

The ‘rentier mentality’, 30 years on: evidence from survey data

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ABSTRACT

The ‘rentier mentality’ has been a key concept in rentier state theory since the 1980s. It posits that wealth distribution by government breaks the link between effort and reward in society, thereby undermining the society’s work ethic. Rentier citizens are also expected to be indifferent to collective political action, obviating the need for a strong national myth. Due to high per capita rents and late state formation, GCC countries are usually seen as classical rentier states; their citizens should evince these attitudes particularly strongly. Existing literature investigating public attitudes in oil-rich countries, however, either leaves out GCC countries or focuses on oil countries in general, with mixed results. This article brings together survey data from a range of sources to investigate rentier mentality hypotheses in the GCC more systematically. It shows that many GCC citizens do indeed evince rentier attitudes when it comes to concrete personal choices and expectations in the economic realm—but at the same time, a disproportionate share of them claim to be in favour of hard work, competition, and a small state on the abstract level. Regarding politics, levels of interest are unusually high, but this is coupled with high levels of loyalty and confidence in government. These results mean that while some aspects of rentier mentality are indeed prevalent, other attitudinal predictions of rentier state theory do not hold up. I speculate about the reasons for this.

Introduction: the ‘rentier mentality’ debate

The ‘rentier mentality’ has been a key concept in rentier state theory ever since its development as a political economy framework for MENA oil states in the 1980s. The idea was first introduced by Hazem Beblawi in 1987.¹ He described it as the result of government-orchestrated distribution of externally derived wealth through various channels of patronage, which breaks the link between effort and reward in society, undermines its work ethic, and creates high material expectations.

The other main author of the 1980s rentier state debate, Giacomo Luciani (1987), expects rentier citizens to be largely indifferent to collective political action as they have no clear collective claims to government resources, as would be the case in a tax-based production state. This makes citizens politically acquiescent, gives the state considerable autonomy, and obviates the need for a strong national myth or identity.² Luciani does not frame these arguments in terms of a mentality, but it is clear that they have attitudinal implications for rentier citizens.

Anecdotally, there is much evidence of both types of attitudes across the GCC, but the rentier mentality hypothesis has never been systematically tested. If it does hold true, it should have a large (negative) impact on economic performance. It should also, potentially, affect politics as it creates high expectations vis-à-vis the state but also potentially subservience to it.

¹ Hazem Beblawi, ‘The Rentier State in the Arab World’, *Arab Studies Quarterly* (1987): 383–98.

² Giacomo Luciani, ‘Allocation vs. Production States’, in *The Rentier State*, ed. Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (London: Croom Helm, 1987).

Bi Puranen and Olof Widenfalk (2007) have undertaken the only quantitative cross-national discussion of the rentier mentality that I am aware of.³ They compare aggregate survey data from the fourth wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) for seven MENA countries, only one of which—Saudi Arabia—is a Gulf rentier.⁴ They find that there is weaker approval of democratic ideals in countries they classify as rentier (including, potentially problematically, Egypt) but that in other regards, there is no evidence of a rentier mindset, as respondents actually approve of democratic performance more and put more emphasis on work and money in the rentier cases. Puranen and Widenfalk did not include any international comparison cases, instead focusing on a limited number of survey responses and leaving out most of the GCC.

Ishac Diwan, Zafiris Tzannatos, and Tarik Akin⁵ who, using World Values Survey data, analyse economic values in Arab countries, show that oil exporters around the world do not generally stand out in terms of economic attitudes. But they do not specifically focus on the GCC—high-rent countries where much higher levels of wealth distribution make rentier mentality effects more likely.⁶

Calvert W. Jones's (2017) work on how elite schools in the UAE actually deepen the entitlement mentality of young UAE citizens is an original piece of research that seems to confirm rentier mentality outcomes in the GCC, but only in a rather specific institutional context and for a specific demographic group.⁷ Finally, the edited volume by Annika Kropf and Mohamed A. Ramady (2015) on employment and career motivations in the GCC contains some useful anecdotal and survey evidence that nationals in some oil monarchies countries fail to understand the requirements of private GCC labour markets,⁸ but the work again does not include a global comparative dimension, and the survey data it presents is often not nationally representative.

Given the theoretical importance of the rentier mentality concept and the limited empirical work on it, this article systematically analyses a wide range of survey data to assess whether—almost three decades after the concept was coined—there really is evidence for a rentier mentality among GCC citizens. The article briefly summarizes the objective economic position of GCC citizens, showing that a large share of them remain, in practice, rentiers who rely strongly on state largesse. It then analyses a range of survey data on economic issues, providing both regional and global comparisons of GCC citizen attitudes. The article focuses particularly on respondents' specific expectations regarding their role in the local labour market. This is followed by an analysis of general, abstract attitudes towards the role of the state, achievement orientation, and competition. Finally, the article provides aggregate data on political attitudes, focusing on GCC citizens' levels of political interest, loyalty, and satisfaction.

³ Bi Puranen and Olof Widenfalk, 'The Rentier State: Does Rentierism Hinder Democracy?', in *Values and Perceptions of the Islamic and Middle Eastern Publics*, ed. Mansoor Moaddel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 160–78.

⁴ The full country list includes Jordan, Morocco, and Turkey as non-rentiers and Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt as rentiers.

⁵ Ishac Diwan, Zafiris Tzannatos, and Tarik Akin, 'Debunking Myth: Economic Values in the Arab World through the Prism of Opinion Polls', *Middle East Development Journal* 10, no. 1 (2018): 31–63.

⁶ Table 4 in their article shows some individual country results for Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar that are in line with the findings in this article, namely high tolerance for income inequality and trust in institutions (in addition to high desire for material success in life), but without further discussion.

⁷ Calvert W. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁸ Annika Kropf and Mohamed Ramady, eds., *Employment and Career Motivation in the Arab Gulf States: The Rentier Mentality Revisited* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015).

The article presents country-level descriptive statistics, not regression models. This is because country case numbers are too small for statistically estimating whether being a GCC country has a significant statistical effect and too small for running a factor analysis to establish whether specific countries experience a 'rentier mentality'. The findings therefore are suggestive, not conclusive. The measures chosen from the various data sets include all relevant variables that speak to the above-mentioned implied dimensions of the rentier mentality: attitudes to economic achievement and effort, level of interest in (or indifference to) political action, and the strength of national identification.

A key descriptive finding is that many GCC citizens do indeed evince rentier attitudes when it comes to concrete life choices—but at the same time, a disproportionate share of them claim to be in favour of hard work, competition, and a small state. When it comes to politics, levels of interest are unusually high, but this is coupled with high levels of loyalty and confidence in government. These results mean that while some aspects of rentier mentality are indeed prevalent, other attitudinal predictions of rentier state theory do not hold up—potentially because rentier states have adapted since the 1980s and used a range of social engineering tools to instil pro-business and patriotic beliefs on an abstract, ideational level.

Sources

The main micro-level data sources for the article include the last three waves of the World Values Survey (1999–2014) and a Saudi labour market survey designed by the author and implemented by YouGov in Saudi Arabia in March 2014. The WVS includes data for Saudi Arabia (wave 4) and Qatar (wave 6).⁹ I also draw on aggregate data from other surveys reported in a range of sources, notably the Arab Youth Survey and national labour force surveys for Kuwait and the UAE.

