

**Shaped Attitudes: Economic
Pessimism and Attitudes Toward
Migrants in the MENA Region**

What explains variations in citizens' attitudes towards immigrants?

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1 Introduction

Debates over immigration often move faster than the evidence. Across both OECD and non-OECD settings, research on fiscal impact finds that immigrants' long run net contributions are frequently neutral or positive, yet "fiscal drain" narratives remain politically powerful¹. Global and regional reporting from the IOM similarly emphasizes that migrants commonly fill structural labor shortages and contribute through consumption, remittances, and pension systems. Public opinion, however, tends to anchor on highly visible pressures like crowded schools, rising rents, and strained health services, whether or not migrants are the primary cause of those strains.

This mismatch between "economic reality" and "economic anxiety" is especially consequential in parts of the Global South, where volatility and segmented labor markets make perceptions of scarcity easier to politicize. In the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), for example, labor markets are often structured around a dual system in which citizens cluster in public sector or higher skill roles while non-national concentrate in lower wage, informal, or temporary work². That structure can amplify the impression of direct competition during shocks, even when the measurable labor-market effects are limited or concentrated within migrant heavy sector³. Consistent with that logic, Dennison argues that economic pessimism helps predict anti-immigrant sentiment across the region, more than objective labor-market conditions.

Perceptions do not form in a vacuum, they are shaped by institutions and identity boundaries that define who belongs and what rights are treated as "normal." In many MENA contexts, migration governance is less a stable legal regime than a discretionary, often aid-dependent patchwork. States may avoid binding commitments such as international law frameworks, and rely instead on their own arrangements (e.g. MoUs with UNHCR) that make protection more contingent and revocable⁴. External financing can also condition reforms and their durability⁵, while temporary or conditional models of migrant inclusion reinforce in-group and out-group distinctions⁶. Those boundaries can

¹Alex Nowrasteh. "The Fiscal Impact of Immigration", CATO Institute (2014), www.cato.org/workingpapers

²Mohammed Ouheimmou, "Comparative Analysis of Migration Policies and Social Transformations in the MENA Region", *Perceptions* Vol. XXV, no. 1: 43 (2020).

³Fallah, Belal et al. "The impact of refugees on employment and wages in Jordan", *Journal of Development Economics* 139: 204 (2019). DOI: 10.1016/j.jdeveco.2019.03.009

⁴Maja Janmyr. "No Country of Asylum: 'Legitimizing' Lebanon's Rejection of the 1951 Refugee Convention", *International Journal of Refugee Law* 29, no. 3 (2017): 465, DOI: 10.1093/ijrl/eex026.

⁵Michael Clemens. "The Economic and Fiscal Effects of Granting Refugees Formal Labor Market Access", Center for Global Development, working paper no. 496 (2018): 7

⁶Densua Mumford. "Building Regional Communities: The Role of Regional Organizations in Africa", in *Global-*

then be activated through threat narratives and scapegoating during periods of strain, as Abudyak shows⁷, even when material evidence is ambiguous.

This capstone asks what explains variation in citizens' attitudes toward immigrants? Particularly when economic stress is widespread, but its causes and "culprits" are contested? Building on the expectation and weaken solidarity, I test whether evaluations of the national economy are associated with (1) support for concrete protections for migrant workers –measured here through attitudes toward foreign domestic workers' rights– and (2) perceived job competition from migrants. To do this, I use the Arab Barometer's Wave VIII surveys (fielded September 2023 to July 2024) and model the relationship between economic evaluation and mechanisms based on identity that can connect the perception of "hard times" to exclusionary preferences.

2 Theory and Context

2.1 Institutional fragility and aid dependence

In regions labeled as "developing" or "less developed", migration governance operates through weak, fragmented, and highly discretionary institutional arrangements, rather than through comprehensive immigration laws or stable asylum systems. While global migration governance is guided by frameworks such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, which defines a refugee and outlines minimum rights including non-refoulement, access to courts, work, and education⁸, large segments of the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa have not fully incorporated these standards into national legislation. As Janmyr notes⁹, several MENA states deliberately avoid binding treaties in order to retain flexibility over migrant entry, residence, and reintegration, preferring ad-hoc policies that can be altered rapidly in response to political pressures. Even where cooperation agreements exist, such as Memoranda of Understanding between states and UNHCR or IOM, Al-Makhzoumi & Al-Arsi emphasize that these are soft-law instruments¹⁰, affirming basic rights but carrying little enforceable legal weight. This

izing Regionalism and International Relations, ed. Beatrix Futák-Campbell. Bristol University Press, 2021. DOI: 10.46692/9781529217162.005

⁷Amna Abudyak. 2022. "Recreation of Girard's 'scapegoating Mechanism' in Discourse of National Identity Politics", *International Social Science Review* 98, no. 3: 5 (2022). <https://issr.ungjournals.org/articles/25>

⁸United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees", UNHCR: art. 1, 16, 22, 33 (2010). <https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention>.

⁹Janmyr, "No Country of Asylum: 'Legitimizing' Lebanon's Rejection of the 1951 Refugee Convention", 438-449

¹⁰Omar Mahmoud Al-Makhzoumi and Sarah Mahmoud Al-Arasi. "Refugee rights in Jordan in the light of the memorandum of understanding 'Application study on Syrian refugees' ", *Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues* 24, no. 6 (2021): 1-27

combination produces a governance environment where migrants' rights and state obligations fluctuate with administrative discretion rather than fixed legal guarantees.

Institutional fragility is reinforced by heavy reliance on external financial and technical assistance. IOM's regional reports (2016; 2019; 2020-24 Strategy) repeatedly stress that migration governance in MENA depends on donor funding to support border management, labor market reforms, registration systems, and humanitarian operations. This dependence creates two vulnerabilities. First, many policy reforms are externally incentivized rather than domestically institutionalized. And second, programs can be scaled up or down depending on donor priorities, not local needs. Chatelard's political economy analysis shows a similar pattern: governments strategically utilize migration, whether labor migration, transit migration, or forced displacement, to secure aid, investment, or geopolitical support¹¹. Clemens et al. demonstrate that reforms such as expanding formal labor access for refugees or migrants often occur only when paired with external financing, meaning new rights are sometimes temporary or unevenly implemented. In this broader context, migration governance becomes structurally dependent on volatile funding streams, increasing the system's susceptibility to political shocks.

