

Review

Leadership research in the Arab world: A systematic literature review and future research agenda

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Abstract: This systematic review provides a comprehensive assessment of leadership research in the Arab world, examining dominant leadership styles, their underlying determinants, and publication trends over the past five decades. Drawing on a systematic analysis of 42 studies selected from an initial pool of 105 publications, the review identifies the most prominent leadership theories and explores the contextual factors shaping leadership practices across the countries in the Arab world. The findings reveal the widespread influence of Transformational Leadership, particularly in promoting gender inclusion and overcoming leadership barriers in countries such as United Arab Emirates and Lebanon. The review also highlights the growing relevance of Corporate Social Responsibility-oriented leadership and Servant Leadership, both of which contribute to organizational development, social responsibility, and the advancement of women in leadership roles. Furthermore, the analysis underscores the influence of sociocultural norms, gender dynamics, and democratic developments on leadership practices within the region. By synthesizing fragmented evidence on leadership in the Arab world, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature and offers a contextualized understanding of leadership theories and practices. The review provides a valuable foundation for future research while offering practical insights for policymakers, organizations, and leaders seeking to develop more effective, inclusive, and adaptive leadership approaches across diverse sectors in Arab countries.

Keywords: Leadership; Arab World; Systematic Literature Review; Transformational Leadership; Gender and Leadership

1. Introduction

Leadership in the Arab world is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by the dynamic interaction of cultural traditions, societal norms, and contemporary organizational challenges. As countries in the Arab world continue to experience significant socio-economic transformation, understanding the evolution of leadership styles and practices has become increasingly important for both scholarly inquiry and managerial practice. This paper presents a systematic review of leadership research across the Arab world, offering a comprehensive analysis of how contextual and regional factors influence leadership paradigms and organizational behavior.

Historically, leadership in the Arab world has been associated with hierarchical and paternalistic structures, reflecting deeply rooted cultural values that emphasize authority, respect for seniority, and centralized decision-making [1]. However, ongoing modernization, economic diversification, and globalization have stimulated the emergence of more contemporary leadership approaches. In particular, transformational and servant leadership have gained prominence as effective

frameworks for addressing the complexities of rapidly changing organizational environments and fostering employee engagement, innovation, and inclusivity [2, 3].

This systematic review examines leadership research in several prominent countries in the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt. Each country offers a distinctive leadership context shaped by its socio-political environment, economic priorities, and cultural foundations. In Saudi Arabia, leadership practices remain strongly influenced by religious values and cultural traditions, which affect managerial behavior, organizational structures, and gender relations [4, 5]. In contrast, the UAE's rapid economic growth and highly diverse expatriate workforce have fostered leadership approaches that combine traditional cultural values with modern management practices and global business perspectives [3, 6].

Jordan represents another important context where cultural expectations and gender-related considerations significantly shape leadership experiences and opportunities. Research by Koburtay et al. [7] highlights the complex relationship between culture, gender, and leadership within Jordanian organizations. Similarly, leadership in Egypt reflects the influence of both historical legacies and contemporary socio-economic challenges, as documented by Al-Harthi and Al-Mahdy [8] and Metcalfe [9]. To ensure rigor and quality, this systematic review synthesizes evidence from scholarly publications published in highly ranked journals classified as A*, A, and B.

Overall, this review provides a comprehensive assessment of leadership styles and practices across the countries in the Arab world, emphasizing the critical role of cultural, social, institutional, and gender-related factors in shaping leadership outcomes. By examining leadership through both regional and global theoretical lenses, the study advances understanding of leadership dynamics in Arab societies and identifies emerging trends and research gaps. The findings contribute to the academic literature while offering valuable practical insights for policymakers, organizational leaders, and practitioners seeking to develop effective and contextually relevant leadership approaches within the Arab world.

The study of leadership in the Arab world presents a complex challenge due to its unique cultural, social, and historical influences, which often diverge from Western leadership models prevalent in existing literature. Despite significant contributions from Budhwar and Mellahi [10], who examine leadership development in the Middle East, and Muna [11], who emphasize contextual factors in GCC leadership, there remains a substantial gap in comprehensive, context-specific insights across the broader Arab world. This gap results in a lack of tailored leadership strategies and policies suitable for the diverse cultural and social landscapes of the countries in the Arab world.

Arab leadership literature includes insufficient attention to the region's cultural, gender, and socio-economic dimensions. Hierarchical and collectivist values in Arab societies affect leadership practices in ways that are not well-represented by Western models such as transformational leadership [1,3]. Gender dynamics further complicate this landscape, with women facing significant barriers [12,13] due to entrenched societal norms and institutional constraints, and limited research on effective strategies for advancing women's leadership [4,5]. Additionally, rapid socio-economic changes in countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia create a need for leadership that integrates traditional values with modern practices, yet empirical research in this area

is limited [6]. Uneven research coverage – where nations like the UAE and Saudi Arabia are extensively studied while others like Jordan and Egypt are not – leads to a fragmented understanding of leadership practices [7]. Furthermore, the predominance of Western-centric journals restricts the visibility of Arab leadership research, highlighting the need for more publications in high-impact, internationally recognized journals.

In summary, this systematic review addresses a multifaceted research problem involving the need for a nuanced understanding of leadership practices in the Arab world. This includes adapting leadership models to local cultural contexts, addressing gender barriers, navigating socio-economic transformations, improving research coverage across the region, and enhancing the visibility of Arab leadership research in global forums. To address these issues, this review is guided by several key research questions aimed at uncovering the current state of leadership studies in the Arab context and identifying areas for further exploration.

- RQ1: What is the geographical distribution of articles from the countries in the Arab world published in journals on leadership?
- RQ2: How did the journal publications of Arab leadership change in the last five decades?
- RQ3: What leadership styles are predominantly observed in the countries in Arab world according to the academic literature?
- RQ4: What are the primary challenges faced by leaders in the countries in the Arab world, and what strategies or recommendations are suggested to address these challenges?

