Section C of the Online Appendix.

would be to share this story with their friends, again providing a 1–4 scale (1 = Likely, 4 = Unlikely) for answers. Because of similarities in results across the two outcome measures, we focus only on the trust outcome in this paper.¹¹

| Feature | Level | Description |
|--|-------------------|---|
| Source cited for the story (Source) | US | 1. <i>The source of the news item is an organization or figure from the United States of America...</i> |
| | In-Country | OR 2. <i>The source of the news item is an organization or figure from [COUNTRY OF RESPONDENT]...</i> |
| The news medium for the story (Medium) | Traditional Media | 1. <i>...and you came across this news item through the traditional media such as a newspaper, TV, or radio.</i> |
| | Social Media | OR 2. <i>...and you came across this news item through social media such as Twitter or Facebook.</i> |
| The content of the story (Subject Matter) | US-Positive | 1. <i>The content of the news item is that the current role of the United States of America in the Middle East is in agreement with Arab interests in achieving greater stability.</i> |
| | US-Iran CT | OR 2. <i>The content of the news item is that the United States of America's nuclear agreement with Iran that was recently terminated was part of efforts exerted by the United States of America to weaken the influence and power of Sunni Middle Eastern countries.</i> |
| | US-ISIS CT | OR 3. <i>The content of the news item is that the United States of America is trying to help Daesh take power in Syria and Iraq.</i> |
| | US-Negative | OR 4. <i>The content of the news item is that the current role of the United States of America in the Middle East serves only its own political interests.</i> |

Table 1: Conjoint features and levels. These have been reverse-translated from the Arabic text, which is available in Section 3.1 of the Online Appendix.

¹¹A short discussion of results using the second measure can be found in Section E.1 of the Online Appendix.

3.2 Hypotheses

We test several hypotheses; all but one of the hypotheses listed below was pre-registered, as noted in the text.¹² In the interest of transparency, our discussion of the pre-registered hypotheses outlines what we expected prior to running our experiment. In some cases (such as hypotheses 2, 3(a), 3(b), and (5), these expectations matched the outcomes we observed. In other cases, our findings went against our prior expectations.¹³

In the first section of our results (Section 4.1), we use an overall, cross-country analysis to test our first three hypotheses, all of which were pre-registered and address the unconditional AMCEs from our design.

Hypothesis 1 Stories with a US source will be deemed less trustworthy than in-country sources because of negative attitudes toward the US and an overall bias in favor of sources from one's home country.

Hypothesis 2 Traditional news media will be deemed more trustworthy than social media because of the difficulty of verifying the accuracy of content on social media and some individuals' lack of familiarity with social media.

Hypothesis 3 This hypothesis addresses the news story element of our conjoint, which contains four levels and therefore sub-hypotheses (a), (b), and (c). (a) News stories featuring the US-Negative content will be deemed the most trustworthy, in comparison to the US-Positive content. The two conspiracy theories—US-Iran CT (b) and US-ISIS CT (c)—will fall in between in terms of trustworthiness. Because of strong negative attitudes toward the US, we anticipated that the US-Negative story would receive the highest trustworthiness ratings and the US-Positive content would receive the lowest trustworthiness ratings. However, because some participants would view conspiracy theories as outlandish, we anticipate that the two conspiracy theory content items (US-Iran and US-ISIS) would be in the middle, with participants viewing them as more

¹²Our pre-registration can be found here: REMOVED FOR REVIEW.

¹³There are some hypotheses included in the pre-registration that we do not include here; a discussion of the findings on those hypotheses can be found in Section B in the Online Appendix.

trustworthy than the positive story but less trustworthy than the negative one.

In the second section of our results (Section 4.2), we use individual-level measures to explore micro-level heterogeneous effects. Our first hypothesis, based on previous research by Nyhan and Zeitzoff (2018), was pre-registered; the second, exploring effects based on anti-US sentiment, was added afterward but is written to reflect what our expectations would have been.¹⁴

Hypothesis 4 Micro-level: Greater knowledge of and interest in politics will correspond with higher trust in the two conspiracy theories because, in line with previous research, we expect that those with higher political knowledge and interest seek out more anti-Western and potentially conspiratorial content.

Hypothesis 5 Micro-level: Higher anti-US sentiment, as estimated by a common measure of support for anti-US violence, will correspond with higher trust in both conspiracy theories.

In Section 4.3, we move to a between-country analysis to address our final pre-registered hypothesis.

Hypothesis 6 Macro-level: Participants living in authoritarian regimes will have a higher belief in conspiracy theories because of their exposure to state-sponsored misinformation and deception.

Lastly, we spend the final section of our results—Section 4.4—discussing the role of two additional macro-level factors, sectarianism and interventionism. To preview our macro-level results: We find that authoritarianism does not have the effect outlined in hypothesis 6. However, we *do* find enormous variation in between-country trust in the US-ISIS conspiracy theory in particular, and we turn to the macro-level factors of sectarianism and interventionism to explain the variation we do observe.

3.3 Analysis

We use linear regression to analyze our results. Most of our hypotheses are addressed by estimating the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE), i.e. the marginal effect of a given attribute averaged

¹⁴In the results section, the reader will find that those expectations are not met and that each of our conspiracy theories has a different relationship with anti-US sentiment.

over the joint distribution of the remaining ones (Hainmueller et al., 2014). For Hypotheses 4 and 5, we estimate the conditional AMCE based on individual characteristics, while we estimate the conditional AMCE based on country for Hypothesis 6. As is standard when analyzing conjoint data, we cluster standard errors by participant. Additionally, we use two types of survey weights in the results that we present. In analyses that pool results across countries, we use “standardized” weights instead of those provided by the Arab Barometer. To calculate these standardized weights, we take the country-specific weights and re-normalize them to the adult population of all the countries as a whole—otherwise, small countries in our dataset (such as Palestine) would be over-represented in these analyses compared to the larger countries (such as Egypt). Results using these weights can be thought of as representative of the adult Arab population for the 10 countries surveyed as a whole. In other analyses, we look at results between countries, and for these analyses, we use the country-level weights provided by the Arab Barometer without any normalization.¹⁵

4 Results

4.1 Cross-Country Trust in Conspiracy Theories

We first use cross-country results to draw broad conclusions across the 10 countries in our sample. We seek to answer the following question: For the adult population of the 10 countries in our sample, did the Source, Medium, and Subject Matter of the news story we presented affect participants’ levels of trust in that news story? This question corresponds to Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. For the analyses in this section, we use the standardized weights that make our results representative of the adult population of all surveyed countries combined.