The 2014 YouGov survey, which has not been used by academic researchers so far, provides by far the most detailed account of work attitudes for any GCC country. Respondents on the employer side include 148 human resources managers or company managers in companies that are roughly equally split into small, medium size, and large; and the survey covers sectors such as manufacturing, contracting, retail, and finance. Respondents on the employee and jobseeker side include 428 Saudi nationals aged between 20 and 30, roughly equally divided between being employed and unemployed/looking for a job. While the company interviews were undertaken online, the employee interviews were equally split between online and face-to-face.

GCC citizens remain rentier citizens

Before we investigate attitudes, it is worth pointing out that structurally, by almost any measure, a disproportionate share of GCC citizens remain rentiers. The vast majority of GCC citizens with a job are government-employed (see Figure 1, below), while in the rest of the world government employment usually accounts for a fifth or less of employees.¹⁰ Most private sector jobs are held by foreigners. The public sector provides better wages, shorter working hours, more secure jobs, and an (even) earlier pension age.¹¹ While GCC public sectors no doubt include hard-working individuals,

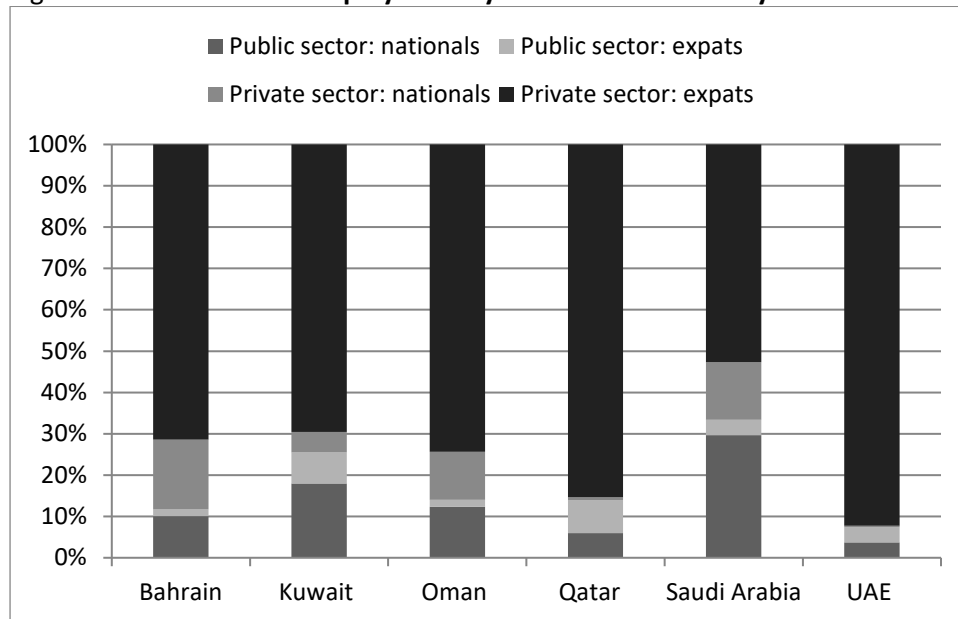
⁹ The Arab Barometer also includes a number of GCC countries, but unfortunately its survey instruments contain no questions covering attitudes to work and business. We also note that, different from Diwan et al., we have not included available Bahraini World Values Survey data in our analysis as data quality appears quite bad (which might be why Bahrain is no longer listed on the World Values website as a participating country).

¹⁰ See here, for example, for the EU, a region with fairly large state apparatuses: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/WDN-20170723-1>.

¹¹ Natalia T. Tamirisa and Christoph Duenwald, *Public Wage Bills in the Middle East and Central Asia* (International Monetary Fund, 2018); Steffen Hertog, 'Making Wealth Sharing More Efficient in High-Rent Countries: The Citizens' Income', *Energy Transitions* 1, no. 2 (2017): 7.

their overall size—disproportionately large by any reasonable measure—and the level of benefits provided imply that rent sharing and patronage are key functions for them.

Figure 1 **Distribution of employment by sector and nationality in the GCC**

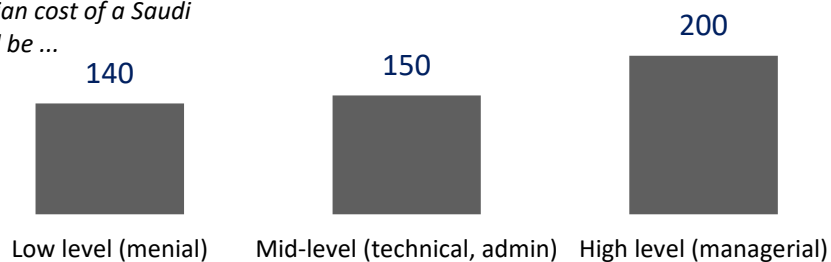


National sources, various years.

In the private sector itself, there is a significant labour cost differential in favour of nationals, even if skills, age, experience, non-wage costs, and other factors are controlled for. Figure 2, below, from the 2014 YouGov survey, shows that on all levels of employment, nationals are more expensive.¹²

Figure 2 **Comparative cost of employees**

If the cost for the expat is set at 100, the median cost of a Saudi worker would be ...



Base: respondents who answered on each category ($n = 136 / n = 137 / n = 138$).

Source: YouGov survey.

Nationals also receive free healthcare and education, including the tertiary level; can avail themselves of a range of subsidized loans; and are sometimes entitled to direct cash grants. Energy subsidies, which disproportionately benefit richer citizen households, remain considerable in the region.¹³ In cases where they have been reformed, they have sometimes been replaced by other forms of distribution, notably the Citizen Account Program in Saudi Arabia, which provides monthly cash payments to households below a certain (fairly generous) income threshold.

¹² See also International Monetary Fund, 'Labor Market Reforms to Boost Employment and Productivity in the GCC', IMF Report (Washington, DC, October 2013).

¹³ Bassam Fattouh and Laura el-Katiri, 'A Brief Political Economy of Energy Subsidies in the Middle East and North Africa', 2015, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:dcbbe09e-8d29-4a11-bcef-0d809bc79d3a>.

A discussion of the economic effects of such wealth-sharing practices is beyond this article. It is worth pointing out, however, that labour productivity and total factor productivity in the region have been stagnating for decades as labour markets have relied on barely restricted imports of low-skilled foreign workers instead of building private productivity capacity on the back of an upgraded national workforce.¹⁴

Does patronage lead to a rentier mentality?

Compared to almost any other economy in the world, GCC citizens on average receive an unusually generous package of benefits from their governments. That said, the Gulf rentier states have been fraying around the edges because of population growth and oil price fluctuations, especially in the lower-rent countries such as Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. This has particularly affected younger citizens, as older generations—men in particular—usually hold government jobs they obtained during earlier waves of government hiring and often live in houses financed or subsidized by government.¹⁵

At the same time, GCC youth unemployment outside of the super-rentiers (Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE) has been rising, leaving growing numbers of young citizens out of the old distributive bargain. This means that if there is any demographic group that is not subject to the patronage-induced rentier mentality, it should be younger citizens. Studying their attitudes therefore constitutes a ‘least likely’ test case for the rentier mentality hypothesis¹⁶—should we find evidence for it here, it is likely to apply more broadly too.