At a broader scale, Mumford's de-Eurocentric account of regional organizations suggests that in many non-Western contexts, regional institutions are designed less to emulate EU-style legal integration and more to manage insecurity and construct limited political communities. States use regional bodies to coordinate on migration, security, and economic issues in ways that reinforce existing hierarchies and state sovereignty, rather than pooling authority¹². This perspective helps explain why migration governance in regions like MENA often combines strong state control, reliance on external partners, and only partial regional coordination, instead of converging on a rights-based, supranational asylum regime.

Further, in the absence of comprehensive migration laws, many states rely on parallel regimes and constantly shifting administrative directives. Janmyr document how different nationalities of migrants (labor migrants, asylum seekers, displaced groups, transit migrants) may be governed under entirely separate procedures¹³ each subject to rapid change¹⁴. Ouheimmou describes MENA migration gover-

¹¹Chatelard, "Jordan: A Refugee Haven", 3.

¹²Mumford, "Building Regional Communities: The Role of Regional Organizations in Africa", 83.

¹³Visa rules, sponsorship, systems, security vetting, temporary protection categories, humanitarian permits.

¹⁴Janmyr, "No Country of Asylum: 'Legitimizing' Lebanon's Rejection of the 1951 Refugee Convention", 465

nance as an “open economy, closed society” system. States welcome migrant labor as long as it remains temporary, politically silent, and economically flexible, but maintain strict control over long-term residence and integration. With this model, sponsorship rules may tighten during economic downturns, residency renewals may be costly or restrictive, labor nationalization programs may suddenly expand (e.g. Nitiqat)¹⁵, and deportation or regularization campaigns may appear with little predictability. IOM’s 2024 World Migration Report further shows that this instability is common globally, especially in regions where migration is governed through administrative decrees rather than statutory law.

Because these systems are shallow and aid-dependence, migration policy becomes a highly responsive and sometimes volatile arena for managing social and economic anxieties. Survey evidence from the Arab Barometer and comparative work indicate that economic pessimism and perceptions of strain on services are closely linked to preferences for more restrictive immigration policies, even when objective labor market impacts are limited. IOM’s regional and global reports likewise highlight how spikes in unemployment, inflation, or insecurity are often followed by abrupt tightening of migration controls or abrupt shifts in cooperation with international organizations. In this sense, institutional fragility and aid dependence do not just shape migrants’ legal precarity, they also make immigration policy unusually sensitive to shifts in perceived economic conditions and public mood.

2.2 Public Perceptions and Identity-Based Attitudes

Explanations of variation in support for hosting refugees often go beyond economics to highlight the role of social identity, scapegoating, and demographic or psychological factors. In the Middle East, these dynamics are particularly complex because of overlapping religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities between hosts and refugees. Yet shared identity does not necessarily translate into solidarity.

Keçecioglu’s study of Arab–Turkish perceptions of Syrians shows that cultural and sectarian similarities may coexist with exclusionary attitudes. Despite shared language roots, religious traditions, and regional proximity, Turkish and Arab respondents frequently distinguished themselves from Syrians, framing them as outsiders in terms of economic competition and social disruption¹⁶. The study emphasizes that identity boundaries are socially constructed and can harden under conditions of eco-

¹⁵Ouhemmou, “Comparative Analysis of Migration Policies and Social Transformations in the MENA Region”, 43.

¹⁶Zeyno Keçecioglu, “FORCED MIGRATION AND INTERGROUP RELATIONS: ARAB-TURKISH CITIZENS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SYRIANS IN TURKEY” (M.A. diss. Sabanci University, 2020), 9.

nomic or political stress, meaning that sectarian or cultural proximity cannot be assumed to generate support for refugee hosting. Mumford acknowledges that there is conflict even within communities and that “there is no need for pacifism to be a constructive feature of a community”¹⁷. This insight is crucial for regions where tribal affiliations already shape identity politics, and where international immigrants are often seen through the lens of sectarian and economic threat rather than kinship.

Another mechanism shaping public opinion is scapegoating. Abudyak’s analysis of scapegoat mechanisms highlights how both political elites and publics shift blame onto refugees during periods of strain¹⁸. Refugees become convenient culprits for broader problems such as unemployment, inflation, or declining public services, regardless of whether the evidence supports these claims. This process is political as much as psychological: elites use refugees to deflect accountability for structural economic issues, while citizens adopt scapegoating narratives to make sense of hardship. This suggests that perceptions of the economy and support for hosting are not independent, but rather mediated through the narratives that attribute responsibility for economic decline to migrant inflows.

Finally, broader survey-based research from the Arab Barometer illustrates the socio-demographic and psychological underpinnings of attitudes toward migration. Dennison’s cross-country analysis finds that factors such as youth, higher education, being unmarried, and lower religiosity consistently predict stronger migration aspirations¹⁹, while stress and economic pessimism increase both the desire to emigrate and, in some contexts, the willingness to do so irregularly. While this work focuses on propensity to migrate rather than support for hosting, it suggests that the same variables, particularly perceptions of economic decline and psychological stress, may also condition how citizens evaluate immigrants.

2.3 Economic Dimensions: Real vs Perceived Impacts

Economic explanations have long stood at the center of debates about immigration, yet research consistently shows a gap between perceived and actual economic impacts of migrants. Across regions, citizens often view immigrants as competitors for jobs or burdens on public services. However, em-

¹⁷Mumford, “Building Regional Communities: The Role of Regional Organizations in Africa”, 80.

¹⁸Abudyak, “Recreation of Girard’s “Scapegoating Mechanism”, 13

¹⁹James Dennison, “Re-thinking the drivers of regular and irregular migration: evidence from the MENA region”, *Comparative Migration Studies* 10, no. 1: 18 (2022). DOI: 10.1186/s40878-022-00296-y

irical evidence from diverse contexts paints a much more complex picture. In many labor markets worldwide, immigrants do not uniformly displace native workers nor depress wages, instead, their effects vary by sector, skill group, and local economic structure.

Studies of labor markets across the Middle East and other regions demonstrate that migrants frequently cluster in informal, low-wage, or complementary sectors, where they are more likely to compete with other migrants than with citizens. Wahba²⁰ finds that large inflows of displaced populations often integrate into segments already dominated by non-nationals, producing limited direct competition for citizens and, in some cases, contributing to local demand that stimulates employment in services and trade. Similar global analyses suggest that migrants can generate positive advancements when given opportunities to participate in the economy rather than being confined to informal markets (Clemens et al.).