Prior to running the survey, we had expected that a US source would be seen as less trustworthy than an in-country one, that social media would be seen as less trustworthy than traditional media, and that our two conspiracy theories would be more trustworthy than a positive and less trustworthy than a negative story about the US (effectively sandwiched by what we considered to be “lower” and “upper”

¹⁵See Section E.2 in the Online Appendix for more information on the construction of these weights

bounds prior to the experiment). The results in Figure 1 indicate that some of these expectations were correct while others were not. Contrary to expectations, a US source had no effect on trustworthiness; the point estimate on US Source is slightly negative but far from significant. In line with expectations, we found that the communication of a news source through social media does make it less trustworthy than one communicated through traditional media. An AMCE of -0.19 ($p < 0.01$) indicates a decrease in trust of approximately 7% on our 1–4 scale. We view results on this conjoint feature to be primarily a result of two factors: first, the extent to which social media is seen as a new, Western source of information and, second, the extent to which participants trust their local news media. Given the authoritarian context in many of the countries in our sample, it would be plausible if participants eschewed such sources for social media if they view it as providing more reliable in-

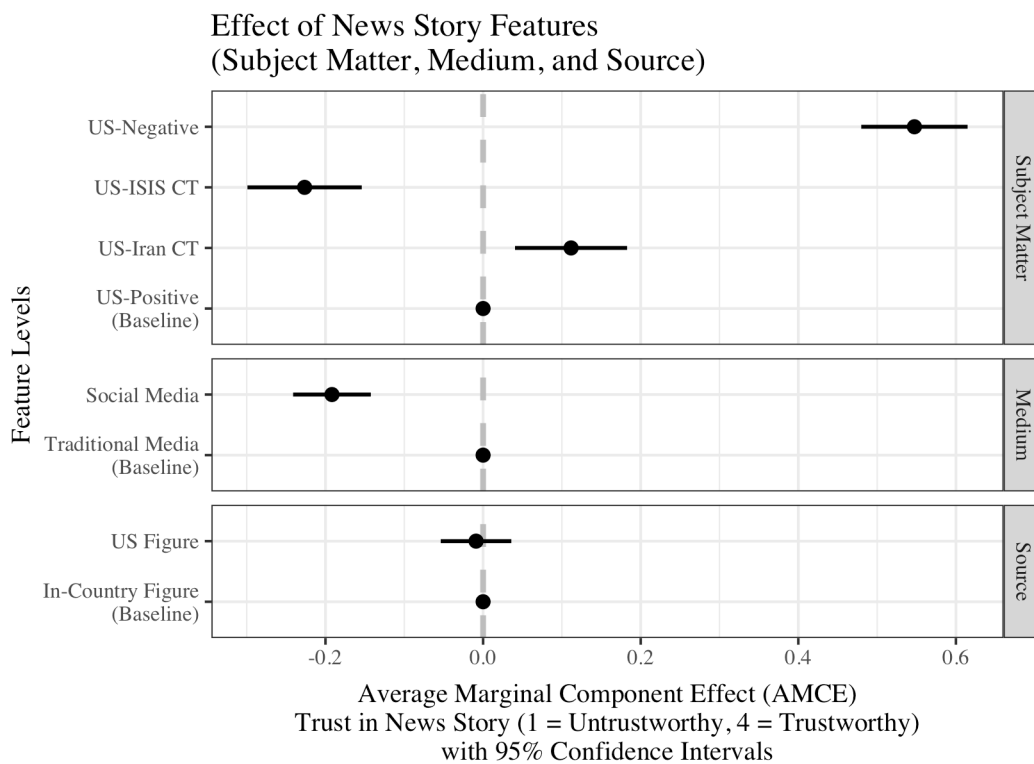


Figure 1: Effect of News Story Features, as estimated using AMCEs for levels of all three features included in the conjoint design. Outcome is trustworthiness of the news story—participants were asked if they think the story they were read is trustworthy, and they rated the story on a 1–4 scale (1 = Untrustworthy, 4 = Trustworthy). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level, and the results are weighted to be representative of the adult population of all ten surveyed countries combined.

formation. However, one interpretation of our results is that skepticism of social media wins out over any concerns about local media.¹⁶

With regard to the conjoint element of primary interest, i.e. the subject matter, our findings are again mixed when compared to our predictions. As predicted, respondents trusted the US-Negative “upper bound” story much, much more (AMCE of 0.55, $p < 0.01$, a shift of almost 20% on our scale) than our baseline “lower bound” story, which portrayed US involvement in the region as having positive effects. Also as predicted, belief in the Iran conspiracy theory is sandwiched between these two, with an AMCE of 0.11 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that participants are more likely to trust a story presenting the Iran conspiracy theory than one that is positive about US influence in the region, but much less likely to trust this conspiracy theory than a news story reporting that US intervention is self-serving. With regard to the ISIS conspiracy theory, the results went against our expectations. Participants are less likely to believe the US-ISIS conspiracy theory than even a news story that reports positively on US intervention in the region, with an AMCE of -0.23 ($p < 0.01$), over twice the magnitude of the positive AMCE for our other conspiracy theory. This illustrates a previously unreported variation in belief in US-related conspiracy theories and indicates that participants’ trust in such conspiracy theories can vary greatly—variation we explore further at the individual and country levels in the following sections.