The 2014 YouGov survey is a particularly useful source for such a test as it contains data on both young Saudi jobseekers and young Saudi employees. Two-thirds of the latter are privately employed, a much higher share than in the general population. Both unemployed and private sector workers are excluded from a key plank of the distributional bargain, government employment, and hence should have had an incentive to adjust their expectations. We can also expect private sector employees in particular on average to be more willing to venture beyond the comfortable confines of government employment and patronage and into a competitive market—that is they potentially should have less of a rentier mentality.

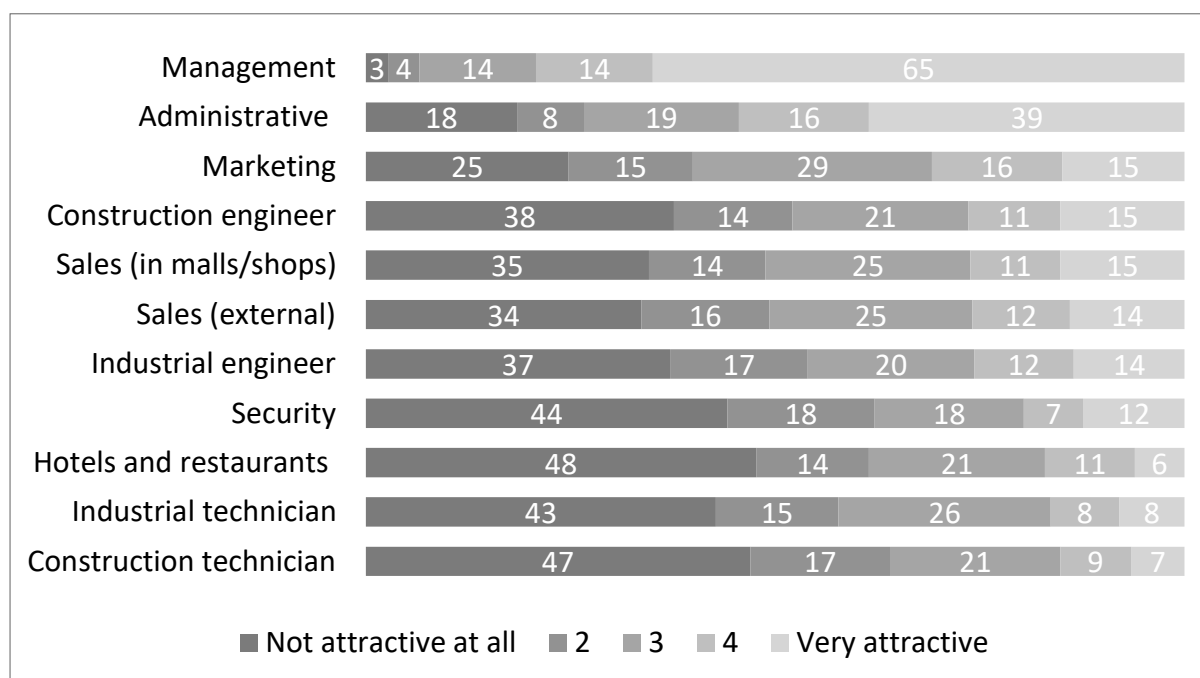
Figure 3, below, shows how young Saudis in our sample rate a wide range of different occupations available in the private labour market. What stands out is that a majority of respondents reject most of the available jobs—despite the considerable employment privileges that Saudis typically enjoy in the private sector compared to foreign workers. The data suggest that young Saudis remain rather picky, reflecting high expectations and, arguably, weak motivation to work their way up in the private sector. Given the easy historical availability of government jobs, this is understandable, but it is probably not sustainable given the fiscal constraints that the government has been operating under.

¹⁴ Tim Callen et al., *Economic Diversification in the GCC: Past, Present, and Future* (International Monetary Fund, 2014).

¹⁵ Steffen Hertog, ‘Back to the Seventies? Saudi Youth and the Kingdom’s Political Economy after the Arab Uprisings’, in *Oil States in the New Middle East: Uprisings and Stability*, ed. Kjetil Selvik and Bjørn Olav Utvik (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁶ Jack S. Levy, ‘Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25, no. 1 (2008): 1–18.

Figure 3 Job preferences of young Saudi jobseekers and employees



(428 respondents)

Source: YouGov survey.

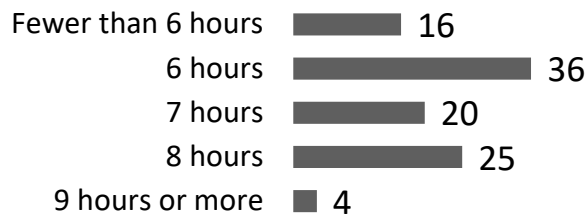
The 2014 survey specifically asked current Saudi private sector employees ($n = 131$) how interested they would be in switching to a government job with a similar salary, higher job security, and typical government working hours from 7.30 to 2.30. A total of 76% of them reported that they would accept such a job, and only 7% refused (18% were undecided). A full 71% would prefer a government job even with the same working hours as they currently had. The preference for secure government employment is strong even among Saudis who have chosen to join the private sector and, hence, have arguably shown an atypical willingness to take risks and accept more difficult jobs.

The aversion to the private sector is despite the relative protection afforded to nationals within it. Nationals are often guaranteed private jobs through quota policies that compel firms to hire a certain minimum ratio of nationals. Jobseekers are aware of this: 62% of unemployed respondents in our sample agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement that Nitaqat Program quota rules are the main reason that private companies hire Saudis. Once hired, Saudis also tend to enjoy higher job security than foreign workers: 59% of employer respondents reported that dismissing Saudis as opposed to foreign workers was an issue or a major issue. And yet the residual risk of private employment still seems too high to many Saudi jobseekers.

A relatively modest achievement orientation is also reflected in Saudi employees' and jobseekers' preferences for working hours. Figure 4 shows that only 29% of respondents are willing to work eight hours or more per day. This again is understandable given historical practices of short working hours in the government sector, but it is far below international standards of eight hours or more—or the hours required of foreign workers in the local private sector, who on average work more than nine hours.¹⁷

¹⁷ Female respondents are particularly keen on working six hours or less (62% vs. 43% of men), while men are more open to longer working hours, with 37% vs. 18% accepting eight hours or more. Family obligations and social expectations are likely at play here.

Figure 4 ‘How many hours per day would you be willing to work at most?’



(428 respondents)

Source: YouGov survey.

Older data from the 2003 World Values Survey conducted in Saudi Arabia paint a similar picture, showing that in international comparison, Saudi citizens have a stronger preference for holidays, accord less importance to work in general, prefer jobs with ‘not too much pressure’, put less emphasis on showing initiative in the job, and find it unfair if pay for the same job is differentiated by performance (results available on request).

The YouGov data are a few years old and were generated at a time of high oil prices and government generosity. Attitudes might have shifted since. Aggregate labour data, however, show private sector employment of Saudis largely stagnant between 2014 and 2019 despite modest growth of the private sector during that period.¹⁸ A larger-scale shift in attitudes would presumably have motivated more Saudis to join the private sector to replace foreign workers there.

The YouGov survey also asked employers whether they thought that Saudi attitudes to culturally undesirable jobs had changed within the last five years. On average, respondents reported almost no change, suggesting that any long-term changes in labour attitudes are moving slowly at best.