Fiscal debates reveal a similar tension between fear and evidence, Across th OECD and non-OECD countries, immigrants' long term fiscal contributions are often neutral or positive, contradicting widespread beliefs that they strain state budgets. Public narratives about fiscal drain persist even when tax contributions, entrepreneurship, and demographic renewal offset costs (Nowrasteh). IOM;s global and regional reports further show that migrant workers often fill structural labor shortages while contributing to pension systems, remittances, and domestic consumption. Yet public opinion tends to emphasize visible pressures, such as crowded schools, rising rents, or overburdened health systems, regardless of whether these pressures are caused by migrants or by underlying policy and infrastructure deficits.

In many countries, especially in the Global South, economic volatility and segmented labor markets heighten the prominence of economic perceptions in shaping attitudes toward immigration. Chatelard and Ouhemou both highlight how states in the MENA region structure their economies around dual labor markets: nationals concentrated in public-sector or higher skill roles, and migrants in low wage, informal, or temporary positions. This segmentation creates the impression from direct competition. When global shocks occur, like rising food prices or cuts in development assistance, these structural dependencies become visible, feding the public narratives of scarcity and insecurity. Dennison under-

²⁰Fallah et al. "The impact of refugees on employment and wages in Jordan", 204.

scores that economic pessimism, rather than actual labor market conditions, is one of the strongest predictors of anti-immigrant sentiment across the region.

Support for immigration can't be understood solely through measurable economic impacts, but also through how citizens interpret economic conditions. This happens especially in contexts with segmented labor markets, public services strained, and economic performance linked to aid or remittances. The persistent gap between objective outcomes and subjective beliefs (economic reality vs economic anxiety) plays a decisive role in shaping general public attitudes toward migrants.

2.4 Institutionalizing the In/Out Group Divide

The politics of immigration cannot be separated from the institutional practices that define who counts as an insider and who remains an outsider. Migration and asylum policies both reflect and reproduce in-group/out-group boundaries, shaping how citizens interpret the presence of migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers. For several MENA countries, the decision to not ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention, and instead rely on Memoranda of Understanding with UNHCR or on generic foreigners' legislation, leaves protection largely contingent on administrative discretion and international partnerships rather than on comprehensive national law²¹. This selective, soft-law approach signals that migrants' rights are conditional and revocable, reinforcing the idea of non-nationals as guests tolerated through external support rather than as members with durable claims. Restrictions on formal labor market access and residency further institutionalize a distinct social category for migrants, sustaining perceptions of dependence rather than participation.

These institutional patterns resonate with theories of social identity and group conflict. Cultural and religious proximity does not guarantee solidarity. Citizens often accentuate differences, portraying refugees as economic competitors or cultural threats despite shared regional or religious backgrounds. Survey-based work on attitudes to immigrants in Europe, North America, and Africa likewise finds that perceived threat to status, identity, or security is strongly associated with opposition to immigration²². Policy designs that emphasize temporariness, limited rights, or spatial segregation implicitly

²¹Makhzoumi and Al-Arasi, "Refugee rights in Jordan in the Light of the Memorandum of Understanding: Application Study on Syrian Refugees", 7

²²Godfred O. Boateng, Karin Wachter, Roseanne C. Schuster, Tanya L. Burgess, Mary Bunn. "A Scoping Review of Instruments Used in Measuring Social Support among Refugees in Resettlement", *International Journal of Environ-*

validate these distinctions between “us” and “them”.

At the regional level, MENA migration regimes often institutionalize exclusion through frameworks such as kafala or labor nationalization campaigns, keeping migrant labor essential to the economy yet structurally excluded from full social membership. Similar patterns appear elsewhere, where programs bring in migrants for work but limit their ability to settle or have a political voice²³. Mumford’s account of regional organizations outside the West suggests that these institutions are designed less to foster free movement and political integration, as in the EU²⁴, and more to manage insecurity, coordinate limited cooperation, and preserve state control. In such settings, regional and national institutions work together to stabilize migration flows while maintaining sharp distinctions between insiders and outsiders.

Policies, institutions, and identity interact to sustain public ambivalence toward immigration. By limiting rights and framing migrant presence as conditional, states deepen in-group/out-group divisions that can be activated whenever economic or political pressures rise. These divisions, in turn, shape how citizens interpret economic strain and social change, making it more likely that migrants are seen as a pressure on jobs, services, or cohesion even when objective impacts are modest. In the remainder of the paper, I draw on survey data and statistical models to test how these institutional and perceptual dynamics translate into support for hosting migrants, with particular attention to the role of economic pessimism.

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Data

To answer why some individuals support the hosting of refugees more than others, we will rely on data from the Arab Barometer. Arab Barometer has conducted international standard social scientific surveys across the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) since 2006. The survey employs area-probability sampling, providing representativeness at both the national and governorate/region

mental Research and Public Health, no. 21: 3 (2024). DOI: 10.3390/ijerph21060805

²³McAuliffe, M. and L.A. Oucho (eds.) “World Migration Report 2024”, International Organization for Migration, 93 (2024)

²⁴Mumford, “Building Regional Communities: The Role of Regional Organizations in Africa”, 86

levels. Interviews are conducted in person in respondents' homes. Its most recent set of surveys—and the one analyzed for this paper—is the eighth wave, conducted between September 2023 and July 2024 across eight countries: Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia. Exclusion of other countries was either due to funding limitations, ongoing instability, or government restrictions on full and fair access to their ability to conduct the survey.

Each wave of the survey, conducted annually, includes more than 15,000 citizens. Per country, smaller countries like Kuwait, Mauritania, and Palestine had around 1,200 responses, and the remaining had around 2,400. Respondents were 18 years old or older. Questions were asked mainly in Arabic (or Kurdish for some regions in Iraq). The survey was designed to be completed in an average of 45 minutes, using Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) as its mode of collection. Households were selected using systematic sampling with a fixed interval, beginning from a randomly chosen starting point, and the specific respondents were selected through a Kish grid. The response rate varied widely between countries, from 22% in Kuwait to 95% in Mauritania.

This Arab Barometer dataset provides insight into MENA public opinion and how priorities, needs, and concerns are shifting along with the regional change. It covers a broad set of topics—such as the situation in Gaza, international relations, the economy, trust in government and performance, gender norms and women's status, identity and discrimination, and environmental issues.