4.2 Variation in Trust in Conspiracy Theories by Micro-Level Characteristics

The large-scale nature of the Arab Barometer allows us the opportunity to explore micro-level factors affecting trust in conspiracy theories—factors we describe testing in hypotheses 4 and 5. We pre-registered an analysis exploring the results of our conjoint by political interest.¹⁷ We measure political interest using a question from the Arab Barometer, not included in our module, asking par-

¹⁶In Figure E.2 in the Online Appendix, we explore how the effects for “Medium” vary by country, since the media environment varies significantly from country to country in our sample. In spite of this variation, we find little difference in the country AMCEs for this feature.

¹⁷Additional discussion of this particular analysis can be found in the Online Appendix in Section E.3.

ticipants if they consider themselves well-informed politically on a 1–4 scale. Recent work by [Nyhan and Zeitzoff](#) (2018) found that higher levels of political knowledge are correlated with a stronger connection of belief in conspiracy theories and anti-US sentiment. The posited mechanism at play is information-seeking—with the prevalence of conspiracy theories about the US in news coverage and elite statements, those who have more exposure to these messages may use them to form their beliefs more than others. Our measure and test are slightly different than theirs, but are meant to measure a similar result. If conspiracy theories are widely prevalent and those with greater knowledge or interest have more exposure to them, they should also have higher levels of trust in them.

We look at heterogeneous treatment effects by our measure of political interest in Figure 2, where we find mixed results mostly in the opposite direction. The results are most stark for trust in the US-ISIS conspiracy theory. Those who strongly disagree that they are interested in politics have an effect estimate of near zero for the US-ISIS CT. However, the effect estimate increases in negativity as participants state they are more interested in politics. Those who strongly agree that they are interested in politics have an estimate of -0.58 (-0.89, -0.26)—meaning that for this group of people, having the news story focus on a US-ISIS conspiracy theory moves their rating of trust down by almost 20% on our 1–4 scale compared to a story that is positive about US influence. As for the US-Iran conspiracy theory, the trend does move in the other direction, consistent with the mechanism suggested by [Nyhan and Zeitzoff](#) (2018). However, the estimates for the Iran conspiracy theory are not statistically different from zero for any level of our political interest measure. The results are largely similar for the US-Negative story, though the differences are slightly larger. For our sample, the proposed connection between greater political knowledge/interest and trust in conspiracy theories does not generalize.

We also explore one additional characteristic for individual-level heterogeneous effects: sentiment toward the US. We did not pre-register this exploratory analysis, but it is important to address the relationship between common measures of anti-American sentiment and our effects for two reasons. First, we can check that the effect estimates for our US-Negative story increase as anti-American

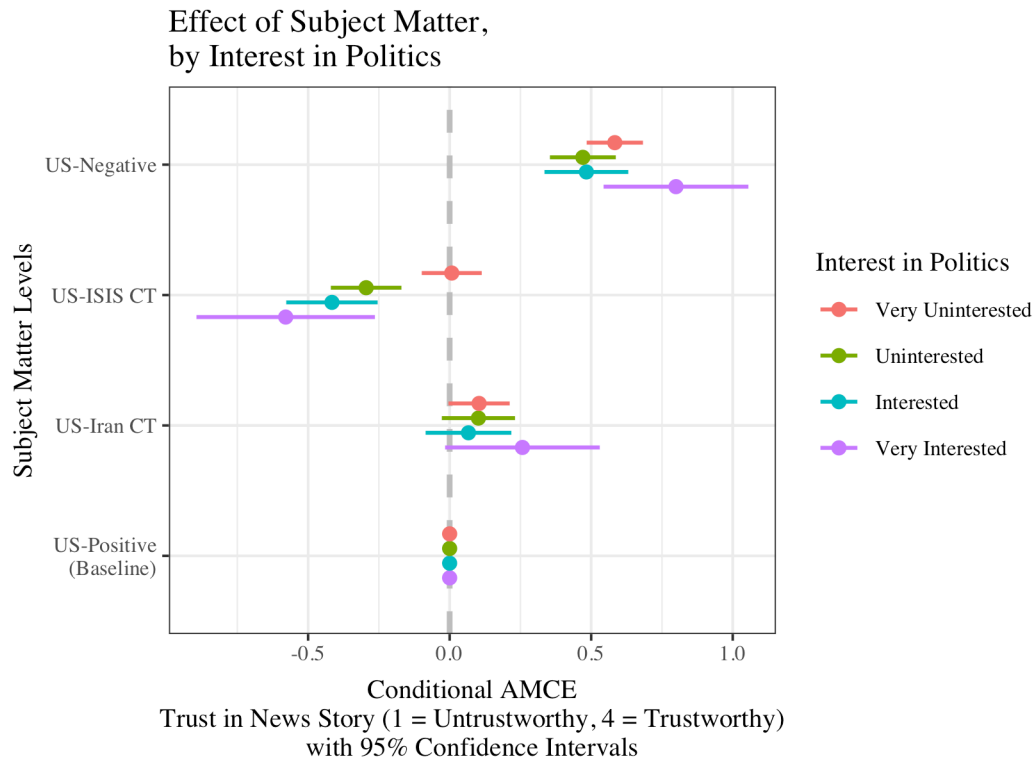


Figure 2: Effect of Subject Matter, as estimated using AMCEs for levels of the Subject Matter conjoint feature, conditional on political interest. Outcome is trustworthiness of the news story—participants were asked if they think the story they were read is trustworthy, and they rated the story on a 1–4 scale (1 = Untrustworthy, 4 = Trustworthy). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level, and the results are weighted to be representative of the adult population of all ten surveyed countries combined.