Leadership practices in the countries in Arab world are deeply rooted in cultural, social, and historical contexts that differ significantly from those in Western nations. Understanding these unique aspects is crucial for developing effective leadership models and strategies that resonate with the local populace. Analyzing the evolution of leadership studies within the countries in the Arab world can provide valuable insights into how leadership theories and practices have adapted over time to meet changing societal needs. By addressing the geographical distribution, publication trends, dominant leadership styles, and challenges, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on global leadership and offer practical recommendations for enhancing leadership effectiveness in the Arab world. Additionally, this review will help identify gaps in the existing literature and pave the way for future research initiatives that can further enrich our understanding of leadership in these unique settings. Highlighting these nuances is vital not only for scholars and practitioners within the region but also for the global leadership community, which can benefit from more diverse and inclusive perspectives.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample and data collection

This study employed a systematic methodology to review scholarly research on leadership within the countries in the Arab world, focusing on English-language publications to ensure broad accessibility and international relevance. The search process began with 105 articles identified through keywords related to "leadership", "Arab", specific Arab countries such as "KSA" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) and "UAE" (United Arab Emirates), and leadership styles like "Transformational leadership" and "Servant leadership." The review targeted journals listed in the

Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) journal quality list, focusing on those ranked A*, A, or B. Multiple databases were utilized for a comprehensive search, including Scopus, Google Scholar, Emerald, ProQuest, EBSCO, ScienceDirect, and Wiley.

Title, abstract, and keyword fields were searched simultaneously where the database interface permitted. Date restrictions were not applied in order to capture the full historical arc of leadership research in the region. To ensure systematic and reproducible results, the following string was used to do the primary search across all databases: ("leadership" OR "leader*") AND ("Arab" OR "Middle East" OR "Gulf" OR "GCC" OR "Saudi Arabia" OR "UAE" OR "United Arab Emirates" OR "Egypt" OR "Jordan" OR "Lebanon" OR "Morocco" OR "Kuwait" OR "Bahrain" OR "Oman" OR "Qatar") AND ("leadership style*" OR "transformational leadership" OR "servant leadership" OR "paternalistic leadership" OR "gender" OR "organizational behavior")

Initial records included 105 articles, but after removing 23 duplicates, 5 ineligible records marked by automation tools, and 6 others for various reasons, 71 records remained for screening. **Figure 1** illustrates the PRISMA flow diagram outlining the study selection process. The decision to restrict the review to journals ranked A*, A, or B in the ABDC list was made on two grounds. First, these rankings serve as a proxy for methodological rigor, peer-review quality, and academic impact, thereby ensuring that the evidence base for the review meets a consistent quality threshold. Second, this filter reduces the risk of including studies with weak research designs or limited generalizability that are sometimes found in lower-ranked or predatory outlets. It is acknowledged, however, that this criterion introduces a specific form of selection bias: high-ranking ABDC journals are predominantly Western in their editorial boards, dominant theoretical frameworks, and geographic preferences. Leadership research produced by Arab scholars in Arabic-language journals, or in regionally significant outlets not yet recognized by Western ranking systems, is systematically excluded.

2.2 Data analysis

The analysis employed thematic coding to organize and interpret the data based on common themes, providing insights into leadership practices and challenges in the Arab world. Thematic coding, as outlined by Gibbs [14] and supported by Braun and Clarke [15] and Guest et al. [16], facilitated a detailed qualitative examination of the data. Out of the 71 records screened, 15 were excluded due to being ranked below B in the ABDC journal quality list, and 14 were excluded for being related to global rather than Arab-specific leadership. Reports assessed for eligibility totaled 56, with 42 ultimately included in the final review (**Figure 1**). This rigorous approach ensured a comprehensive examination of leadership research, offering valuable insights into the evolving dynamics and future research directions in the Arab context.

Coding was conducted independently by two members of the research team. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a coefficient of 0.73, which indicates near-perfect agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