3.2 Hypotheses and variables

This project tests two related hypotheses about how economic perceptions shape attitudes toward migrants. The first hypothesis claims is that citizens' views of the national economy influence how much support they give to immigrants and to policies that protect immigrant workers' rights. At the individual level, economic perceptions were operationalized using two items from the Arab Barometer: Q101, which asks respondents to evaluate the current economic situation in their country, and Q102, which asks how they expect the economic situation to change over the next two to three years. Together, these questions capture both present evaluations and short-term expectations about the economy. My main outcomes for this hypothesis are three questions about foreign domestic workers' rights (Q916_1, Q916_2, Q916_3), covering whether domestic workers should keep their passports, have one guaranteed

day off per week, and be able to hold a bank account. I will call these FDW-rights and analyze them both separately and through a combined ordered index of support for foreign domestic workers' rights.

The second hypothesis is that citizens' economic perceptions shape how economically secure they feel in relation to migrants. That is, whether they worry that migrants might threaten their own or their family's job prospects. I measure this "economic security vs. threat" dimension using Q869F, which asks respondents how likely it is that they or someone in their family would fail to get a job while an equally or less qualified migrant receives it instead. Higher values on this item indicate greater perceived job competition from migrants. In all models, Q101 and Q102 serve as the main independent variables, while the FDW-rights index and its three component items (for Hypothesis 1) and the job-threat item Q869F (for Hypothesis 2) are treated as dependent variables. Additional variables such as age, gender, and country are included later as controls rather than as core variables in the hypotheses themselves.

3.3 Regularization, feature selection, and regression analysis

First, the outcome and key predictors were prepared so they could be used in feature selection and regression. For all questions with non-answer codes (98 = "Don't know", 99 = "Refused"), a working subset was created in which those values were treated as missing rather than dropped from the original data. This is especially important for the FDW-rights items Q916_1–Q916_3: because "don't know" and "refused" do not represent real positions on the support–oppose scale, they cannot be meaningfully averaged. After flagging 98/99 as missing, each item was reverse-coded so that higher numeric values always correspond to more support for FDW rights.

Next, I assessed whether these three items could reasonably be combined into a single index. Cronbach's alpha showed that Q916_2 (day off) and Q916_3 (bank account) are fairly strongly correlated, while Q916_1 (passport possession) is somewhat less correlated with the other two. Overall internal consistency was just below the conventional 0.7 cutoff, which suggests moderate but not high reliability. On that basis, constructing an index was still viable, but I also run models for each item separately as a robustness check. The index was built by averaging the three reverse-coded items for respondents with at least two non-missing answers, then cut this mean into four ordered levels

(“low”, “medium-low”, “medium-high”, “high” support). This category scale serves as one of my main dependent variables in the ordinal regression models.

Then, the main explanatory variables and controls were cleaned and recoded. Current and future economic evaluations were converted from numeric codes to ordered factors that distinguish “very good”, “good”, “bad”, and “very bad” current conditions and a five-point scale for expected future change. Age was turned into a numeric variable and clearly invalid entries (e.g., 99999, which indicates no answer) were set to missing. Gender (Q1002) was retained as a simple 1/2 indicator (male/female). Even after these cleaning steps and the requirement of valid responses on the outcome, the analysis still keeps roughly 90% of the original observations.

With these variables prepared, a series of cumulative logit (ordinal logistic) regression models were estimated. I began with a simple model that regressed the FDW support index on current economic evaluations only, then added controls for future economic expectations, age, gender, and country fixed effects. Each model, is also visualized as stacked bar charts, which show how the distribution of support levels changes across economic categories. The same modeling strategy was repeated separately for Q916.1, Q916.2, and Q916.3 to check whether any one right behaves differently from the combined index. Finally, I applied the same cleaning, reverse-coding, and modeling workflow to the job-threat item Q869F, which asks how likely it is that an equally or less qualified migrant would get a job instead of the respondent. This outcome is modeled with and without controls and visualized with a stacked probability plot, providing a second, more threat-focused way to evaluate how economic perceptions are linked to attitudes toward migrants.

4 Descriptive Patterns

As an initial, descriptive assessment on how respondents in Arab Barometer Wave VIII view the economy and migration, Fig. 1 presents what is considered the “most important challenge in [YOUR] country.” The national economic situation and related issues, such as prices and unemployment, dominate across the MENA countries in the sample. In most countries, these economic items clearly outnumber other options like security, public services, or climate change. Immigration to the respon-

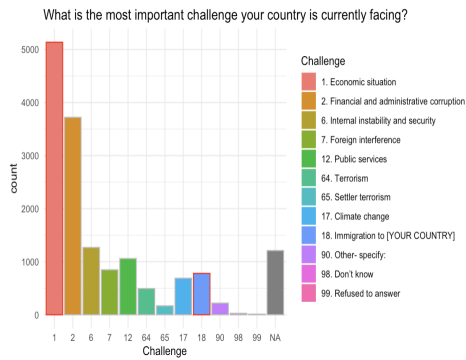


Fig. 1: Most important national challenge named by respondents.

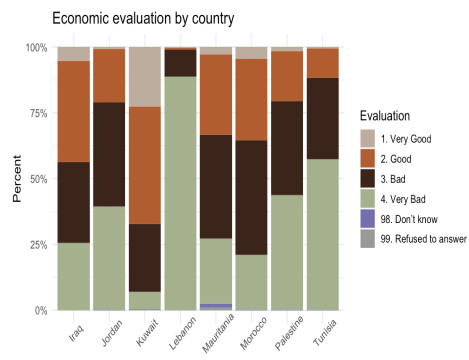


Fig. 2: Perceived national economic situation, by country.

dent’s country appears in the distribution but is selected much less frequently than core economic concerns, suggesting that for most respondents migration is nested inside a broader story about economic hardship rather than standing on its own as the main problem.

Fig. 2 shows evaluations of the current national economic situation by country. In almost eight countries, a majority of respondents choose “bad” or “very bad”, with only a small minority rating the economy as “good” or “very good”. There is a cross-national variation, some countries have more “very bad” respondents than others, but the overall picture is one of widespread economic pessimism. This confirms that my key independent variables, current and future economic assessments, capture meaningful variation in how citizens view macroeconomic conditions.

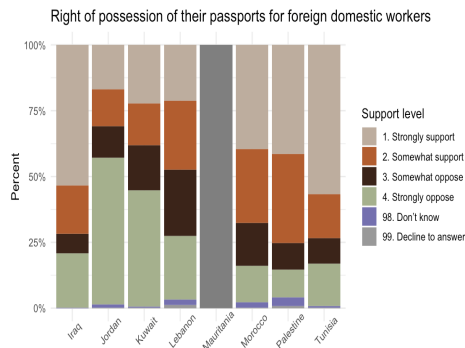


Fig. 3: Support for foreign domestic workers keeping their passports, by country.