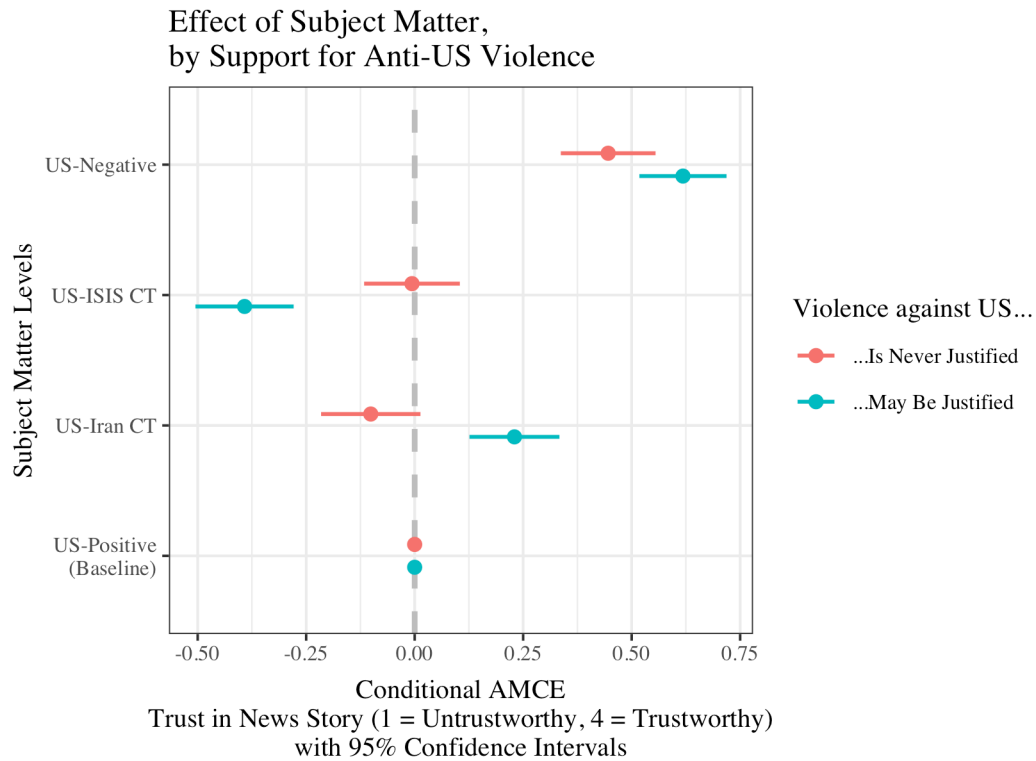


Figure 3: Effect of Subject Matter, as estimated using AMCEs for levels of the Subject Matter conjoint feature, conditional on support for anti-US violence. Outcome is trustworthiness of the news story—participants were asked if they think the story they were read is trustworthy, and they rated the story on a 1–4 scale (1 = Untrustworthy, 4 = Trustworthy). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level, and the results are weighted to be representative of the adult population of all ten surveyed countries combined.

sentiment increases, which would be theoretically expected. Second, we can check the extent to which trust in our conspiracy theories increases as anti-American sentiment increases. It is often assumed that trust in US-related conspiracy theories is primarily a function of anti-US sentiment, but is the the case for Arab publics in practice?

To address this relationship, we examine the effects of the subject matter of our story conditional on a very common dichotomous measure of support for anti-US violence.¹⁸ Participants are asked if they believe that violence against the US is never justified or, alternatively, if it may be justified in some cases. Conditional effects by this measure can be seen in Figure 3. The results confirm the expectation that anti-US sentiment aligns with responses to the US-Negative story—those who respond that violence against the US may be justified have, on average, an effect estimate that is approximately 0.2 higher on our scale (representing a 6% increase). The estimate for the US-Iran conspiracy theory follows the same pattern as the US-Negative story—participants who indicate they think violence against the US is justified are more likely to trust this conspiracy theory—but the results are more substantively and statistically significant, with an increase of more than 0.3 (about an 11% increase). However, for the US-ISIS conspiracy theory the relationship goes in the opposite direction: trust in this conspiracy theory goes down by almost 0.4 on our scale (an approximately 13% decrease) as participants become more likely to justify violence.

How do we interpret these mixed findings? We believe that the difference in results hinges not on the US but on the other entity implicated in the conspiracy theories. Those who think violence against the US is justified may, simultaneously, be more likely to support ISIS's violent opposition to the US and the West. For such individuals, who hold strong negative beliefs about the US but positive beliefs about ISIS, believing that the US and ISIS are in a secret conspiracy would violate their presuppositions about these entities. Thus, those mostly likely to believe this conspiracy theory may consist of those who hold strong negative beliefs about both entities, which, because of ISIS's methods and goals, is likely to correlate with a belief that violence against the US is never justified. This finding aligns

¹⁸The dichotomous measure of anti-US sentiment is one of the most common in the literature. However, in Section F.4 in the Online Appendix, we also explore heterogeneous effects using an alternative measure that looks at support for anti-US violence on a 4-point scale instead. The results are largely similar to what we present here.

with other research (Romney et al., 2021) that those simultaneously negative toward ISIS and the US are more likely to believe in a conspiratorial connection between the two. Additionally, this example strongly illustrates that belief in US-related conspiracy theories is not solely a function of anti-US sentiment; it can also be a function of other dynamics—in this case specifically, a function of the relationship between the US and the other entities implicated in the conspiracy theory. We further explore such variation in the next section by examining heterogeneous effects by country.

4.3 Variation by Macro-Level Characteristics

The cross country results presented in the previous section are illuminating, but they also mask significant variation by country in our sample. Why might we expect cross-country variation? One reason is variation in levels of democracy and autocracy—a factor we highlight in hypothesis 6. Though the countries of the Middle East are authoritarian with few exceptions, there is still variation in the extent to which their political systems are open or closed. We are somewhat limited by our sample; for instance, excluding Yemen, our sample does not include any of the gulf states, which consistently rank as the most authoritarian in the region. Additionally, our focus on the Arab Middle East means that our pool of democratic countries is limited and lacking in what most would consider full democracies. However, in spite of these limitations, the countries in our sample do vary significantly on important indices of democratization. This allows us to explore an important question: How do levels of democratization relate to belief in conspiracy theories? Some have proposed that citizens under authoritarian regimes are more susceptible to conspiracy theories. Higher levels of propaganda and misinformation should, according to this theory, make citizens more likely to believe misinformation about the United States. Additionally, some have argued that Middle Eastern states, especially those with authoritarian regimes, use conspiracy theories about the United States and other disliked entities (e.g. Israel) in an attempt to deflect blame or distract from internal discontentment (Alrababa'h et al., 2021; Romney et al., 2021; Koehler-Derrick et al., 2022). If such efforts are successful, one would expect that citizens in countries with authoritarian regimes would also be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories involving the US, and this was our expectation going into this experiment. Our

survey data do not allow us to get at the first hypothesis—i.e. that regimes strategically use conspiracy theories in state media¹⁹—but we can explore the second to see the extent to which authoritarianism is correlated with belief in conspiracy theories at the country level.