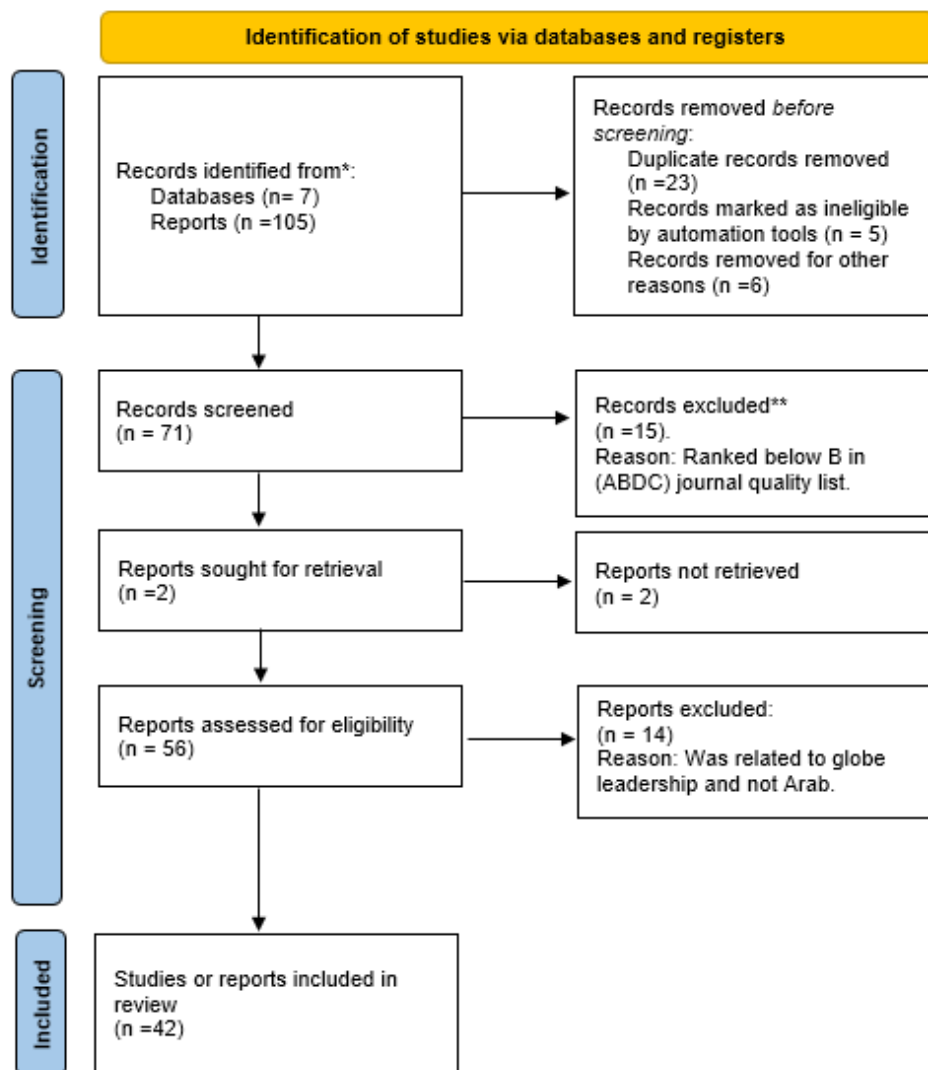


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram for study selection

3. Results

3.1 Geographical distribution across the Countries in the Arab World

The geographical distribution of leadership research across the countries in the Arab world (**Figure 2**) reflects both specific regional interests and broader thematic trends. Notably, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) emerges as a focal point in leadership studies, a reflection of its rapid socio-economic development and its role as a significant hub for business and governance. Research on leadership in the UAE is diverse, addressing multiple dimensions of leadership. For instance, Mathias [6] explores public leadership within the UAE, examining how leadership practices align with the country's developmental trajectory and governance structures. This focus highlights the UAE's unique position as a rapidly modernizing state grappling with both traditional and contemporary leadership challenges. The UAE's prominence in leadership research is further illustrated by studies such as those by Kemp et al. [13], which investigate the state of female leadership in the UAE. Their research sheds light on the specific barriers faced by women leaders in a context marked by both progressive reforms and traditional constraints. Similarly, Bealer and Bhanugopan [3]

compare leadership styles between expatriates and nationals, reflecting the UAE's multicultural workforce and the complexities of managing diverse teams.

Saudi Arabia, another major focus of leadership research, is represented in studies that address gender issues and educational leadership. Al-Ahmadi [4] delves into the challenges faced by female leaders in Saudi Arabia, providing insights into the cultural and institutional barriers that impact women's leadership trajectories. Alqahtani et al. [5] shift the focus to educational settings, examining leadership practices among school principals. This reflects a significant interest in understanding leadership within educational institutions, which are crucial for shaping future leaders in the Kingdom. Jordan is highlighted in the literature through studies that focus on women's leadership and cultural dynamics. Koburtay et al. [7] explore the experiences of women leaders in Jordan, offering insights into the intersection of gender and cultural norms. This focus on gender and culture underscores the importance of contextual factors in shaping leadership experiences and outcomes. Egypt, with its rich historical and cultural background, is also well-represented in leadership research. Studies such as those by Al-Harhi and Al-Mahdy [8] on educational leadership, Metcalfe [9] on cultural influences, and Senaji et al. [18] on leadership effectiveness reflect a broad exploration of leadership issues in this historically significant country. These studies collectively address a range of topics from educational leadership to the impact of cultural values on leadership effectiveness, highlighting Egypt's diverse and evolving leadership landscape.

Several recurring themes emerge from the literature on leadership in Arab countries. A prominent theme is the focus on gender and leadership. Numerous studies examine the barriers and challenges faced by women in leadership roles across various countries in the Arab world e.g., [4, 19, 20]. This focus highlights ongoing gender disparities and the need for more inclusive leadership practices. Research often addresses issues such as institutional barriers, societal expectations, and the impact of cultural norms on women's advancement in leadership positions. For example, Al-Ahmadi [4] provides a detailed analysis of the challenges encountered by female leaders in Saudi Arabia, while Skalli [19] offers insights into the cultural and media portrayals of Arab female leadership. Another significant trend is the exploration of cultural context and its impact on leadership. Studies like Metcalfe [9] and Madsen [21] examine how cultural dimensions shape leadership styles and effectiveness. This research underscores the importance of understanding cultural values and norms in developing effective leadership practices. For instance, Metcalfe [9] explores cultural dimensions of gender and management in the Middle East, revealing how cultural factors influence leadership behaviors and perceptions.

Research on public sector leadership is also prominent, with a focus on public sector reforms and leadership practices e.g., [6, 22]. This trend reflects a growing interest in understanding leadership within government and public administration, particularly in the context of reform and modernization efforts. Mathias [6] investigates public leadership in the UAE, while Sarker and Al Athmay [22] explore public sector reforms in the UAE, highlighting the complexities of leadership in the public sector. Despite these significant contributions, the literature often generalizes leadership across the Arab world and the Middle East without delving into specific contextual nuances. This generalization can limit the depth of understanding and may overlook important regional and cultural differences.

In summary, the distribution of leadership research across countries in the Arab world reveals a diverse yet uneven coverage, with a significant focus on

specific countries and themes. While there is substantial research on gender, cultural context, and public sector leadership, there are notable gaps in corporate leadership studies and emerging leadership paradigms. Addressing these gaps and exploring intersectional factors could enhance the understanding of leadership in the Arab world and contribute to more effective leadership practices in the region.