We have much less data on labour attitudes for the rest of the GCC, but what is available is consistent with the Saudi story: Georgia M. Daleure (2016) finds that many UAE jobseekers continue to shun private sector jobs,¹⁹ and according to Kuwaiti labour force survey data from 2015, 58% of unemployed Kuwaitis are willing to work only in the government sector.²⁰ The 2016 Arab Youth Survey found that 70% of GCC youth prefer government jobs, compared to 50% across the Middle East as a whole.²¹

The same survey reported that 78% of all Arab youth want governments to continue energy subsidies. Separate results for the GCC have not been published, but the strong social backlash to plans to cut subsidies and allowances in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia since 2015 suggests that expectations of wealth distribution are strong and—given the reversal of several such plans—affect government policy.

¹⁸ See various quarterly labour force surveys: <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/34>.

¹⁹ Georgia M. Daleure, ‘Holistic Sustainability as Key to Emiratization: Links between Job Satisfaction in the Private Sector and Young Emirati Adult Unemployment’, in *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education* 3 (ERIC, 2016), 5–24.

²⁰ See Table 43 here: https://lmis.csb.gov.kw/En/LaborForceGraphView.aspx?Graph_ID=2005.

²¹ The National, ‘Survey Shows 70% of GCC Youth Prefer Government Jobs’, updated October 12, 2016, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/survey-shows-70-of-gcc-youth-prefer-government-jobs-1.162857>. Raw data from the survey unfortunately are not publicly available.

The 2015 Arab Youth Survey also shows that 68% of GCC youth are confident that their governments can deal with unemployment problems, compared to only 33% in non-GCC Arab countries.²² This might be a sign that despite fewer ample resources, young citizens still expect states to live up to their part of the rentier bargain.

The evidence reviewed in this section suggests the existence of a rentier mentality in the GCC with regard to practical life choices, particularly in the labour market. Many citizens reject most of the occupations available in the private labour market, eschew risk and undue effort, and prefer safe government jobs. I should add that this is not a culturalist argument: GCC citizens simply follow structural incentives given by rentier states. This adjustment to incentives probably happens with a lag, however, as attitudes seem to trail the fiscal adjustment of distributive systems, which have become less generous in recent years.

What about economic attitudes in general?

Rentier attitudes seem pervasive when it comes to *concrete* economic decisions and practices. Are GCC citizens also rentiers when it comes to general attitudes to economic life and the government's role in the economy—i.e. their ideological as opposed to their practical orientation? In this section, we draw on WVS data to compare self-reported attitudes of Kuwaiti, Qatari, and Saudi citizens with those of respondents in all other countries in which the WVS has been conducted. We focus on WVS waves 4–6, as no GCC countries were surveyed in earlier waves. The WVS included Saudi Arabia in wave 4 (1999–2004), while Kuwait and Qatar were included in wave 6 (2004–10). Wave 5 is included to provide additional data on comparator cases.

The following graphs show the average (weighted) responses to a range of WVS questions on general economic attitudes, plotted against countries' logged GDP per capita in the year of the survey, as level of wealth is known to systematically affect social attitudes. The line crossing the graphs represents the central trend in the data as measured by a simple bivariate regression. All available countries in WVS waves 4–6 are included in each graph to maximize observations.²³ We highlight rentier countries, defined as countries with annual per capita oil rents above 1000 \$ in the survey year, as well as Arab countries, to provide reference groups for the GCC cases.²⁴ All Arab countries are labelled by name. To make the graphs readable, we avoid numerical labels for the response variables and instead indicate which ends of the response axis reflect agreement or disagreement with a given statement.

Figure 5, below, shows to what extent the national populations surveyed agreed to the statement that 'government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for'. Several patterns are visible: Firstly, average responses in oil-rich countries do not cluster in any clear way. Secondly, Arab populations typically have rather high welfare expectations vis-à-vis the state, possibly a legacy of the great promises and ambitious welfare agendas in the era of Arab nationalism.²⁵

Among the three Gulf rentiers surveyed, only Kuwait shows above-average agreement with the statement, but still less so than many other Arab cases. The Saudi and Qatari responses are below

²² Burson-Marsteller Asda'a, 'Arab Youth Survey 2015', Dubai, UAE, http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/English/press_release.php (click on 'White Paper'), 2015.

²³ As a result, some countries are represented by several observations. Graphs for individual survey waves look very similar and are available on request.

²⁴ The graphs look very similar if other cut-offs are used for defining rentier status. Unfortunately, key high-rent developing countries outside the Arab world (e.g. Brunei, Gabon, Angola, Equatorial Guinea) are not included in the WVS, preventing comparisons within this class of cases.

²⁵ Steffen Hertog, 'Is There an Arab Variety of Capitalism?' (currently under review).

the global trend line—although citizens there enjoy some of the most extensive government provision anywhere in the world and, as we saw above, in practice strongly gravitate towards the government on the local labour market. We can only speculate about Kuwaitis’ stronger belief in government welfare, which might have to do with the much stronger political mobilization of Kuwaiti society around distributional issues, which is the key focus of local political debate, elections, and lobbying.

Figure 5 Attitudes to government’s welfare role²⁶

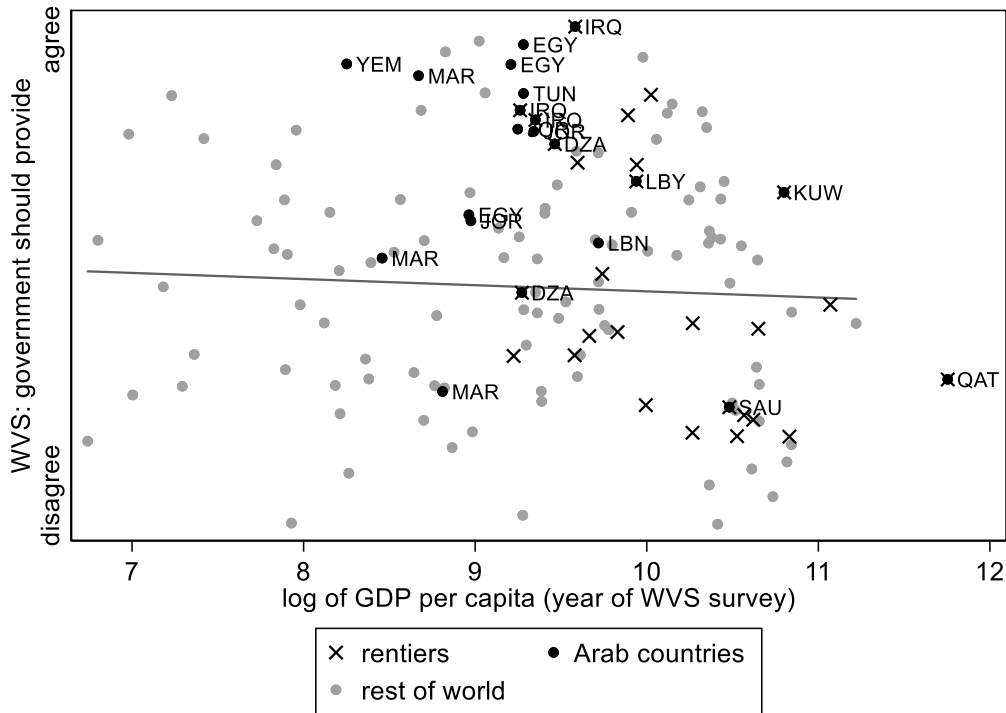


Figure 6, below, shows average attitudes to competition. There is again no clear pattern for oil-rich countries in general, but different from above, Arab respondents generally approve of competition as a stimulant of hard work and new ideas (perhaps as a reaction to the uncompetitive nepotism characterizing many Arab economies). This includes the two Gulf rentiers in which this question was asked, Qatar and Kuwait. This general orientation is again in some tension with the concrete attitudes and structures on GCC labour markets, which are the opposite of competitive: nationals typically seek shelter from competition through ultra-secure public employment and enjoy protection from competition through various quota and hiring rules in the private sector.