Figure 4 looks at this correlation in a systematic manner using the 2018 Polity2 measure.²⁰ The countries in our sample vary from a low of -4 (Egypt, Sudan, and Morocco) to a high of 7 (Tunisia), covering a little over half of the scale which extends from -10 to +10. In Figure 4, the y-axis shows the country and its polity score, with countries arranged from most autocratic at the bottom to most democratic at the top. The x-axis presents the conditional AMCE for Subject Matter. Higher values on the x-axis for the first two panels of the figure would indicate higher levels of trust in news stories focusing on the US-Iran and US-ISIS conspiracy theories, when compared to a story that is positive about US influence on the region. The third panel shows the AMCE for the US-Negative level, again with US-Positive as the baseline. As in the overall results we presented, note that trust in the US-Negative AMCE serves as an “upper bound” to the effect sizes for the conspiracy theories. Only one country—Lebanon—has an effect size for the conspiracy theories that exceeds the AMCE for US-Negative.²¹

At the level of individual countries, our sample size does not allow for statistical hypothesis testing; however, an examination of the patterns in Figure 4 clearly provide evidence against the hypothesis that citizens under authoritarian regimes are more susceptible to belief in conspiracy theories. If anything, the pattern appears to be stronger in the opposite direction. Tunisia, Lebanon, and Iraq, the three countries with the most democratic regimes in our dataset, have among the highest AMCE estimates for the US-Iran conspiracy theory, only beaten by Yemen (which itself is only a 0 on the -10 to +10 scale). The pattern is more varied but in the same direction for trust in the US-ISIS conspiracy theory. Tunisia (Polity = 7) and Algeria (Polity = 2) have relatively low AMCE estimates, though they are still higher than the more authoritarian Egypt and Morocco. On the other hand, Lebanon and

¹⁹For an exploration of this hypothesis, see for instance Koehler-Derrick et al. (2022).

²⁰Note the exclusion of Palestine from this analysis, for which a Polity2 score is not available.

²¹Lebanon’s results are complicated and reflect the fact that its unique sectarian politics can be difficult to compare to other countries in the region. In Section 4.4, we discuss results for Lebanon in more detail.

Iraq (Polity = 6) as well as Yemen (Polity = 0) have the highest AMCE estimates by a long-shot.

To further explore how our results vary by country, it is helpful to move to a different quantity of interest, the marginal mean (MM).²² The MM is a descriptive statistic that equals the mean outcome for a given feature level and subgroup while averaging across all other features. A comparison to a traditional experiment is helpful: In a traditional experiment, you might care most of all about the Average Causal Effect (ACE), but also show the average for your outcome in each treatment group. This allows you to see the average outcome in the control group, for instance, rather than just the difference between the control and treatment. Similarly, the MM provides a measure of the mean outcome for each conjoint feature level across all appearances in the profiles shown to participants, which is particularly useful in cases where there is subgroup variation in the baseline conjoint level (Leeper et al., 2020), in our case the US-Positive level.

Figure 5 shows our estimates for the MM across each country in our sample. The results clearly indicate that between-country variation exists in our baseline and in other levels of this feature, and there are some important takeaways from the results. First, the variation across countries is larger for some levels than others. Comparing our two conspiracy theories is particularly enlightening. For the US-Iran conspiracy theory, marginal means hover around 2.6 for most countries, with Iraq having the lowest value at around 2.2 and Lebanon the highest at around 2.7. There is variation, but it is circumscribed to 16% of the scale for our outcome. For the US-ISIS CT, on the other hand, the MM estimates vary from around 1.6 for Tunisia to almost 3.0 for Iraq, extending across almost 50% of our outcome's scale. This higher variability for the US-ISIS CT may be a reflection of the extent to which each country has been affected by the conflict with ISIS. Note that the countries with the highest marginal mean for the ISIS story are Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq. These are the countries in our sample arguably most affected by ISIS and other terrorist organizations and, as a result, US-backed campaigns against these groups—a pattern we discuss further in the next section.

²²This analysis was not pre-registered, but it is in line with current best practices in the analysis of conjoint designs. Additionally, the marginal mean is not a causal estimate.