The uneven distribution of research across countries in the Arab world carries significant implications for what we can and cannot conclude from this body of literature. The predominance of UAE- and Saudi Arabia-based studies reflects these countries' global economic footprint, their investment in English-medium universities, and their attractiveness to internationally mobile scholars. However, this concentration creates a systematic blind spot. Leadership contexts in countries such as Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories — where political instability, post-conflict reconstruction, and resource scarcity fundamentally shape leadership challenges — are almost entirely absent from the high-ranking journal literature. Similarly, North African countries (Algeria, Tunisia, Libya) and the Levant (Syria, Iraq) appear only peripherally, despite their distinct historical and institutional legacies.

This geographic skew means that findings from the reviewed literature are most generalizable to relatively high-income, politically stable, Gulf Cooperation Council settings. Caution is warranted in extrapolating conclusions about “Arab leadership” from a sample that disproportionately represents a specific sub-regional type. The field would benefit from intentional research investments in underrepresented Arab nations, including through partnerships with regional institutions and through dedicated funding streams from international development organizations.

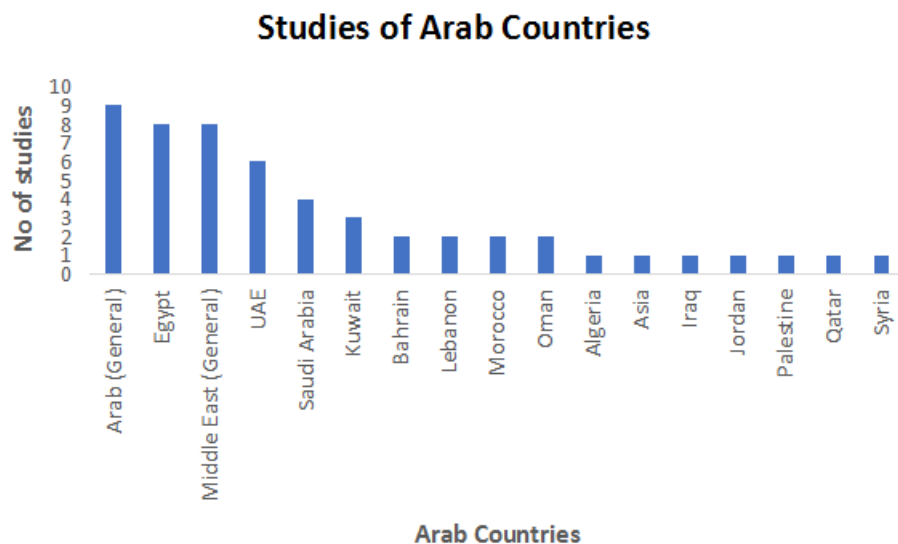


Figure 2. Summary of studies from countries in the Arab world

3.2 Publication Analysis on Leadership Research in Arab Countries

3.2.1 Frequency of publications on Leadership in Arab World

The landscape of leadership research in the countries in the Arab world has evolved significantly over the decades, reflecting shifts in academic focus, regional contexts, and emerging global trends. Analyzing publication trends reveals fluctuations that mirror broader changes in research priorities and societal developments within the region. In the early 2000s, foundational studies set the stage

for understanding leadership within the Arab context. Notable works from this period include Byman [23], which examined leadership changes in the Arab world, and Vatikiotis [24], whose exploration of political dilemmas in the Arab world provided a historical backdrop for leadership analysis. These early studies laid the groundwork for understanding the interplay between leadership and political contexts, setting a foundation for subsequent research.

The 2010s marked a period of increased publication activity, driven by a heightened interest in the nuanced aspects of leadership within the countries in the Arab world. This decade saw a broadening of research topics, with scholars increasingly focusing on gender dynamics and cultural influences on leadership. For example, Sidani and Thornberry [25] delved into the Arab work ethic, investigating how cultural values impact leadership behaviors in the workplace. Similarly, Tlaiss and Kauser [26] examined entrepreneurial leadership in Lebanon, highlighting the role of cultural and socio-economic factors in shaping leadership practices. This surge in research during the 2010s can be attributed to a growing recognition of the complex interplay between cultural, social, and organizational factors in shaping leadership practices in the region. Al-Abdallah et al. [27] and Afiouni et al. [28] contributed to this discourse by exploring the impact of organizational culture and leadership practices in the Middle East, emphasizing the need for context-specific studies to understand leadership dynamics fully.

In recent years, particularly from 2019 onwards, there has been a continued focus on contemporary issues such as leadership effectiveness and organizational culture. Arar [20] investigated the challenges faced by women leaders in the Arab world, providing insights into the practical aspects of leadership and the impact of organizational environments. Rezaei Zadeh et al. [29] contributed to this trend by examining leadership effectiveness in various organizational settings, reflecting a growing interest in actionable insights and solutions to contemporary leadership challenges.

The observed fluctuations in publication trends reflect broader changes in research interests, where early foundational studies evolved into more detailed and context-specific analyses. The increase in publications during the 2010s and recent years highlights a dynamic academic environment that is responsive to changing regional contexts and emerging leadership issues. Scholars have increasingly adapted to global trends and local nuances, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the leadership landscape in the Arab world [30, 31].

3.2.2 Quality of Journal Publications

An analysis of publications in high-ranking journals reveals a nuanced engagement with the subject of leadership in the countries in the Arab world, demonstrating a growing recognition of the region's leadership context within the global academic community. Among these publications, 37% are ranked A*, 33% are ranked A, and 30% are ranked B (**Table 1**). The majority of these high-ranking journals have contributed to the understanding of Arab world leadership by addressing various aspects, including ethical considerations, organizational change, and cultural influences.

The list of journals and their respective rankings provide an overview of the academic landscape for leadership research in the countries in the Arab world. The distribution of publications across various journals underscores the growing recognition of Arab world leadership issues in high-impact research and the increasing focus on region-specific challenges and practices.