Next, I look at support for three specific rights for foreign domestic workers (FDWs): the right to keep their passports, to have one guaranteed day off per week, and to have a bank account to receive

their salaries. Figures 3 to 5 show that support is generally high but not uniform across these rights. The most widely supported rights are a weekly day off and a bank account. Large majorities choose “somewhat support” or “strongly support” for these items. Support for allowing FDWs to keep their passports is lower, with a larger share of respondents in the “oppose” categories. This pattern suggests that respondents are most comfortable with rights that fit standard employment norms and are more hesitant about rights that reduce employer control.

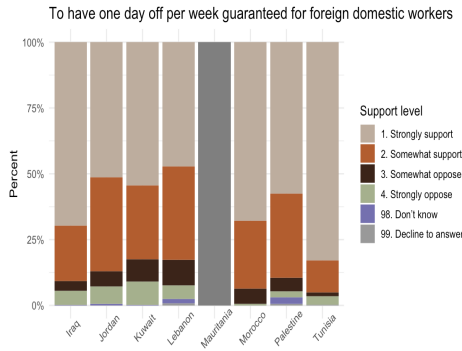


Fig. 4: Support for guaranteeing foreign domestic workers one day off per week, by country.

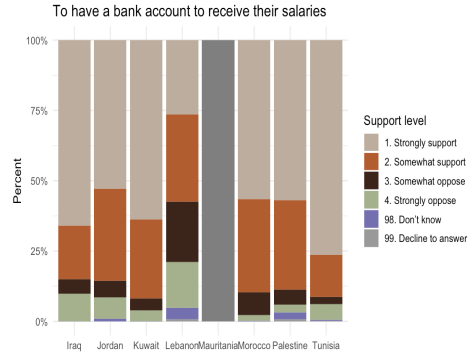


Fig. 5: Support for foreign domestic workers receiving wages through a bank account, by country.

5 Results

5.1 Support for FDW rights

To study Hypothesis 1, the first ordinal logistic regression uses the FDW support index as the dependent variable and the current evaluation of the economy (Q101) as the only predictor. Compared to respondents who say the economy is “very good,” those who rate it “good” or “bad” have slightly higher log-odds of being in a higher support category, while the coefficient for “very bad” is small and statistically insignificant. Substantively, these effects are modest. The share of respondents in the “medium-high” and “high support” categories remains large and quite similar across all four economic evaluations.

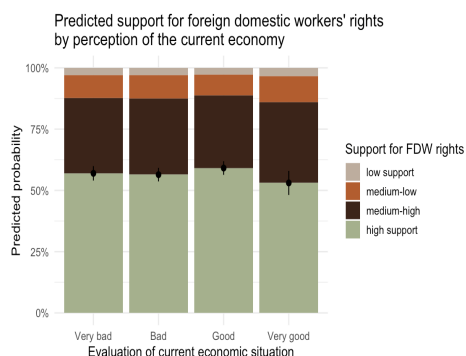


Fig. 6a: Stacked Predicted Probabilities

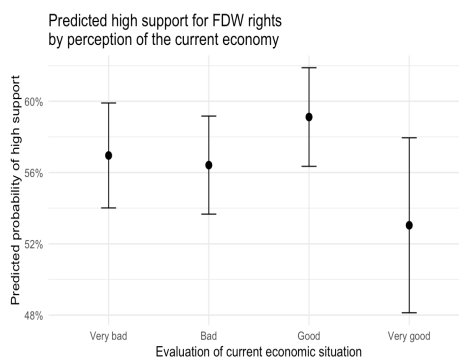


Fig. 6b: 95% Confidence Intervals

Fig. 6: Support for FDW rights is essentially unchanged across economic evaluations. The confidence intervals overlap across categories, indicating no statistically significant differences.

To make this clearer, the predicted distribution of support categories by economic evaluation is plotted as stacked bars, and then the 95% confidence intervals for the probability of “high support” are isolated. The stacked bars show little visual change. Regardless of whether people say the economy is “very good,” “good,” “bad,” or “very bad,” the top two support categories dominate. In Fig. 6b, the confidence intervals for the four economic categories overlap substantially. This overlap means that the differences in predicted probabilities are not statistically meaningful at conventional levels. In short, the simple model provides little evidence that more negative economic views are associated with weaker support for FDW rights.

Then, a fuller model is estimated, adding future economic expectations (Q102), age, gender, and country fixed effects. Once these controls are included, the pattern for current economic evaluations remains essentially the same. Most coefficients on current economic evaluations (*econ_now*) are small and often not statistically significant, and adding future economic evaluations (*econ_future*) does not reveal a strong, consistent gradient either. Age and country account for more of the variation in FDW support than economic perceptions do. The predicted probabilities from this full model again show that high support for FDW rights is the modal outcome across economic categories, with confidence intervals that largely overlap. These results suggest that Hypothesis 1, that “bad economy” equals “less rights support,” is not supported by the data.

Because the index combines three distinct rights, I also estimate separate ordinal logit models

with each FDW item as the outcome. For the day off and bank account items, the effects of current economic evaluations are again small and mostly insignificant. Running the models at the item level, therefore, reinforces the message from the index: economic pessimism does not translate into a clear withdrawal of support for these basic protections.

5.2 Perceived job threat from immigrants

The second part of the analysis turns to Hypothesis 2, that economic perceptions shape how economically secure people feel in relation to migrants, specifically whether they fear that migrants might take jobs that they or their family members could have obtained. This dependent variable is coded as an ordered outcome with categories from “very unlikely” to “very likely”. The main predictors are, again, current and future evaluations of the national economy, with age, gender, and country fixed effects as controls.

In contrast to the FDW rights models, the coefficients on economic evaluations in this “threat” model are large and positive. Relative to respondents who say the economy is “very good” or “good,” those who rate it as “bad” or “very bad” have significantly higher log-odds of giving a more threatening answer. The effect remains sizeable even after controlling for expectations about the future economy and for demographic covariates.