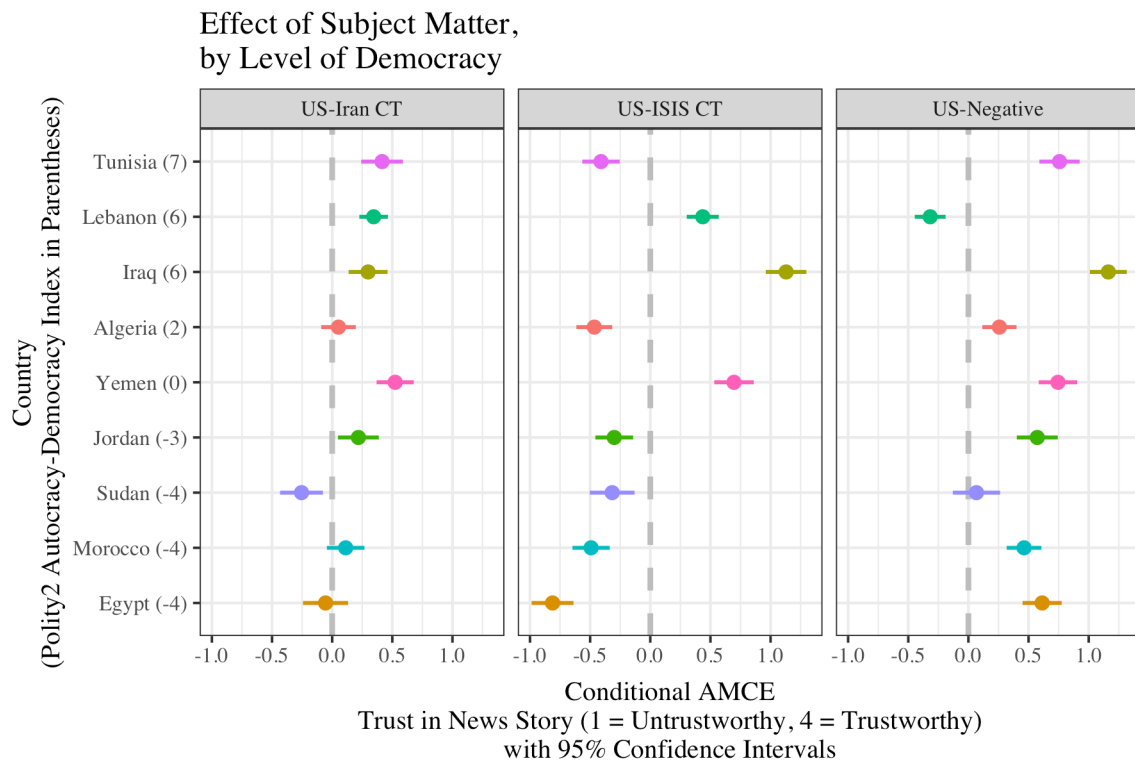


Figure 4: Effect of Subject Matter, as estimated using AMCEs for levels of the Subject Matter conjoint feature, conditional on country ordered by Polity2 autocracy-democracy index. Colors vary by country and match the colors used in Figure 5. Note, however, the exclusion of Palestine which has no Polity2 score. Outcome is trustworthiness of the news story—participants were asked if they think the story they were read is trustworthy, and they rated the story on a 1–4 scale (1 = Untrustworthy, 4 = Trustworthy). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. As opposed to Figures 1, 2, and 3, the results are weighted to be representative of the adult population in each country individually. Colors match those used in Figure 5 to allow for comparison across the figures.

Means for Subject Matter, by Country

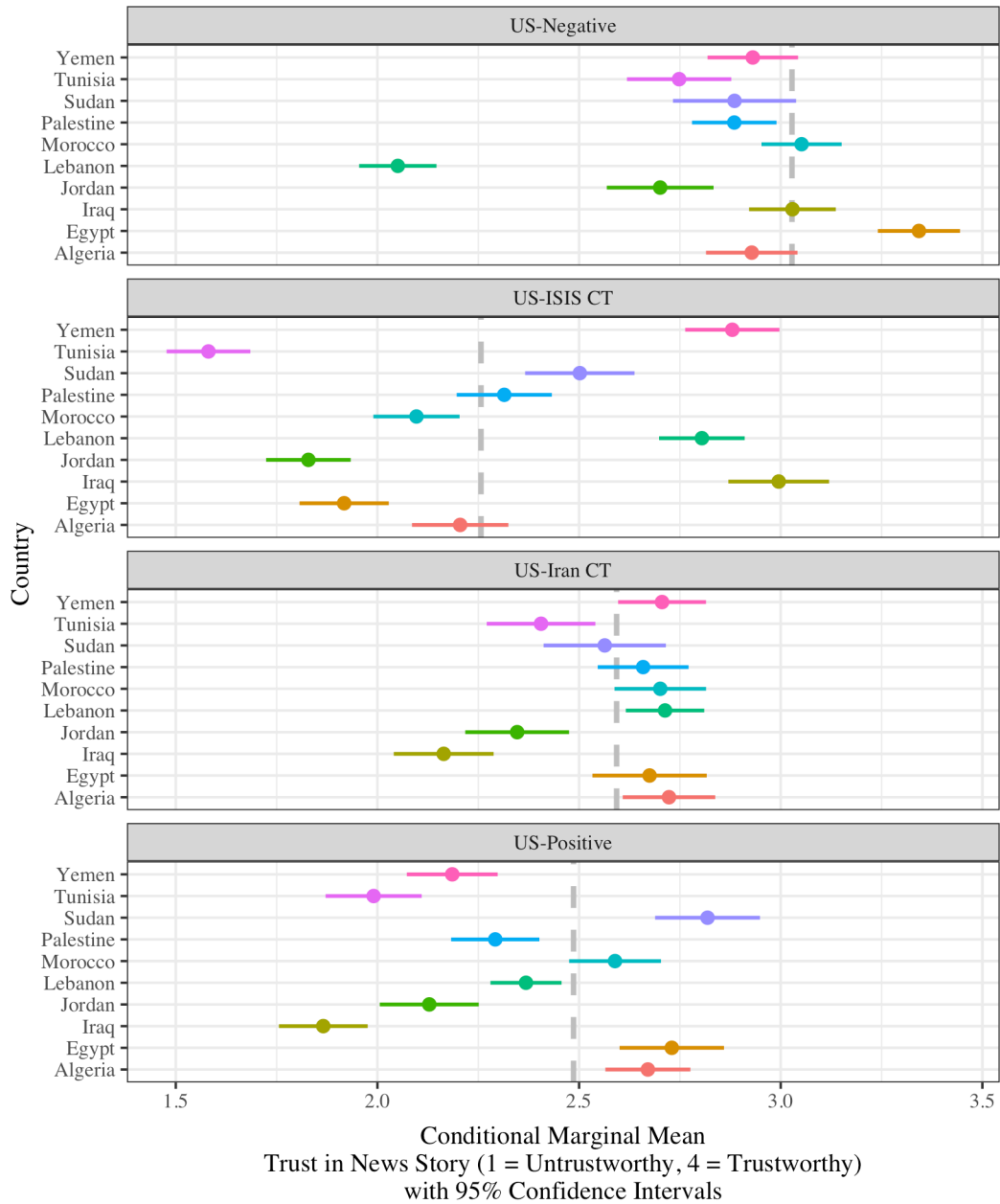


Figure 5: Means for Subject Matter, as estimated using marginal means for levels of the Subject Matter conjoint feature, conditional on country. Colors vary by country and match the colors used in Figure 4. Outcome is trustworthiness of the news story—participants were asked if they think the story they were read is trustworthy, and they rated the story on a 1–4 scale (1 = Untrustworthy, 4 = Trustworthy). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. As opposed to Figures 1, 2, and 3, the results are weighted to be representative of the adult population in each country individually. However, the gray dashed lines in each panel represent the overall marginal mean for that level of the conjoint feature, calculated using the overall weights. Colors match those used in Figure 4 to allow for comparison across the figures.