Table 1. Quality of Publications as per the ABDC List

Journal	Rank	No of Publications
International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management	A*	1
International Journal of Human Resource Management	A	5
Asia Pacific Journal of Management	A	1
Comparative Politics	A	1
International Business Review	A	1
Gender and Society	A	1
Academy of Management Review	A	1
American Journal of Political Science	A	1
Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences	A	2
Educational Management Administration & Leadership	A	2
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal	A	1
International Journal of Cross Cultural Management	A	3
Human Resource Development International	A	1
International Journal of Educational Management	A	1
International Journal of Tourism Research	B	1
Journal of Business Ethics	B	4
Journal of Small Business Management	B	1
Political Science Quarterly	B	2
Public Administration Quarterly	B	1
The Academy of Management Journal	B	1
The American Political Science Review	B	1
International Journal of Knowledge Management	B	1
International Journal of Public Sector Management	B	1
Journal of Global Responsibility	B	1
Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies	B	2
Journal of Public Affairs	B	2
Social Science Quarterly	B	1
Thunderbird International Business Review	B	1
International Journal of Organizational Analysis	B	1

3.3 Dominant Leadership Theories in Arab Countries

3.3.1 Transformational Leadership

In the Arab context, transformational leadership is a prominent theme. Bealer

and Bhanugopan [3] investigate its application across various managerial settings in the UAE, emphasizing continuous education, empowerment, and motivation, which are essential for promoting gender inclusion and overcoming traditional barriers to leadership positions. This theory's impact on fostering empowerment and effectiveness is further supported by House et al. [32], who examined its effectiveness in the Arab Gulf countries, and by Jamali and Nejati [2], who highlight how transformational leadership can advance female managers in Lebanon. Kemp et al. [17] also contribute to this understanding by analyzing the current state of female leadership in the UAE, underscoring the role of transformational leadership in navigating the gender-specific challenges faced in the region. Additionally, Tlaiss and Kauser [26] offer insights into entrepreneurial leadership and its intersection with patriarchal structures in Lebanon, revealing how transformational principles can challenge traditional norms. Despite these contributions, limitations include the small sample size and context-specific focus of some studies, as well as cross-cultural comparisons that may not fully account for local leadership nuances [3]. Nonetheless, these studies significantly advance the understanding of how transformational leadership operates within Arab organizational settings, illustrating its critical role in fostering empowerment and effectiveness across various managerial contexts in the region.

A critical reading of the transformational leadership evidence raises several concerns. Most studies rely on small, context-specific samples, often a single organization or a narrow sector within one country, which significantly limits generalizability. Moreover, the dominance of transformational leadership in this literature may partly reflect a publication-driven self-fulfilling prophecy: Western-trained researchers, publishing in Western-ranked journals, apply Western-developed instruments (such as the MLQ), which are calibrated to detect transformational behaviors and may be insensitive to alternative effective leadership forms that are culturally native to the Arab world. This creates a structural bias where transformational leadership appears prominent not only because it is effective in Arab contexts, but because it is the framework most legible to the journals in which Arab leadership scholars seek to publish.

3.3.2 Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a significant theme in Arab world leadership studies. Madsen [21] explores how societal values affect female leaders in the Middle East, offering a comprehensive understanding of how social responsibility intersects with leadership practices. This study provides valuable insights into how societal expectations shape the experiences and effectiveness of female leaders in the region. Similarly, Lythreatis et al. [33] present evidence from the Middle East demonstrating how perceptions of CSR enhance organizational identification and moral meaningfulness. Their findings underscore the critical role of CSR in influencing leadership practices and advancing gender inclusion. Despite these contributions, the generalizability of these studies may be limited due to their specific regional focuses, but they nonetheless provide a rich perspective on CSR's impact in Arab contexts.

3.3.3 Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership is another prominent area of interest in Arab world leadership studies. Jamali and Nejati [2] investigate the challenges faced by women managers in Lebanon and highlight the role of servant leadership in supporting their

advancement and work-life balance. This study underscores how servant leadership principles can help female leaders overcome societal and professional obstacles. Complementing this, Skalli [19] examines how Moroccan media portrays Arab female leadership and illustrates how servant leadership can influence perceptions and expectations. These studies collectively highlight the importance of servant leadership in promoting gender inclusion and addressing specific challenges faced by women leaders. However, the focus on particular countries may limit the broader applicability of the findings, yet they offer crucial insights into how servant leadership interacts with cultural and societal expectations in the Arab world.

The evidence base for servant leadership in the Arab world is thinner and more geographically concentrated than that for transformational leadership. The studies reviewed focus predominantly on Lebanon, Jordan, and Morocco — and it remains unclear whether servant leadership would show the same salience in more politically closed or resource-driven contexts such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. Furthermore, the conceptual overlap between servant leadership and Islamic ethical frameworks (e.g., *khilafa* — the concept of stewardship) has not been theorized in the reviewed literature, representing a significant missed opportunity to develop an indigenously grounded variant of the theory.

3.3.4 Self-Centered Leadership

Self-centered leadership, characterized by minimal delegation and high self-reliance, has been explored in the Arab world context by Hawass [34]. Hawass developed a measurement scale for self-centered leadership traits in Egyptian firms, offering a unique perspective on leadership dynamics in Arab organizations. This perspective is further supported by the work of Al-Ahmadi [4], who discusses challenges facing women leaders in Saudi Arabia, illustrating how self-centered leadership traits might impact leadership effectiveness in different contexts. Additionally, the study by Byman [23] on leadership change in the Arab world provides indirect insights into how self-centered leadership could influence organizational adaptability and resilience during transitions. Despite these contributions, the theory's limitations include its focus on Egyptian firms, which may not fully represent the diverse leadership styles across other countries in the Arab world. The applicability of self-centered leadership beyond Egypt remains a subject for further research, though these studies offer a valuable lens on the role of self-reliance and personal control in leadership within the Arab world context.