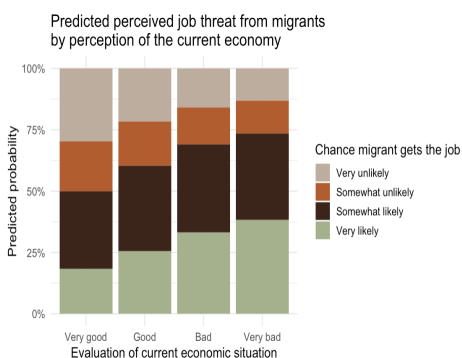


Fig. 7a: Stacked Predicted Probabilities

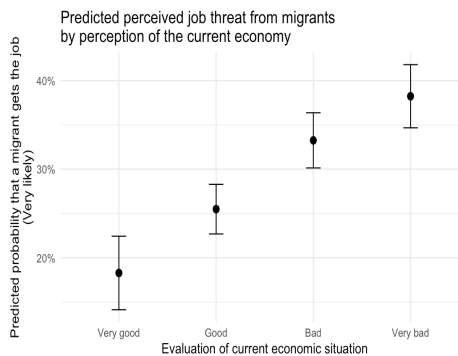


Fig. 7b: 95% Confidence Intervals

Fig. 7: As people’s evaluation of the economy worsens from “very good” to “very bad,” the predicted probability of saying it is “very likely” that a migrant will get the job rises sharply. The confidence intervals barely overlap, indicating these differences are statistically meaningful rather than just noise.

Predicted probabilities based on these models illustrate the above mentioned pattern. In Fig. 7a, as we move from “very good” to “very bad” evaluations of the economy, the “very unlikely” and “somewhat unlikely” segments shrink sharply, while the “somewhat likely” and especially “very likely” segments expand. The gradient is visually steep, respondents who think the economy is “very good” are much less likely to say that a migrant is “very likely” to get the job than those who think the economy is “very bad.”

Fig. 7b focusing on the “very likely” category makes the magnitude of the effect clearer. The predicted probability that a respondent answers “very likely” roughly doubles between the best and worst economic evaluations. Moreover, the 95% confidence intervals around these predicted probabilities don’t overlap between “very good” and “very bad” evaluations, indicating that the differences are statistically meaningful rather than sampling noise. Even between adjacent categories like “good” or “bad,” the intervals are narrow enough that the upward trend is credible.

These results support Hypothesis 2. While support for immigrants’ basic labor rights remains high and relatively stable across economic perceptions, feelings of economic vulnerability to migrants are strongly shaped by how people view the economy. Citizens who think the national economy is doing poorly are much more likely to feel that migrants pose a direct threat to their own or their family’s job prospects. In other words, economic pessimism seems to operate less by eroding support for rights and more by amplifying perceived competition over scarce jobs.

Finally, it is important to note that these are cross-sectional associations. The ordinal logistic regressions reveal strong correlations between economic pessimism and perceived job threat, but they cannot on their own establish that pessimism causes threat perceptions. Other factors, such as trust in the government, local labor conditions, or others, could influence both. In the next steps of this exploration, I complement these results with a small process tracing and comparison over time, to see whether changes in economic conditions and evaluations plausibly precede and help generate stronger job-threat perceptions.

6 Process Tracing

To move beyond cross-sectional regressions, I use a small process tracing exercise that follows attitudes over time in Jordan and Lebanon across Arab Barometer Waves VII and VIII, as well as World Bank reports on these countries' recorded economies. A brief search and analysis of news articles from 2022-2024 will be referenced as evidence for these theories. The goal is not to “prove” causality, but to see whether the observed sequence of macro conditions and micro-level attitudes is at least consistent with a story in which economic deterioration feeds into pessimism, problem diagnoses, blame, and ultimately perceived labor competition from migrants. Jordan and Lebanon are useful contrasts where both host large migrant and refugee populations, but their recent economic trajectories diverged. Between 2022 and 2023, Jordan recorded modest positive growth (around 2.6% and 2.9%, with GDP rising from roughly \$48.8 to \$51 billion), while Lebanon remained in deep crisis, with output still contracting at about -0.6% and -0.8%. In both cases, migrants represent a sizeable share of the population, roughly one third in both states, so economic anxiety has clear potential to be refracted through a migration lens.

To orient the sections that follow, I use the diagram below (Fig. 8) to summarize the hypothesized sequence of links I am probing for plausibility, from worsening economic conditions and pessimism through jobs and prices problem diagnosis and blame, and ultimately to framing migrants as direct job competitors.

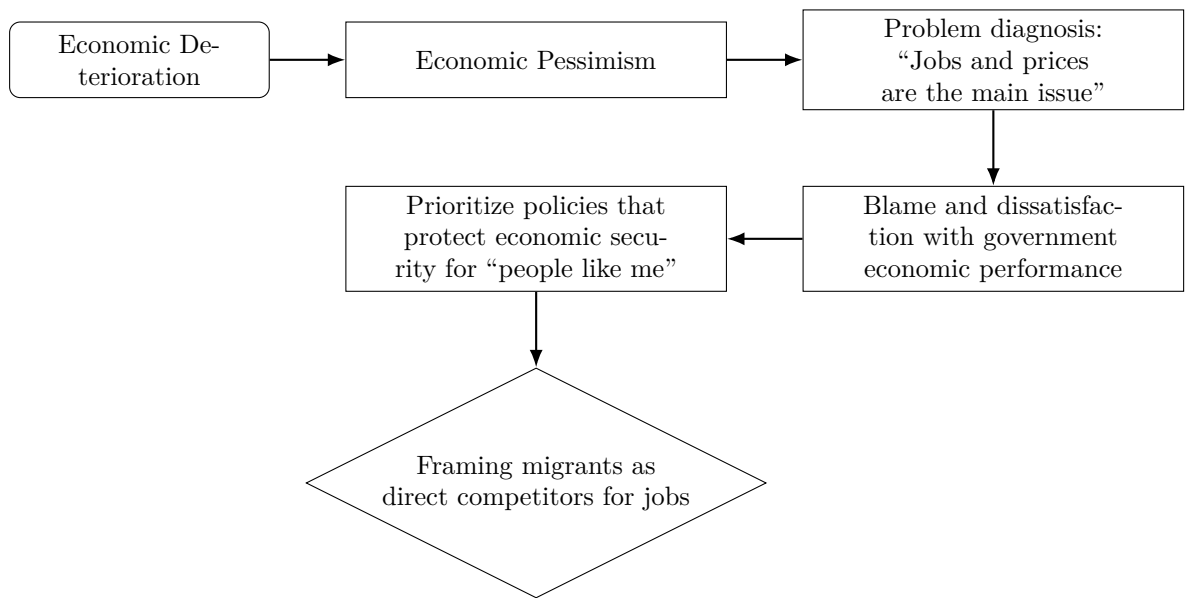


Fig. 8: Flow diagram outlining the process tracing being followed to probe plausibility.

