Alijla, Abdalhadi. *Trust in Divided Societies. State, Institutions and Governance in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine.* London/ New York: I.B.Tauris, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-8386-0531-5. 235 pages.

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Increasing social and political fragmentation is one of the greatest challenges affecting many countries in the world in the last thirty years. Civic consensus around collective projects on the creation of egalitarian republics might be going backwards. Political polarization and societal divisions are ramping up from Washington to Bogotá, from Sana'a to the whole European continent. Middle Eastern societies are no exception to this global trend. In some instances, the levels of fragmentation in already-divided societies seems to be becoming even sharper. Consider the last fifteen years in Lebanon, Iraq, or Yemen. In others, societies with traditionally manageable levels of internal cohesion have fallen into a spiral of increasingly consolidating fresh divisions that a few years ago were not apparently so important. Turkey, Palestine, Libya, Kuwait or war-torn Syria are examples of this trend. Beyond the scholarship devoted to explaining why this is happening - from the "return of identities" discussion to postmodernist assessment on the dilution of the sense of collectivity, just to mention some - new levels of attention are being given to who might have the key to improve the situation. *Trust in Divided Societies. State, Institutions and Governance in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine* by Dr. Abdalhadi Alijla (Gerda Henkel Fellow, Orient institute Post-doctoral fellow) suggests new paths towards better understanding this pressing issue in the MENA region and pointing to some important answers on where the solution might be.

Alijla asks himself the question on the extent to which public authorities might improve or worsen with their actions trust levels among citizens in settings marked by social, political, economic, or identity-related divisions. Generalized trust, argues the book, is a social glue that, despite fragmentation, helps societies distance themselves from violence, makes governability easier and ultimately makes citizens' lives better. Trusting your fellow countrymen is a proxy to peace, stability, and prosperity.

The main argument of the book is clear: institutions matter. Formal and informal institutions - and public policies in particular - play an important role in causing generalized trust among citizens to increase, as well as to decrease. Even if it is clearly demonstrated that there is no magic fit-for-all formula, impartiality and equality delivered by public authorities promotes a sense of commonly shared fairness which spreads generalized trust (19). On the other hand, inequality, exclusion, and corruption at the public domain raise mistrust (92). In all these factors, political and social establishments in charge of bureaucracies are not inconsequential; the author's research demonstrates their critical role in shaping not only citizens' trust towards those

same institutions but, beyond that, general social reliance on the whole community (181). This is not to suggest that Alijla's arguments are not sufficiently nuanced. Throughout the text, one cannot help but remember Tolstoy's Anna Karenina's initial words, namely "happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Alijla devotes a great deal of attention and effort to assess the concrete explanatory factors of generalized (mis)trust in each one of the cases covered: Lebanon, Syria and Palestine - with parallel small-scale incursions into the realities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Pakistan, Turkey, Macedonia, Kyrgyzstan, South Africa or Iraq. From political oppression to the feeling of insecurity, unfair judicial performance, the role of civil society, or equal access to social services like education or health, the range of usual suspects to which the book pays attention is vast.

And here sits one of the book's main accomplishments. This is neither one of those Political Science contributions that mesmerizes you with universally explanatory theories on reality but with no grounding in the particulars of actual cases; nor an Area Studies monograph far too particularistic and fully embedded in each and every shade of the examined societies that you finish without much to take from it. *Trust in Divided Societies* strikes a great balance between being theoretically sound and empirically robust. Methodologically speaking, the book is a *rara avis* in its genre. The author is able to incorporate in the construction of his arguments qualitative methods for multiple case studies (based on field research and multiple interviews) simultaneous equation modelling and single case logistic-regression, all at the same time. This is impressive. It forces Alijla to perform a formidable juggling exercise that, even if it might be fair to claim that effectively managed, it might on occasion push the reader out of bounds. It also speaks to Dr. Alijla's programmatic vocation that transpires all along: his intellectual contribution aims at finding the best possible option to overcome such a huge problem as generalized mistrust in fragmented societies.

Still, the book's greatest achievement is that it seriously gives the reader food for thought on the issues covered - to me, the best thing one could say about any publication. This review would draw attention to just a few themes that lingered after finishing *Trust in Divided Societies.* First, the question on featuring fragmented societies. Societies being riven is not a given; it is not a natural condition. Instead, every societal fault line or cleavage is itself a social construction potentially malleable over time through political processes (44-45). Public institutions might ultimately play a decisive role in either consolidating social divisions at the core of fragmented societies or make every possible effort to overcome them. This goes beyond generalized trust: it is not only encouraging positive civic engagement among those who are different, but working towards blurring and deconstructing divisions (184). The book points to new lines of investigation on the ultimate consequences of improving generalized trust in terms of increasing social cohesion.

Second, the issue on the objectives and willingness of public authorities. Putting it plainly, it is rather obvious that not all public authorities aim at consolidating a republic among equals. Many are precisely built on top of social cleavages and can only be understood thanks to those divisions (vid. Lebanon). Others find in social and political division the perfect ecosystem in which to flourish and to consolidate their power (Palestine, Syria). Then, the question to face - ingeniously bypassed on occasion by the book - is why those interested in pursuing fragmentation as a tool of political survival would start working towards its overcoming, why would they work towards greater levels of generalized trust if it goes against their *raison d'être*. Mistrust might not be an unpredicted consequence of any poorly planned and executed public policy but one of its actual objectives (146).

Third, the gap between generalized and institutional trust. The books make it clear that they are correlated: it might be easier to end up trusting your fellow citizens if you trust the institutions governing you all. Yet, we face here a chicken-or-egg question: what could come first? It is difficult to think that citizens might spontaneously start trusting one another in a context where authorities fuel divisions through biased and unfair actions. It is challenging as well to believe that trust in public servants and politicians is possible if they are just the institutional reflection of social divisions. We cannot take for granted that the first move will necessarily come by public authorities out the blue.

Finally, it is worth assessing how this book might be interesting for those scholars working on Mediterranean Studies. It is true that, even if Alijla's analysis focuses on the societal level, it does so by taking the state as starting point. His focus is trained on Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian societies. Clearly put, this is a Comparative Politics book; not an International Relations or Mediterranean Studies one *per se*. Still, many of his arguments might resonate really well in the minds of those conducting research through the lens of a more broadly Mediterranean paradigm. The author stresses that the countries analyzed are mere case-studies selected for the convenience of his research, opening up the possibility that the reality observed there could be concomitantly happening in any other of the surrounding societies. The cycles of trust and distrust are then potentially transborder phenomena affecting similar political contexts. Especially significant is the unresolved question on the extent to which some of his arguments about construction and de-construction of trust by public authorities' actions might be useful to better understand some Northern Mediterranean political contexts in the last thirty to forty years (divided societies such as those of the Balkans or, at an earlier moment, cases such as Spain, Italy or Greece). Alijla's suggestions should contribute to scholarship testing the validity of this arguments at trans-Mediterranean level.

All in all, Abdalhadi Alijla's contribution drives us all into the path of asking critical questions on the social mechanisms, in place in many of the Middle East and North Africa's fragmented societies, underpinning collective trust, governability and civic engagement among citizens. New avenues for research might follow thanks to some of the arguments suggested by *Trust in Divided Societies*.

**Table of Contents**

**Author's Response:**

The author was provided with an opportunity to respond to the review, but declined.