The self-centered leadership evidence merits particular caution. The concept is derived entirely from a single study by Hawass [34] based on Egyptian firms, and no independent replication or cross-national validation has been conducted within the reviewed literature. Its inclusion as one of five “dominant” Arab leadership theories reflects the breadth of the review’s inclusion criteria more than a consensus finding. Its evidentiary basis in the Arab context remains nascent and should be characterized accordingly.

3.3.5 Implicit Leadership Theories

Implicit Leadership Theories, as discussed by Schyns et al. [35], provide insights into how cultural dimensions and expectations shape leadership perceptions in the Arab world particularly the Middle East. This approach explores the underlying beliefs and expectations that influence leadership effectiveness and perceptions. Further support for this perspective is found in the work of El-Kot and Burke [36], who examine the correlates of work outcomes among managers in Egypt, highlighting

how implicit beliefs about leadership affect managerial effectiveness. Additionally, Senaji et al. [18] offer insights into how leadership effectiveness is perceived across different African contexts, including the Middle East, providing a broader comparative perspective on implicit leadership beliefs.

While these studies highlight the importance of cultural expectations, the broader application of Implicit Leadership Theories may not fully capture the specific leadership styles prevalent in the nations in the Arab world. This limitation suggests that while the theory is valuable, it might require adaptation to address the unique leadership dynamics within different Arab countries more comprehensively.

3.3.6 Cross Theory Analysis: What the Arab Context Reveals about Leadership Theory

The overall prevalence of certain leadership theories in certain countries in the Arab world is not coincidental. It is a pattern with theoretical significance, as the leadership style in the Arab world is not adopted in a vacuum, but is influenced by the structural, historical and sociocultural conditions peculiar to the national context. This discovery contradicts a basic premise of many Western leadership models, which suggests that a particular leadership style, specifically transformational leadership, is universally applicable in organizations and cultures around the world. Transformational leadership is a phenomenon that is more prominent in the UAE and Lebanon, which calls for theoretical investigation.

In both settings, this style has become popular not so much for its motivational architecture but rather as a culturally appropriate way to resist the norm of gender exclusion and hierarchy. In these particular Arab settings, transformational leadership is made appealing as a means to deal with institutional limitations rather than as a means to individual, charismatic vision. On the other hand, the use of servant leadership theory in high-context societies like the societies in Jordan and Morocco where collectivism and religious ethics of care are deeply embedded in the society makes it more meaningful to say that servant leadership theory is most authentically expressed in high-context societies where service, humility and collective wellbeing are not only organizational choices but social norms. Such contexts may be a natural form of leadership, making servant leadership a “newer” or “alternative” paradigm in Western literature a mere cultural bias in the process of theory formation. The universalist picture is complicated even more by the documentation of self-centered leadership in Egyptian firms. Self-centered leadership in this context is not a deviation from effective leadership norms, but rather could be a rational response to contexts in which there is uncertainty about institutions and a lack of organizational trust. This implies that context-sensitive typologies of leadership theory are required; what may be dysfunctional from the perspective of western organizational psychology may be a functional balance in resource-poor or politically volatile environments.

Lastly, the cross-national nature of ILT in the countries in the Arab world demonstrates the extent to which culturally based prototypes of the “ideal leader” differ from those in the predominant Western prototypes. Leadership prototypes in the Arab world are unique in terms of their religious, tribal and paternalistic influence and are a unique cognitive schema that changes perceptions, leadership enactment, and leadership evaluation. Leadership development theories that do not consider culturally specific leadership prototypes have the potential to create leader development models that are not commensurable with the organizational realities of Arab employees and managers.

3.4 Primary Challenges of Arab Leadership and Strategies

Arab leadership faces an intricate array of challenges that are deeply intertwined with cultural, religious, and societal norms. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective strategies to enhance leadership practices in the region. According to Telhami [37], leaders in conflict-ridden areas must navigate the dual tasks of winning public support and countering insurgency [38] all while striving to provide effective governance. Below are common challenges confronting Arab leaders.

3.4.1 Hierarchical and Paternalistic Leadership Structures

A primary challenge in Arab world leadership is the prevalence of hierarchical and paternalistic structures. Ronen [1] points out that Arab cultures traditionally favor top-down leadership, where authority and seniority are highly valued. This hierarchical orientation often leads to centralized decision-making, where leaders are expected to make decisions unilaterally without seeking input from subordinates. Such structures can impede employee empowerment and limit innovation. In rapidly evolving environments where agility and collaboration are crucial, the lack of participatory decision-making can be particularly detrimental. This challenge is amplified in sectors requiring flexibility and rapid response to external changes, such as technology and services.

3.4.2 Gender Disparity in Leadership Roles

Gender disparity represents another significant challenge. Cultural and religious norms in many Arab countries restrict women's access to leadership positions. Skalli [19] emphasizes the barriers faced by Arab women, particularly in countries like Morocco, where societal expectations often confine women to traditional roles and limit their career advancement. Similarly, Al-Ahmadi [4] discusses the obstacles faced by female leaders in Saudi Arabia, including organizational structures and cultural attitudes that undermine their authority and effectiveness. This gender imbalance not only impedes the career progression of women but also limits the overall potential of organizations by excluding a substantial portion of the talent pool. Gender disparity in leadership roles hinders diverse perspectives and innovative solutions, impacting organizational performance and development.

3.4.3 Religious Orientations and Leadership Practices

Religious orientations also significantly impact leadership practices in the Arab world. Tessler [39] explores how religious beliefs shape attitudes towards democracy and governance, revealing that religious orientations can influence leaders' approaches to decision-making and governance. In some cases, these religious influences reinforce conservative practices that may conflict with modern leadership theories emphasizing transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness. The integration of religious values into leadership practices can create challenges in adopting contemporary management practices that prioritize these modern principles.