6.1 Economic deterioration → Economic Pessimism

The first step in the mechanism links objective economic deterioration or stagnation to economic pessimism in mass attitudes. In Lebanon, the macro story is straightforward. Continuing economic collapse is mirrored by almost universal pessimism. Already in 2022, about 98% of surveyed Lebanese described the national economy as bad or very bad, rising slightly over 99% in 2023, suggesting that essentially the entire public sees the economy as disastrous. This financial crisis was enhanced by the October 7 escalation. Interviews from Beirut in late 2023 describe cafes “swatting flies,” restaurants losing up to 80% of their business, and a tourism sector, normally responsible for roughly 20% of GDP, hit hard as airlines cut flights and foreign governments warned their citizens to stay away²⁵. Jordan, by contrast, illustrates that modest growth does not prevent pessimism when people feel left behind. As GDP grew slightly by 2-3%, the share describing the economy as bad or very bad rose from roughly 78% in 2022 to nearly 85% in 2023. In both countries, then, sustained crisis or slow, unequal growth is associated with very high levels of economic pessimism, which sets the stage for more specific diagnoses and blame.

²⁵Mia Alberti, “‘It’s scary’: Israel war fears batter Lebanon’s struggling economy”, AlJazeera, October 29, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/10/29/its-scary-israel-war-fears-batter-lebanons-struggling-economy>

6.2 Economic pessimism → problem diagnosis: jobs and prices are the main issue

Pessimism is widespread, people move from a vague sense that “the economy is bad” to more concrete diagnoses, such as jobs and prices. In Jordan, we see evidence of this shift. Across waves, the share naming “the economic situation” in general as the main challenge declines somewhat (from about 64% to 58%), while the share specifically naming “lack of jobs”²⁶ as a main issue rises from roughly 22% to 30%. That pattern suggests that, as pessimism deepens, people narrow their diagnosis toward concrete labor-market pressures rather than a general “economy” category. In Lebanon, by contrast, pessimism is already at the ceiling, and the shares pointing to “the economic situation” or “lack of jobs” as the top challenge actually fall slightly, likely because when everything feels broken, many different problems compete for the “most important” slot. Even so, in both contexts, economic worries remain central, and in Jordan we can clearly see pessimism crystalizing into a more specific job centered problem definition.

6.3 Problem diagnosis → blame and dissatisfaction with government economic performance

Once people decide that jobs, prices, and basic economic security are the main problems, the next step in the mechanism is to decide who is responsible. In the survey, this shows up in evaluations of government economic performance, in questions about whether the government is doing “good” or “bad” job managing the economy. Conceptually, the expectation is that economic pessimism coupled with a diagnosis centered on jobs and living costs will translate into harsher ratings of government performance. Citizens conclude that if jobs are scarce and prices are rising, the authorities have failed. For further research, it could be beneficial to track whether rising pessimism and job focused problem definitions are accompanied by increases in the share saying the government is doing a “bad” or “very bad” job on the economy in Jordan and Lebanon. Even before running that step, however, the logic is clear. When people think the economy is in crisis and see employment as a core issue, it becomes easier to blame incumbents for not protecting their livelihoods.

²⁶Shahrokh Fardoust, “Challenges new and old: The myriad economic issues affecting MENA through the lens of public opinion”, February 28, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/challenges-new-and-old-myriad-economic-issues-affecting-mena-through-lens-public>

6.4 Blame and dissatisfaction → prioritizing policies that protect economic security for in-groups

Blame can be linked to concrete policy priorities. If citizens believe the government has mishandled the economy, they are more likely to demand policies that directly shore up their own economic security and that of their respective in-group (co-nationals, co-ethnics, etc.) In survey terms, this shows up when respondents choose options that emphasize job creation, wage priorities. The mechanism here is that dissatisfaction with government performance does not remain abstract; it gets translated into preference for redistributive and protective and protective measures that are implicitly (or explicitly) for citizens first. In the next iteration, policy-priority questions to see whether respondents who are pessimistic about the economy and unhappy with government performance are more likely to prioritize economic protections for their own in-group, which would set the stage for seeing migrants as competitors for those same scarce protections.

6.5 Prioritizing economic security for in-group → framing migrants as direct competitors for jobs

These in-group focused economic priorities are connected to perceptions of migrants as labor-market rivals. If people feel that jobs and basic economic security should be reserved for the “people like me,” then any out-group that also seeks work becomes a potential threat. This is also where scapegoating becomes politically useful. During Lebanon’s economic collapse, public discourse and elite rhetoric have increasingly blamed Syrian refugees for economic hardship and job scarcity, helping shift responsibility away from domestic governance failures and toward a visible out-group.²⁷ In the Arab Barometer data, this appears in the 2023 question asking whether it is “very likely” that the respondent or a family member would fail to get a job because an equally or less qualified migrant gets it instead. In both Jordan and Lebanon, about 11–12% of respondents say this outcome is “very likely,” indicating a nontrivial minority who see migrants as direct competitors in a zero-sum labor market. Crucially, this perceived competition sits on top of very high economic pessimism and, in Jordan, a growing focus on jobs as the main problem. The job-threat item is only available in Wave VIII, when the migration module is expanded, but its inclusion still helps identify that perceived job competition is a salient concern for a subset of respondents by 2023.

²⁷Dario Sabaghi, “With Lebanon’s Economic Collapse, Syrian Refugees Become Scapegoats,” June 21, 2023, <https://dawnmena.org/with-lebanons-economic-collapse-syrian-refugees-become-scapegoats/>

Overall, with this process tracing we are able to assess whether the observed patterns in Jordan and Lebanon fit a coherent causal narrative. The sequencing of attitudes is broadly compatible with a story that runs from economic deterioration and pessimism, to a focus on jobs and prices, to blaming the government, and finally to viewing migrants as job competitors. At the same time, the available data, especially the single wave job-threat item and the cross-sectional design, mean that alternative pathways and feedback effects cannot be ruled out. I therefore treat this section as a structured plausibility probe. It sharpens the argument that economic distress can feed into perceived migrant threat, while also highlighting the value of panel or experimental evidence for pinning down the direction and strength of the causal link more precisely.