²⁶ Respondents were asked to locate themselves on a 10-point spectrum between two statements: 'Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for' vs. 'People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves.'

Figure 6 Attitudes to competition²⁷

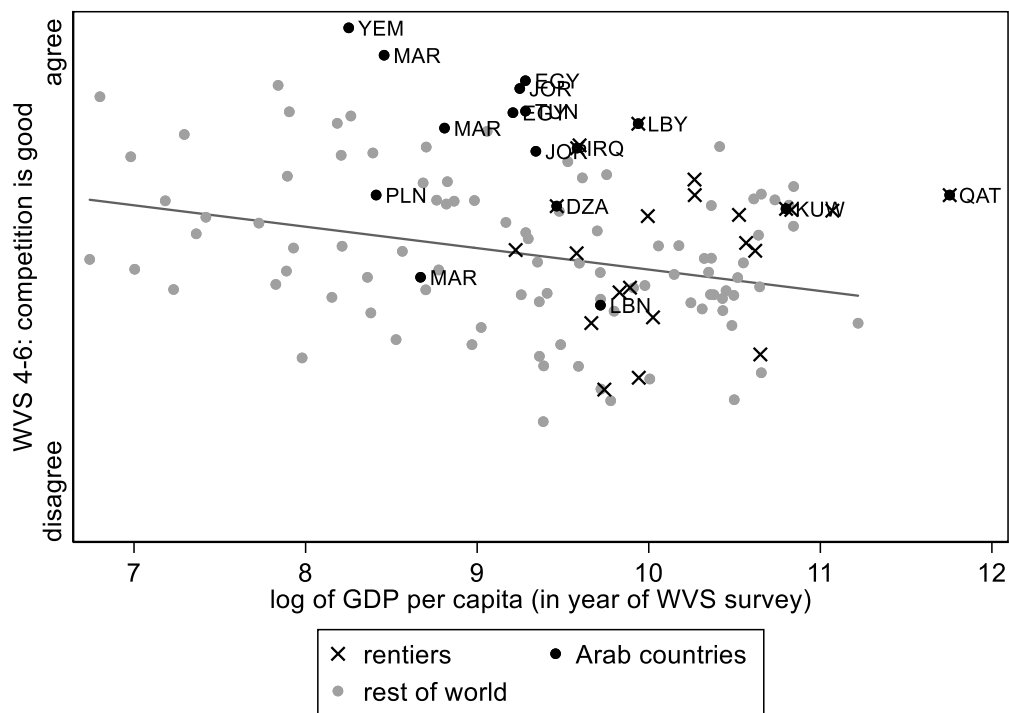


Figure 7 shows attitudes to income differences. Oil-rich countries seem, on average, to be a bit more in favour of the statement that ‘we need larger income differences as incentives for individual effort’, but the pattern is not very systematic. Arabs in general are surprisingly tolerant of inequality, although there is much variation across survey waves in Arab countries that were sampled in more than one wave. The two GCC countries in the sample, Qatar and Kuwait, also show above-average agreement with the statement, which seems to reflect a general belief in individual effort and achievement.

Respondents were asked to locate themselves on a 10-point spectrum between two statements: ‘Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for’ vs. ‘People should take more responsibility to provide for the

Figure 7 Attitudes to income differences²⁸

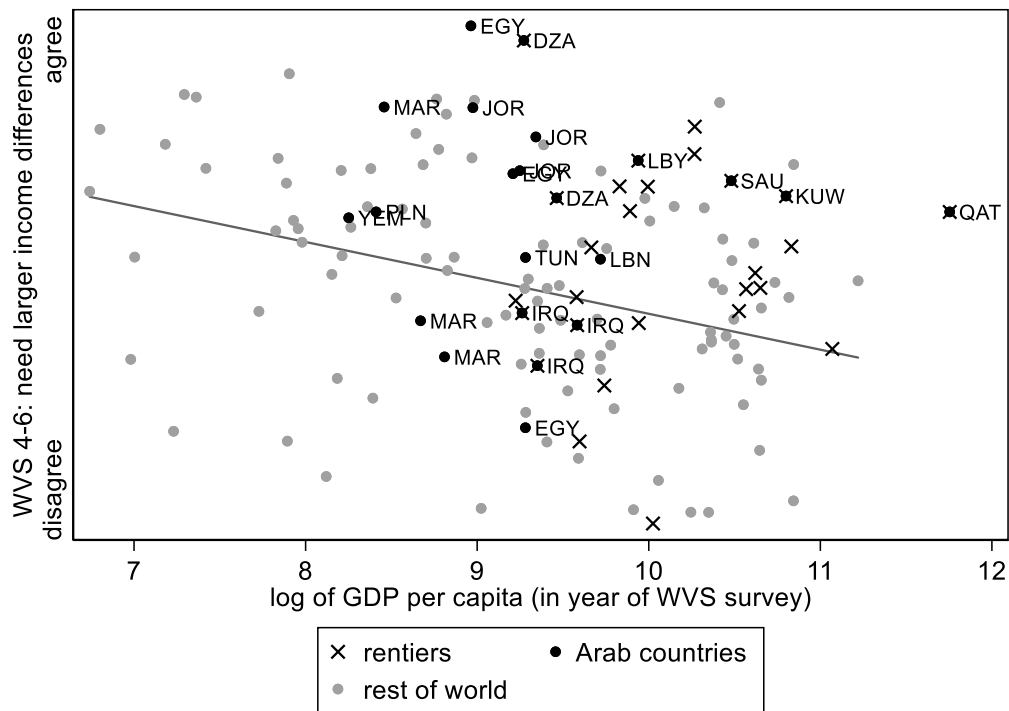
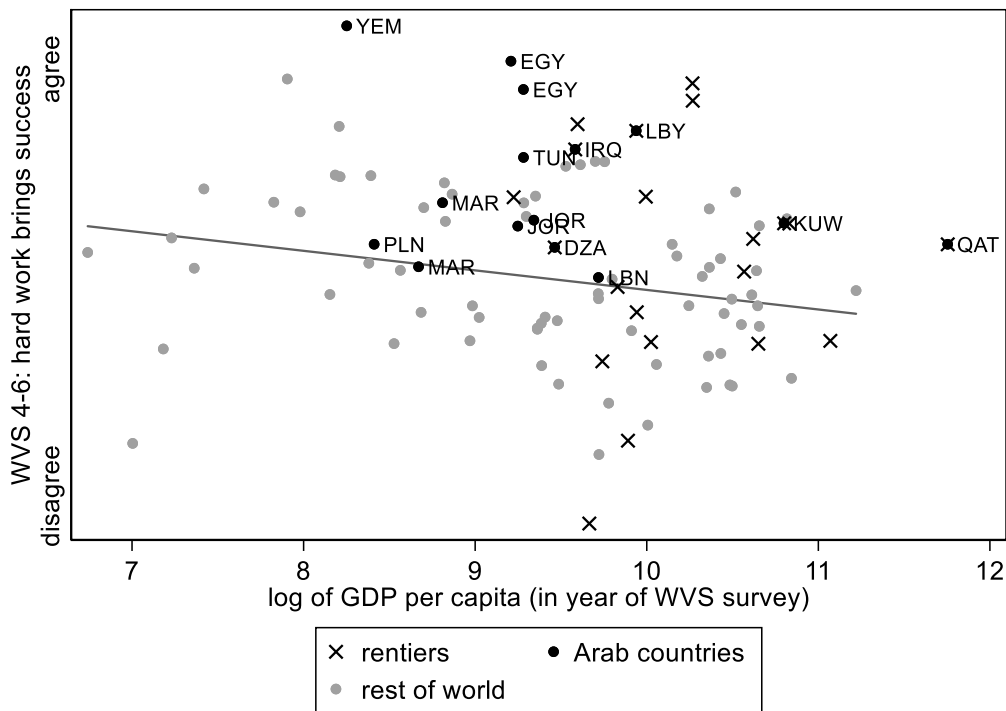