3.4.4 Cultural Resistance to Change

Cultural resistance to change poses another significant challenge. Leaders in the Arab world often encounter resistance when attempting to implement new management practices or reforms that diverge from established norms. Byman [23] discusses how leadership changes in the Arab world can provoke significant political and social upheaval, highlighting the difficulties leaders face in navigating entrenched systems and expectations. This resistance to change is often rooted in a

deep attachment to traditional practices and a reluctance to embrace unfamiliar or Western management approaches. This challenge can impede progress and hinder the implementation of effective leadership strategies.

3.4.5 Educational and Institutional Constraints

Educational and institutional constraints further complicate leadership development in the Arab world. Many leadership programs and academic institutions may not be adequately equipped to address the specific needs of the region. Alqahtani et al. [5] note that educational systems in some Arab countries may not sufficiently emphasize leadership skills or provide practical training relevant to contemporary organizational challenges. Additionally, institutional barriers, such as outdated curricula and limited access to modern leadership theories, can hinder the development of effective leadership practices.

3.4.6 Economic Instability and Leadership Uncertainty

Economic instability in some countries in the Arab world also affects leadership practices. Economic fluctuations and uncertainties can create challenges for leaders in maintaining organizational stability and navigating strategic decisions. Leaders may face difficulties in implementing long-term strategies or attracting investment due to economic uncertainties, which can impact organizational performance and growth. This instability can exacerbate existing leadership challenges and complicate efforts to achieve sustainable development and progress.

3.4.7 Strategies and Recommendations Addressing the Challenges

To address leadership challenges in the countries in the Arab world, several strategic solutions can be employed. First, integrating cultural awareness into leadership training can help reconcile traditional norms with modern practices, as suggested by Bealer and Bhanugopan [3]. Targeted initiatives, including mentorship and career development for women, are essential to overcome gender disparity, with structural reforms supporting women's advancement as emphasized by Sidani and Thornberry [25]. Encouraging dialogue between traditional and contemporary leadership models, as proposed by Zanini and Lopes [30], can create more effective frameworks that respect cultural values while promoting innovation. Effective management of resistance to change requires strategic communication and stakeholder engagement, with Afiouni et al. [28] highlighting the importance of culturally sensitive approaches. Enhancing educational and institutional support by updating curricula and providing practical training, as noted by Alqahtani et al. [5], can better prepare future leaders. Lastly, strategic planning and risk management are crucial for mitigating economic instability and ensuring long-term success. These combined strategies aim to address the multifaceted leadership challenges in the region effectively.

4. Discussion

Despite these significant contributions, the literature often generalizes leadership across the Arab world and the Middle East, overlooking specific contextual nuances that are critical for a comprehensive understanding. This generalization limits the depth of insight into regional and cultural differences, which are crucial for tailoring leadership practices effectively.

In summary, the distribution of leadership research across the countries in the Arab world reveals a diverse yet uneven coverage. While substantial attention has been given to themes such as gender, cultural context, and public sector leadership,

there remain significant gaps, particularly in corporate leadership studies and emerging leadership paradigms. Addressing these gaps, especially by exploring intersectional factors, could significantly enhance our understanding of leadership dynamics in the Arab world and contribute to the development of more effective leadership practices in the region.

Transformational Leadership, for instance, has been notably influential in the Arab context, with research emphasizing its role in advancing gender inclusion and overcoming barriers in countries like the UAE and Lebanon. However, the impact of Transformational Leadership is often constrained by small sample sizes and regional specificity. Similarly, Social Responsibility (CSR) and Servant Leadership are prominent, with CSR studies highlighting its influence on organizational identity and gender inclusion, and Servant Leadership research demonstrating its support for female leaders and its impact on leadership perceptions. Nonetheless, both areas are limited by their focus on specific countries.

Self-Centered Leadership provides valuable insights into leadership dynamics within Egyptian firms but lacks broader applicability to other Arab nations. Implicit Leadership Theories, which reveal how cultural beliefs shape leadership perceptions, also require adaptation to account for the diversity within the Arab world context. Overall, while these theories offer valuable insights into leadership in the Arab world, their regional focuses suggest a pressing need for broader research. Expanding this research could bridge existing gaps and foster a more nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics across the region.

Beyond documenting these patterns, this review argues that the Arab world context provides a productive theoretical vantage point from which to interrogate the cultural embeddedness of dominant leadership theories. The differential adoption of leadership styles across nations in the Arab world, shaped by variation in colonial history, religious practice, economic model, and political regime, constitutes a natural comparative laboratory. Future theoretical development should leverage this variation to build mid-range theories: theories sensitive enough to accommodate cultural context without abandoning the comparative rigor that gives leadership research its generalizability. In doing so, scholars can move from asking “Does transformational leadership work in the Arab world?” to asking “Under what contextual conditions does transformational leadership produce its hypothesized effects, and when do alternative configurations outperform it?”

5. Conclusions

The aim of this systematic review was to chart the field of leadership research in the Arab world, to review the prevailing theories and the contextual factors that shape them, and to suggest directions for further research. After reviewing 42 studies, it is concluded that the field is developing both in terms of volume and quality, but is still geographically localized, conceptually rooted in western frameworks, and lacks a theorization of the Arab cultural, religious and institutional contexts in which it operates. This review is not only bibliometric but also theoretical, in that it shows that the Arab world is a unique context in which the dominant theories of leadership in the West function differently, are used for different purposes, and need to be adapted.

Future research should focus on creating and testing culturally appropriate leadership tools, expanding to other countries in the Arab world that are not well represented, and comparative designs that could help determine the situational context in which various leadership styles are effective. The lessons for practitioners and

policy makers are also obvious: leadership development initiatives in the Arab world that simply replicate Western models are likely to be ill-equipped for the realities of the organization and expectations of employees. The most promising way forward is context-sensitive, co-developed approaches that combine local cultural logics with evidence-based principles of leadership.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This systematic review yields several explicit theoretical propositions that go beyond the descriptive synthesis, providing substantive amendments to prevailing leadership theories, which are mostly Western organizational context-driven. The universalist assumptions of the theory of transformational leadership need to be qualified. The results of this study indicate that transformational leadership is prominent in the UAE and Lebanon, but mainly as a means to achieve gender inclusion and institutional reform, which implies that the explanatory power of the theory in these Arab world contexts depends on different antecedents and outcomes than those theorized. Bass and Avolio's [41] model positions make transformational leadership seem effective since it raises followers' intrinsic motivation and values and makes them congruent with the organization's values. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, seems to be working well in the Arab world context, mainly because it offers socially legitimate justification for the violation of entrenched patriarchal and hierarchical norms. Leadership theory, therefore, needs to differentiate between the nature of a leadership style and the role it plays in context: something that Western leadership models systematically under-theorize.