7 Conclusions

This capstone set out to explain why support for immigration inclusion varies, with a focus on how economic perceptions shape both support for concrete protections and perceived job competition from migrants. Using individual level survey data capturing respondents across multiple social and identity groups in the MENA region, I tested two linked expectations. First, that worse economic evaluations would reduce support for immigrant worker protections, and that worse economic evaluations would intensify job threat perceptions.

The first main finding is that support for baseline protections is high and fairly resilient, even when people believe the economy is performing badly. Descriptively, respondents are most supportive of a guaranteed weekly day off and the right to receive salaries through a bank account, while support is lower for allowing workers to keep their passports. This suggests a boundary between “standard” employment norms and rights that reduce employer control. In the first ordinal logit model, predicted support levels look broadly similar across economic evaluations, presenting little evidence of a meaningful “bad economy” association with less support for rights.

The second main finding is that economic pessimism is strongly associated with perceived job threat from migrants, even when it does not erode support for basic rights. In the job-threat ordinal logit model, respondents who rate the economy as “bad” or “very bad” have substantially higher odds

of saying it is likely that a migrant would get a job instead of them or their family, and the predicted probability of answering “very likely” increases sharply as economic evaluations worsen. These results suggest an important distinction. Economic stress seems to work less through withdrawing endorsement of protections and more through activating a competition frame, consistent with the economic anxiety vs. economic reality gap highlighted in the theory and context of this paper, and with accounts of how scarcity narratives and scapegoating can harden boundaries between “us” and “them”.

Even with strong associations, the evidence still should not be read as a clean causal effect. Cross-sectional relationships can reflect omitted influences that jointly shape economic pessimism and attitudes toward migrants. The short process-tracing is a more interpretive check on meaning. It suggests that the results are most consistent with a story in which economic strain becomes politically legible through a sequence of pessimism, blame, and heightened concern for “people like me,” creating fertile ground for job competition narratives. In that sense, it is not as simple as “bad economies reduce support,” but that economic insecurity can reorganize how people explain problems and who they see as competing for protection. For further research, a potential next step is to test that sequence more directly with evidence over time, tracking whether shifts in economic pessimism precede shifts in threat perceptions, and by measuring exposure to political and media framing that may translate hardship into out-group blame.

Rather than pushing people toward an outright rejection of migrants’ basic rights, the evidence in this paper suggests that economic strain is more likely to recast immigration through a competition lens. Who gets the job, who gets the benefit, who is protected when resources feel scarce. If that is the primary pathway, then the problem to solve is bigger than “changing attitudes about migrants.” It is restoring confidence that economic security is not high stakes and not reserved only for insiders. Moving forward, the most durable responses are likely to pair rights protections with policies and narratives that broaden shared economic stability, so that moments of crisis do not so easily become moments of out-group blame.

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9 Appendix

QMD with all models and code for graphs

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/17gnyBC5DjGW-Jaby2MaTj7D-YopfQsyG?q=sharedwith:public%20parent:17gnyBC5DjGW-Jaby2MaTj7D-YopfQsyG>

Cronbach's Alpha on Q916_1-3

	n <dbl>	raw.r <dbl>	std.r <dbl>	r.cor <dbl>	r.drop <dbl>	mean <dbl>	sd <dbl>
Q916_1_r	14183	0.7834142	0.7049866	0.4338404	0.3466291	2.694493	1.2212348
Q916_2_r	14311	0.7170912	0.7776793	0.6061354	0.4530631	3.484313	0.7943823
Q916_3_r	14232	0.7433267	0.7754330	0.6015169	0.4390473	3.340430	0.9157319

Ordinal Logistic regression on Support for FDW rights

formula: `supp_fdw_ord ~ econ_now`

data: `ab_sub1`

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(> z)	
econ_nowGood	0.38542	0.08517	4.525	6.03e-06	***
econ_nowBad	0.29270	0.08317	3.519	0.000433	***
econ_nowVery bad	0.06669	0.08180	0.815	0.414941	

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Threshold coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	z value
low support medium-low	-2.79705	0.08565	-32.657
medium-low medium-high	-1.33122	0.07936	-16.774
medium-high high support	0.19503	0.07843	2.487

(1339 observations deleted due to missingness)

Ordinal Logistic Regression on Support for FDW rights with controls

	(1)
low support medium-low	-3.366
	(0.121)
medium-low medium-high	-1.851
	(0.116)
medium-high high support	-0.164
	(0.115)
econ_nowGood	0.247
	(0.091)
econ_nowBad	0.136
	(0.094)
econ_nowVery bad	0.158
	(0.097)
econ_futureSomewhat better	-0.046
	(0.064)
econ_futureSame	0.018
	(0.065)
econ_futureSomewhat worse	-0.043
	(0.070)
econ_futureMuch worse	-0.060
	(0.071)
age	-0.004
	(0.001)
Q1002	0.103
	(0.033)
factor(COUNTRY)8	-1.099
	(0.058)
factor(COUNTRY)9	-0.781
	(0.070)
factor(COUNTRY)10	-1.144
	(0.064)
factor(COUNTRY)13	0.312
	(0.060)
factor(COUNTRY)15	0.098
	(0.073)
factor(COUNTRY)21	0.668
	(0.066)
Num.Obs.	13852
AIC	29281.7
BIC	29417.4
RMSE	2.95

Ordinal Logistic regression on job threat

	(1)
Very unlikely Somewhat unlikely	-0.730
	(0.153)
Somewhat unlikely Somewhat likely	0.137
	(0.153)
Somewhat likely Very likely	1.630
	(0.154)
econ_nowGood	0.424
	(0.131)
econ_nowBad	0.800
	(0.132)
econ_nowVery bad	1.017
	(0.135)
econ_futureSomewhat better	0.195
	(0.069)
econ_futureSame	0.140
	(0.073)
econ_futureSomewhat worse	0.178
	(0.080)
econ_futureMuch worse	0.285
	(0.081)
age	-0.004
	(0.001)
Q1002	0.150
	(0.038)
factor(COUNTRY)8	0.246
	(0.080)
factor(COUNTRY)10	-0.027
	(0.084)
factor(COUNTRY)12	0.216
	(0.077)
factor(COUNTRY)13	-0.282
	(0.067)
factor(COUNTRY)21	-0.354
	(0.073)
Num.Obs.	9151
AIC	23749.5
BIC	23870.6
RMSE	2.74