Figure 8, below, finally, shows national populations’ average agreement with the statement that ‘in the long run, hard work usually brings a better life’, as opposed to the statement that ‘hard work doesn’t generally bring success—it’s more a matter of luck and connections’. This question seems particularly relevant in the light of Beblawi’s core claim that the rentier mentality derives from a disconnect between effort and reward in society. While oil-rich countries show no clear pattern, Arab respondents are typically in favour of the statement—including the two GCC states in this sample, Kuwait and Qatar. On an abstract, ideational level, citizens there more often than not seem to reject the rentier mentality.

mselfes.’

s were asked to locate themselves on a 10-point spectrum between two statements: ‘Incomes should be made more equal’ vs. ‘We need larger income differences as incentives for individual effort.’

Figure 8 Attitudes to hard work²⁹



The result stands in particular tension with the more concrete attitudes demonstrated in the previous section: average work effort in the GCC public sector is, by most measures, quite low as citizens benefit from short hours, an exceptionally early pension age, long holidays, and ironclad job security. The private sector, where (relatively) harder work is demanded, is systematically eschewed, and in the Saudi case, expectations of working hours are very much on the low side.

The overall picture

In sum, WVS data show that in the cases where we have information, GCC citizens tend to reject the government’s role as provider, embrace competition and inequality as incentives for achievement, and believe in the virtue of hard work. This is the opposite of a rentier mentality. These self-reported beliefs are in line with the economically liberal rhetoric of Gulf governments. But they do not align with economic practices and concrete attitudes to work life discussed before. In practice, many GCC citizens are strongly oriented towards the state as provider and are less achievement-oriented. So there seems to be a practical rentier mentality but the opposite of rentier orientation when it comes to individuals’ general worldview—a curious disconnect not predicted by original rentier state theories.

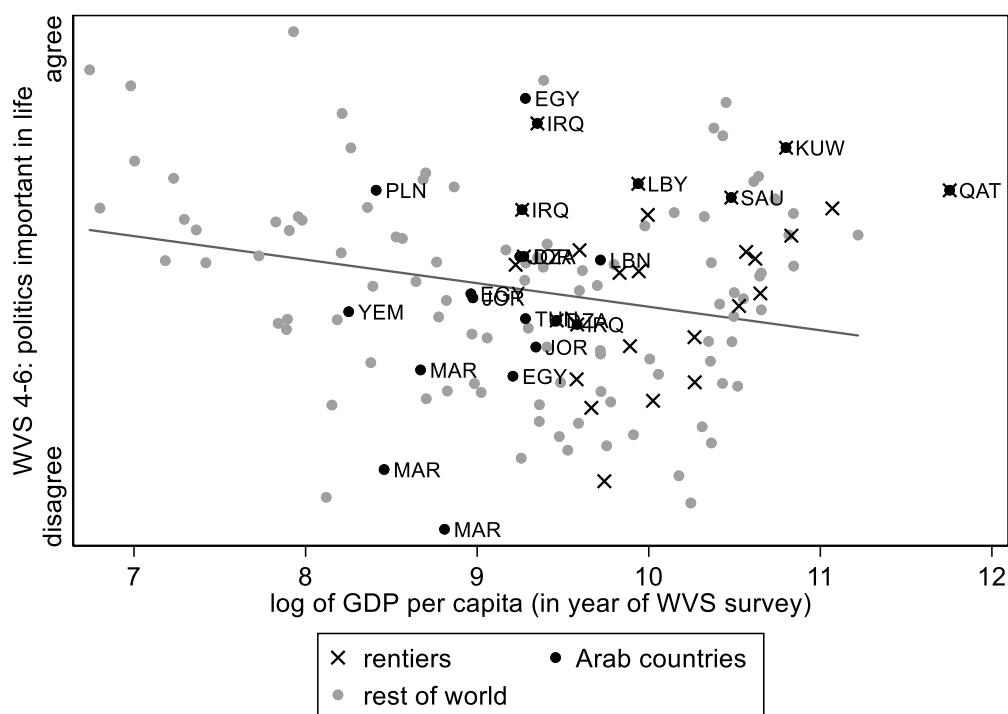
²⁹ Respondents were asked to locate themselves on a 10-point spectrum between two statements: ‘In the long run, hard work usually brings a better life’ vs. ‘Hard work doesn’t generally bring success—it’s more a matter of luck and connections.’

Political attitudes

What about attitudes to politics, about which rentier state theory makes similarly strong, if more implicit, predictions? To recall, Luciani argues that in ‘allocation’ as opposed to ‘production’ states, individuals are more likely to pursue their interests through individual channels because, absent taxation, there is no clear justification for collective material claims on government.³⁰ Weak national identity further undermines political contestation.³¹

Figure 9, below, shows the importance that respondents in different countries accord to politics in their lives. While oil-rich countries and Arab countries in general are distributed all over the response spectrum, in all of the three GCC countries, respondents on average indicate that politics is quite important to them. This is not surprising in the case of Kuwait, where vigorous political debate is known to be a national pastime. The result is more striking for Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where political contestation is muted most of the time. The three cases stand out compared to any reference group—a finding much out of line with our reading of Luciani’s original theory. The results for a WVS question about individuals’ general interest in politics are very similar (available on request).

Figure 9 Importance of politics in respondents’ lives³²



We know, however, that at least in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the political scene is under the state’s tight control and open oppositional mobilization is very rare. It might be possible to reconcile this with the high reported interest in politics if political attitudes and mobilization are mostly pro-government. Figure 10, which indicates how likely respondents are to report that they would fight for their country in case of a war, suggests that this might indeed be the case. Both Kuwaitis and Qataris claim to be willing to make this sacrifice at an unusually high rate, above the high averages for both oil-rich countries and Arab countries.