Second, servant leadership theory might have been culturally dislocated in its western context — and even more culturally appropriate to a non-western collectivist context. The data from Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco indicate that the values of servant leadership (other-centeredness, community stewardship, and humility) are not characteristics of innovations in organizations in these societies, but they are expected values, which are based on Islamic ethics and communal tradition. In high-context communitarian Arab societies, servant leadership may be more of a social script for legitimate authority than a “style choice.” The discovery challenges the notion that servant leadership is a universal model to aspire to. The discovery raises the question of whether servant leadership is a model that is universal or culturally relative.

Third, Egyptian organizational settings are complex in the presence and operation of self-centered leadership, which poses a challenge to deficit-based understandings of non-Western leadership forms. Instead of viewing self-centered and paternalistic leadership as outdated and counterproductive leadership styles that hinder organizational development, the literature indicates that these types of leadership may be rational reactions to institutional settings with high power distance, weak formal governance, and low levels of organizational trust. Leadership theory should shift away from a linear modernization story and towards non-ethnocentric models that can account for the ability of different leadership arrangements to create organizational stability in various institutional settings.

Fourth, Implicit Leadership Theories show a systematic difference between the Arab and Western leader prototypes which has not been adequately theorized. In the Arab world settings, successful prototypes of leaders are also influenced by religious legitimacy, tribal affiliation, paternalistic care, and authority based on seniority. It is important to consider this split when choosing, training, and assessing leaders in

Arab organizations because the cultural distance between the leader and the local prototypes will affect the degree of acceptance of the leader within the organization, even if he or she is technically competent.

6.2 Practical Implications

The practical implications of this systematic review are profound for current and emerging leaders in the Arab world. By recognizing the predominant leadership styles and the factors influencing them, leaders can better navigate the unique challenges and opportunities within their contexts. For instance, understanding the impact of transformational and servant leadership can guide leaders in fostering a more inclusive and effective organizational culture.

Additionally, the insights into gender discrimination and the push for democracy can inform policies and practices aimed at promoting equality and participatory leadership. Recognizing and learning from the achievements of notable Arab leaders can provide valuable role models and strategies for success, ultimately contributing to the development of more competent and adaptive leadership across various sectors.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The systematic review of leadership styles and concepts in the Arab world has several notable limitations that could impact the comprehensiveness and inclusivity of its findings. First, the exclusion of lower-ranked papers based on ABDC categories ensures the inclusion of high-quality sources but might overlook valuable insights from significant studies that fall outside these rankings. This selective criterion could result in missing out on critical perspectives that contribute to the understanding of leadership in the context of the Arab world. Additionally, focusing solely on high-ranking journals introduces potential selection bias, possibly neglecting innovative research from emerging or region-specific journals that have not yet achieved higher rankings. This bias may lead to a less comprehensive understanding of the diverse leadership theories and practices prevalent in various countries in the Arab world. Furthermore, the geographic and cultural specificity of the included studies may predominantly reflect leadership paradigms relevant to a limited number of Arab nations or be influenced by Western perspectives, thereby limiting the broader applicability of the findings across the diverse socio-cultural and economic landscapes within the Arab world. Another significant limitation is the language barrier, as the review likely excluded substantial research published in Arabic or other regional languages. This exclusion narrows the scope of the review, potentially omitting critical insights that non-English language studies could provide. In conclusion, while the systematic review utilizing high-ranking journals offers a robust and rigorous analysis, acknowledging these limitations highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to achieving a richer and more comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics across the Arab world.

The restriction to ABDC-ranked journals, while justified on quality grounds, necessarily reflects the gatekeeping preferences of Western academic publishing. Topics that are salient to Arab scholars, such as tribal leadership, Wasta (relationship-based influence), and Islamic organizational ethics, may be underrepresented in A*/A/B journals not because they are unimportant, but because they fall outside dominant Western research paradigms. Future reviews should complement ABDC-based searches with targeted searches of regional databases such as Dar Al-Mandumah and Arabic-language journals indexed in regional repositories, in order to capture the full breadth of Arab leadership scholarship.

The research landscape on leadership in the countries in the Arab world, while rich, reveals several notable gaps and opportunities for further exploration. One significant gap is the relatively limited focus on corporate leadership compared to public sector and educational leadership. This suggests a need for more research on leadership challenges and practices within the corporate sector. Understanding how corporate leaders navigate cultural and institutional constraints could provide valuable insights into leadership dynamics in the private sector.

Emerging trends such as transformational leadership and servant leadership are gaining attention but remain underexplored in the context of the Arab world. For example, Sharif [40] examines transformational leadership behaviors in dynamic environments, and Lythreatis et al. [33] explore servant leadership in the Middle East. These newer paradigms present opportunities for further investigation into their application and effectiveness within the Arab context. Research into how these leadership styles can be adapted to fit regional cultural and organizational contexts could offer new perspectives on leadership development.

There is also a need for more research on intersectionality in leadership studies. While gender is a common focus, exploring how factors such as religion, socio-economic status, and other intersecting identities influence leadership experiences in the Arab world could provide a more comprehensive understanding. For instance, investigating how religious beliefs intersect with leadership practices or how socio-economic status affects leadership opportunities could shed light on additional layers of complexity within the leadership landscape.

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