4.4 Sectarianism and Interventionism

Levels of authoritarianism do not explain variation across the countries in our sample as expected. What can explain the variation we observe? This section further explores the patterns illustrated in Figure 5, in particular in relation to the US-ISIS conspiracy theory where we observe the most variation by country. This exploration focuses on the three countries that have much higher levels of trust in the US-ISIS conspiracy theory than others: Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. Note that the analysis presented in this section is not a pre-registered hypothesis test, but rather an attempt to explain the unexpected observational patterns found in the data.

Our examination of the cases of Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen illustrate that two factors seem particularly important for determining trust in the US-ISIS conspiracy theory. The first factor is the presence of a politicized and tense Sunni-Shia divide. The second is related: the embroilment of two of these countries—Iraq and Yemen—in destabilizing conflict involving foreign interventionary forces.

To examine the first factor, we turn to Figure 6. This figure shows, in the top panel, how Subject Matter affects trust in the news story across all the countries in our sample, with separate estimates for Christians, Shia Muslims, and Sunni Muslims. The remaining panels show the same results for Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen; of these three, Lebanon is the only country with a significant Christian population, and therefore the other two do not have estimates for Christians as a subgroup. Considering the top panel, at first glance, the relevance of the Sunni-Shia divide seems to boil down to the proportion of the population that identifies as Shia. After all, among the Arab Barometer participants who took our conjoint survey, over 99% of respondents who labeled themselves as Shia reside in one of these three countries. The overall effect (top panel of Figure 6) across countries clearly supports the existence of a Sunni-Shia divide in responses. While Shia Muslims have a larger effect estimate than the other groups for all effect estimates, the US-ISIS conspiracy theory sticks out as particularly divisive, with an effect estimate a bit over 1.5 points (around 40% of the scale) larger for Shia Muslims than either Sunni Muslims or Christians. It is theoretically plausible that Shia Muslims would be more trusting of a story that links ISIS, an organization whose theocratic beliefs originate within

a strain of Sunni Islam, with the US, another disliked adversary. However, there are also elements in this overall analysis that hint at complications to this simple picture. For instance, Shia Muslims are more likely than other groups to also support the US-Iran conspiracy theory—even though Iran, itself a Shiite theocratic Republic, supports numerous Shiite groups in our countries of interest.

To further explore this factor, we turn to the country-level results in panels 2, 3, and 4 of Figure 6. Here, it becomes clear that the Sunni-Shia divide, while still evident at the country-level, is overemphasized in the first panel because of the overwhelming majority of Sunni Muslims from other countries. In Iraq and Yemen, Shia Muslims are still the most trusting in response to the US-ISIS conspiracy theory, with effect estimates of 1.4 (SE = 0.1) and 1.2 (SE = 0.2) respectively. However, Sunni Muslims also respond to the US-ISIS profile with high levels of trust (0.75, SE = 0.15 in Iraq; 0.46, SE = 0.1 in Yemen), especially when compared to the negative cross-country effect estimate in panel 1 (-0.45, SE = 0.05). This finding indicates that, in the sectarian climate of these countries, Sunni Muslims are also more likely to support the US-ISIS conspiracy theory. Why might this be the case? One answer may be that the sectarian climate makes Sunni Muslims more motivated to link ISIS with other disliked entities such as the US. Other recent research (Romney et al., 2021) has shown similar linkages on Arabic-language social media, and this research attributes that linkage to motivated reasoning among Sunni Muslims—i.e., a desire to attribute ISIS to the United States rather than Sunni Islam. Other recent research about Yemen indicates a similar link in popular consciousness between al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula and the US's interests in the region (Phillips, 2019).

However, another factor might explain the results, especially in Iraq and Yemen, and that is the embroilment of both of these countries in violent conflicts in which foreign interventionary forces play a large role. Saudi and Iranian proxy wars being carried out in both countries have resulted in destabilization and loss of life. For instance, data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) indicate that organized violent events during the time period in which our surveys were administered (i.e. September 2018 to January 2019) were extremely high in Iraq (approximately 41 per million adults) and Yemen (approximately 289 per million adults).²³ The only other country with

²³See Section E.3 in the appendix for details on these data.