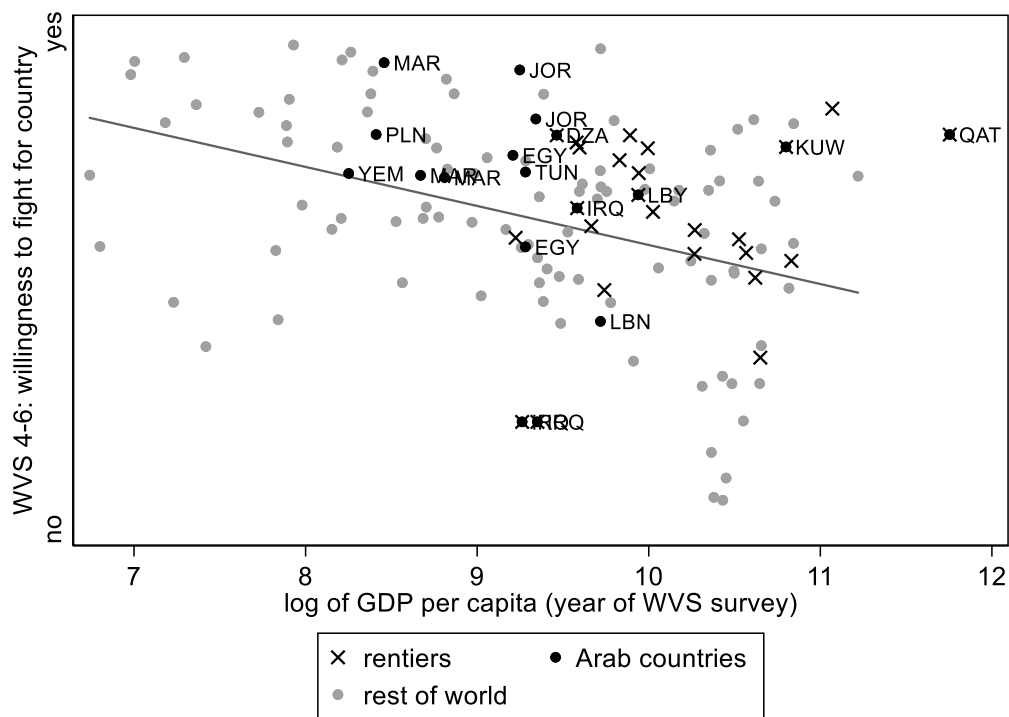
³⁰ Luciani, ‘Allocation vs. Production States’, 74.

³¹ Luciani, 75.

³² Respondents chose on a four-point scale from ‘very important’ to ‘not at all important’.

Perhaps it is easier to make such claims in countries that have not been at war since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, yet this does not explain why other rich countries with long experiences of peace score much lower. The result runs against Luciani's claim that there is no strong national identity in rentier countries and instead indicates a strong strain of patriotism. Respondents' self-reported pride in their nationality is also unusually high among GCC countries (results available on request).

Figure 10 **Willingness to fight for your country if there is a war**³³

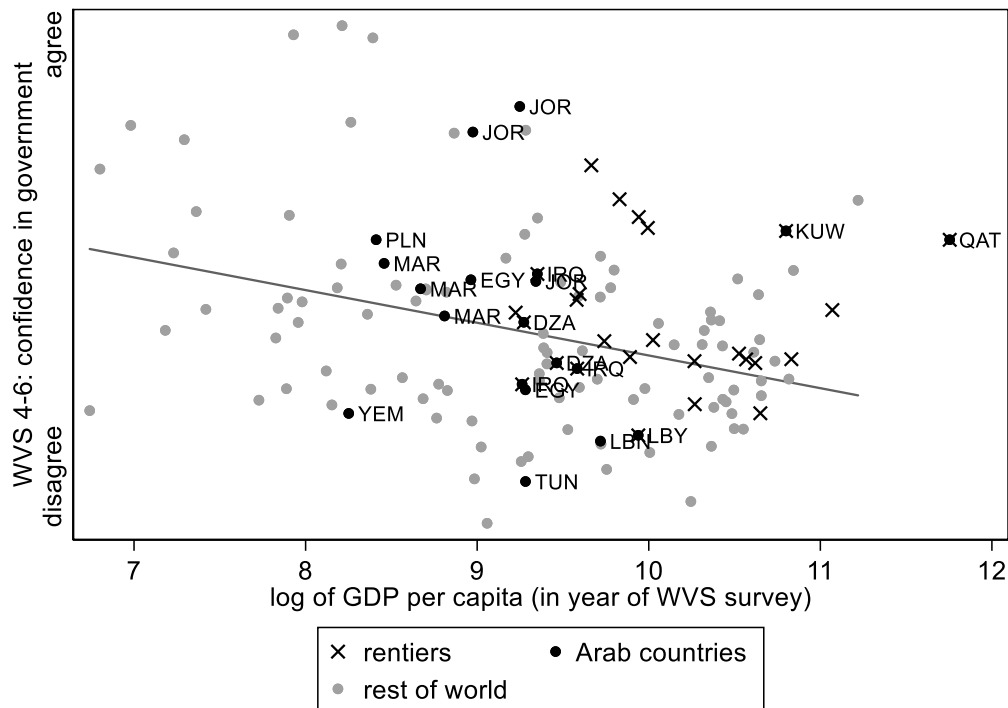


As another sign that political interest is coupled with support for governments rather than political contention, Figure 11, below, shows that Kuwaitis and Qataris report unusually high confidence in their government (while Arabs in general do not show a clear pattern, and citizens of oil-rich countries cluster slightly above average). This is surprising especially in Kuwait, where politics can be quite polarized and public criticism of government is widespread.³⁴

³³ Response options were 'yes' or 'no'.

³⁴ GCC respondents have roughly average scores in their support for the idea of a strong leader and their general support for democracy. One might have expected less interest in democracy on the basis of rentier state theory (as Puranen and Widenfalk previously found in parts of their analysis). Results available on request.

Figure 11 Confidence in one's national government³⁵



The overall picture

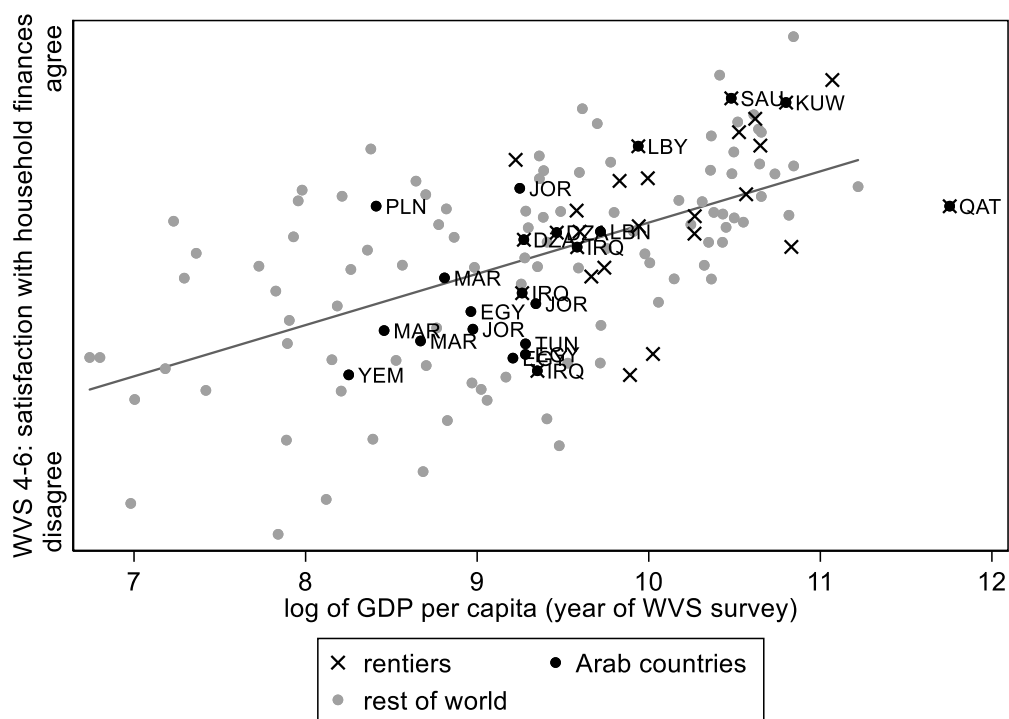
On the political front, there is again a striking disconnect: counter orthodox rentier state theory, the Gulf rentier citizens on whom we have data seem very politically interested and identify with their nations—but they also appear quite loyalist, which is more compatible with rentier theory, which in most of its variants posits an exchange of material benefits for loyalty or at least abstention from political opposition.

Higher levels of political interest and patriotism might be a direct result of the contentious regional environment surrounding the GCC monarchies but could also result from the types of patriotic education policies and social engineering that Calvert Jones has described. ‘Second generation’ rentier state leaders arguably have deeper ambitions to build ‘real states’, gain international recognition, and build both soft and hard power capacities. This would require a stronger need for a loyal population than their forebears in the 1960s and 1970s would have needed, whose polities might have been closer to Luciani’s ideal type of purely distributive quietist polities with weak national identities. In that sense, it might be unfair to assess the predictions of a theory generated briefly after the first oil boom with data created a generation later, after the Gulf monarchies had much more time to develop nation-state identities and nurture a wider range of ambitions.

GCC citizens’ professed confidence in government is in any case compatible with rentier theory. But is state provision of material well-being indeed the mechanism that explains this? Figure 12, below, shows that GCC respondents are generally happy with their household finances, although less so in ultra-rich Qatar. Given that government remains the main contributor to household incomes through jobs, subsidized loans, cash grants, and other subsidies, such a mechanism might indeed be at work, especially given that general life satisfaction in the GCC is actually below average (results available on request).

³⁵ Respondents chose on a four-point scale from ‘a great deal’ to ‘none at all’.

Figure 12 Satisfaction with one's household finances³⁶



That said, preliminary multivariate regressions with individual-level data from the three GCC countries in the WVS do not provide support for this interpretation: neither general household income nor public (as opposed to private) employment status is a good predictor of confidence in government or willingness to fight for one's country.³⁷ To the extent that these variables are measures of the degree to which individuals benefit from government patronage, we should expect them to be positively correlated with these attitudes. None of the measures of patronage is particularly clean, however, and there are many unobserved factors that could impact both sides of the regression equation. A proper individual test of rentier mechanisms is yet to be undertaken.³⁸

In this context, future research should try to build a multilevel model that links country-level averages to actual measures of wealth distribution policies on both the aggregate and the micro level. For a pure country-level comparison as undertaken in this article, there are unfortunately too few genuine 'rentiers' (i.e. cases where oil wealth is not only produced but also widely distributed through tools like easily available government employment) to undertake meaningful cross-country statistical work.

³⁶ Respondents chose on a 10-point scale ranging from 'completely dissatisfied' to 'completely satisfied'.

³⁷ Results available on request.

³⁸ See, however, Mitchell and Gengler's research on how perceived inequality in government distribution in Qatar can reduce satisfaction with government benefits. Jocelyn Sage Mitchell and Justin J. Gengler, 'What Money Can't Buy: Wealth, Inequality, and Economic Satisfaction in the Rentier State', *Political Research Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 75–89.

Conclusion

Key aspects of available survey data from Gulf rentier states are in line with core predictions of rentier theory. Practical economic attitudes are oriented towards government patronage with relatively weak achievement orientation on the labour market. When it comes to concrete life choices and demands, citizen attitudes are in line with our expectations of a 'rentier mentality'. Citizens also report to be confident in government and content with their household finances, which is compatible with a 'rentier social contract' in which material benefits are exchanged for political acquiescence.

But some aspects of survey data are not compatible with the implications of original rentier state theory. As already indicated by Puranen and Widenfalk with a much more limited data set, citizens claim strong agreement with achievement-oriented statements about economic life—as long as these are kept on an abstract level. They also report high levels of political interest and willingness to sacrifice for their country—which we should not expect from the individualistic, apolitical rentier citizens in Luciani's original theory.

Further research is required to test and explain these tensions. What makes GCC citizens rentiers in practice but hard-nosed neoliberals in spirit? Why are they so politically interested although most of them have grown up in political systems with low levels of political mobilization?

I can only speculate here, but my best guess is that the pro-market and loyalist attitudes are a result of regimes' deliberate social engineering over the last few decades. Local media and education have been playing up the value of entrepreneurship and private initiative, even if the material incentives that governments have provided have largely worked against this. Similarly, nationalism and patriotism have taken an important place in educational curricula since the 1980s, while government-influenced media have been striking increasingly patriotic tones.

In the case of economic attitudes, what psychologists call 'attribution bias' might also play a role:³⁹ the tendency of humans to ascribe good things that happen to them to their own choices and abilities, while bad outcomes are blamed on circumstances. While in practice the household incomes of GCC citizens result to a large extent from state action, citizens might see them as rewards for their own choices and skills—a view that in turn is compatible with economically liberal attitudes. Interestingly, however, citizens' claims to achievement orientation and economic individualism do not seem to decrease their loyalty (and potentially gratefulness) to governments. It might be that they are still unconsciously aware of what governments do for them, or that they support governments not because of individual patronage but rather because of the general levels of welfare and stability that they provide for citizens.

It is potentially significant that the patterns described above only apply to Gulf rentiers. As already shown by Diwan, Tzannatos, and Akin,⁴⁰ attitudes in other oil-rich countries for the most part do not show clear patterns. This could be because rents in some cases are too low or too insignificant relative to the rest of the economy (e.g. the United States, Canada, Australia). It could also be because states do not share rents as widely with their citizens, which is notably the case in sub-Saharan African rentier countries⁴¹—which, however, are unfortunately not included in the WVS. In either case, we should not expect classical rentier state theory to apply.

³⁹ Rhiannon N. Turner and Miles Hewstone, 'Attribution Biases', in *Encyclopedia of Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), 43–5.

⁴⁰ Diwan, Tzannatos, and Akin, 'Debunking Myth'.

⁴¹ Ferdinand Eibl and Steffen Hertog, 'When Do Oil Dictators Share Wealth? Evidence from the Gulf Monarchies', unpublished.

This article is but a first step in the systematic investigation of the attitudinal micro-foundations of rentier state theory. Data have been limited; it would be particularly useful to replicate some of the above tests on Bahraini, Emirati, and Omani survey data and to collect more fine-grained data on the government's role in GCC citizens' individual and household welfare. More work is also needed on the potential causal mechanisms behind rentier citizen attitudes, which might require research designs that are more focused on causal inference, such as survey experiments. The evidence collected in this article suggests that the rentier states in the Gulf have been rather successful at producing unusually happy and supportive rentier citizens, but we do not yet know much about the how and why.