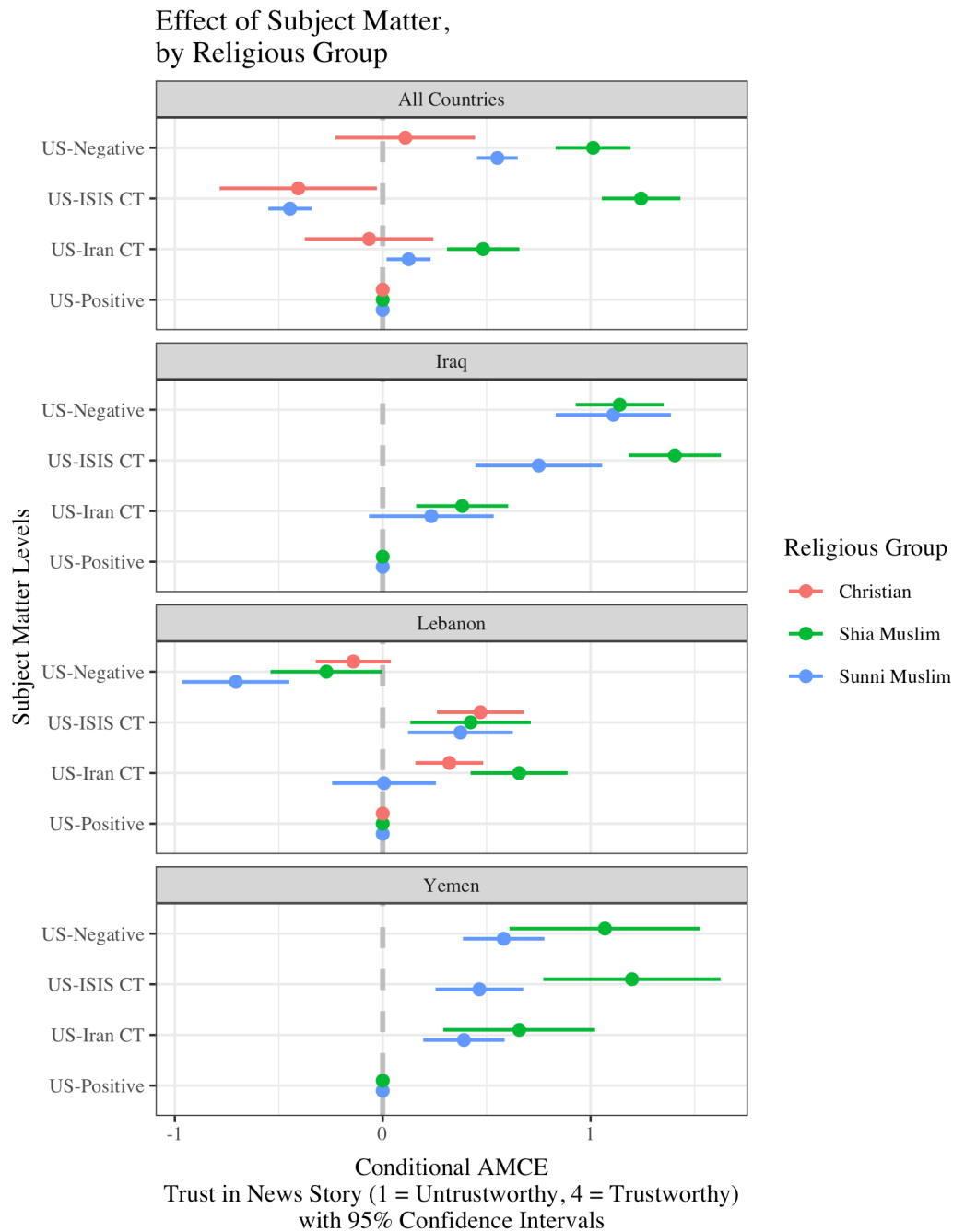


Figure 6: Effect of Subject Matter, as estimated using AMCEs for levels of the Subject Matter conjoint feature, by country and conditional on religion. Outcome is trustworthiness of the news story—participants were asked if they think the story they were read is trustworthy, and they rated the story on a 1–4 scale (1 = Untrustworthy, 4 = Trustworthy). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. For the top panel (“All Countries”), the standardized weights are used; for the country panels, country-specific weights are used. Note that some units are dropped because of non-response, not identifying as Sunni or Shia, or identifying as a religion not analyzed here. See Section [E.1](#) in the Appendix for detail.

similar levels of violent incidents is Palestine (83 per million), where the source of those incidents is the ongoing conflict with Israel rather than the regional power politics fueling violence in Iraq and Yemen. The average for other countries, on the other hand, is approximately 3 events per million. The US's history of intervention in the region, as well as its close ties to some of the regional powers involved in these conflicts, may cause survey participants to link the US and ISIS in a conspiratorial manner.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

We fielded a conjoint survey experiment in 10 Arab countries to explore variation in belief in US-related conspiracies, manipulating three elements of a hypothetical news story: the Source, and Medium, and the Subject Matter. We were able to evaluate claims about the relationship between micro-level factors (such as political knowledge and anti-US sentiment) and trust in conspiracy theories. We were also able to evaluate claims about the relationship between macro-level factors (such as the degree of authoritarianism) and citizens' trust in conspiracy theories. What we found offered both confirmation of expected results and surprising findings. Participants did not respond to the source of the story, responded negatively (as expected) to social media as the medium, and had responses to the subject matter that were both expected (with the US-Iran CT) and unexpected (with the US-ISIS CT). In general, there was more variation across respondents than expected, which allowed us to explore micro- and macro-level factors that affect trust in conspiracy theories.

At the micro-level, we found that a correlation discovered in previous work between political knowledge and trust in conspiracy theories did not generalize to this context. We also found that the relationship between anti-US sentiment and trust in conspiracy theories is not as straightforward as some might expect. In fact, for one of our conspiracy theories—the US-ISIS CT—increased anti-US sentiment is associated with *decreased* trust in the conspiracy theory, a result we attribute to the way in which support for ISIS, anti-US sentiment, and trust in conspiracy theories coincide. At the macro-level, we found that higher levels of authoritarianism, as measured using Polity2, are not associated

with higher trust in conspiracy theories; if anything, the opposite observational pattern exists. Rather, for the conspiracy theory in which there is the most variation—the US-ISIS conspiracy theory—the main macro-level factors explaining trust appear to be sectarianism, in particular Sunni-Shia sectarianism, and foreign intervention in violent conflicts.

These findings provide insights into why citizens trust US-related conspiracy theories, and show that a nuanced understanding of country-specific factors is necessary to develop a full picture of this phenomenon. They challenge the assumption that belief in conspiracy theories in the Arab Middle East is a straightforward function of anti-US sentiment, but future work could probe this more by looking at a wider variety of US-related conspiracy theories. Our conspiracy theories contain specific references to other potentially adversarial entities for respondents. This adds realism to our design, since these conspiracy theories were ones we came across in the media and were relevant to Middle Eastern politics at the time, but it also provokes questions about the extent to which our findings would generalize to conspiracy theories involving other regional entities. We hope that future work will build on our findings to continue to explore trust in conspiracy theories in the Arab Middle East and in other contexts.

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