Are Islam and Democracy Compatible?

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Democracy Needs Democrats
In 2011, the people of the Middle East and North Africa overthrew dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Anti-regime movements erupted in Jordan, Bahrain, Syria, and other countries in the region. It was the “Arab Spring.” Soon, however, a reaction set in. The Egyptian army ousted the country's elected President, jailed and killed thousands of his supporters, and instituted a military dictatorship. Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen descended into civil war. The rulers of other countries in the region offered minor concessions but combined them with increased repression to stifle dissent.

According to one widely used measure, between 2010 and 2014 civil liberties and political rights deteriorated in nine of the region’s eighteen countries and remained at the same low level in seven other countries. The state of civil liberties and political rights improved only in Tunisia and Libya (Brym and Andersen, 2015; Freedom House, 2015). However, it is certain that Libya will soon lose its improved status because of its civil war. In short, the balance sheet suggests that, while much was lost during the Arab Spring – most importantly, of course, many thousands of lives – little was gained overall.

Many commentators argue that the region remains mired in autocracy because it lacks a cultural tradition that promotes democracy. In particular, Islam, the region’s dominant religion, supposedly lacks affinity with democratic values. As political scientist Samuel Huntington famously put it in 1993: “Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic… cultures” (Huntington, 1993; see also Yuchtman Ya’ar and Alkalay, 2010).

Our analysis of survey data collected in 23 Muslim-majority and Western countries from 1996 to 2007 allows us to reconsider whether Islam is incompatible with democracy (Milligan, Andersen, and Brym, 2014). In brief, we failed to find as high a level of incompatibility as some other analysts claim to have observed.

Islam and Tolerance, Present and Past
Liberal democracy rests on the principles of majority rule and minority rights. Majority rule ensures respect for the will of the citizenry. Respect for minority rights prevents the formation of a tyrannical majority and protects the interests of all citizens, even those who are not in the majority. Majority rule is relatively easy to achieve because it requires only
free and fair elections. Minority rights are relatively hard to achieve because they require tolerance for people one may dislike or even detest. Classic works of political theory all recognize the importance of tolerance as a pillar of liberal democracy.

The relative lack of tolerance in the Middle East and North Africa is well illustrated by the case of Nouri al-Mailiki. Al-Mailiki, a Shi’a, was elected Iraq’s Prime Minister in 2006 by a majority in free and fair elections. However, he systematically stripped Iraq’s Arab Sunni minority (about a fifth of the population) of political influence. When Sunni Arabs demonstrated against his government, al-Mailiki’s security forces fired on them. Civil war ensued. Eventually, some Sunni Arabs in Iraq became so angry with al-Mailiki’s regime that they resolved to form their own state. They aligned themselves with the Islamic State (IS), an offshoot of al-Qaeda that is even more extreme than its parent organization is. In the summer of 2014, IS raced across eastern and northern Iraq, shooting, raping, torturing, beheading, and crucifying Christians, Muslims, and anyone else who refused to accept their ideology. No trace of humanity, let alone tolerance, could be detected in their actions.

Countries ruled by Muslims have not always been relatively intolerant of minorities. In certain times and places during the Middle Ages, the Jewish minority flourished in countries ruled by Muslims. In Spain, the Jews referred to the early period of Muslim rule (from the 8th century to the 11th century), as their “Golden Age.” Meanwhile, Christian Europe’s Jewish minority suffered many episodes of extreme persecution during the Middle Ages. The Jews were expelled from part of Germany in 1012, from England in 1290, from France in 1306, from Catholic-controlled Spain in 1492, from Lithuania, Sicily, and Warsaw in 1483, from Portugal in 1496, and from Italy and Bavaria in 1593.

A similar story emerges from a comparison of late 16th century and early 17th century India and England. During that period, India’s Muslim ruler, Akbar the Great, removed a tax on non-Muslims and sought to integrate Hindus and members of other religious groups into the nobility and the military. His actions increased national unity and prosperity and helped to create an atmosphere of tolerance throughout the country (Sen, 2005). In contrast, at about the same time in England, Roman Catholics were being fined, imprisoned, tortured, and put to death for failing to join the Church of England. A Catholic wanting to hold public office had to give up his religion and swear allegiance to the monarch as the supreme governor of the Church of England. William Shakespeare had to conceal his Catholic upbringing (Holden, 1999).

These few historical facts suggest that, while intolerance of minorities is relatively widespread in the Middle East and North Africa today, there was a time when European Christians were on average less tolerant than Muslims were. It follows that there is no necessary connection between Islam and intolerance.

Despite our historical observations, analysis of the respected World Values Surveys demonstrates that the citizens of Muslim-majority countries are today and on average less tolerant than citizens of Western countries are. We now turn to a subset of these surveys, conducted between 1996 and 2007 on nationally representative samples drawn from 23 Muslim-majority and Western countries.

**Tolerance in Muslim-Majority and Western Countries**

In the World Values Surveys, respondents were asked the following question: “On this list are various groups of people. Could you please mention any that you would not like to have as neighbours?” If a respondent said s/he would not like to have a neighbour who was a
member of a racial minority group, an immigrant, or a person who practiced a religion different from his or her own, s/he was coded as “intolerant.” Otherwise, s/he was coded as “tolerant.”

Listed in order from the most to the least tolerant, the Muslim-majority countries in our study included Morocco, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Jordan. (Pakistan, Indonesia, and Bangladesh are not in the Middle East and North Africa.) Western countries, again listed in order from the most to the least tolerant, included Sweden, Canada, Norway, Australia, Switzerland, Brazil, Netherlands, Spain, the USA, Germany, the UK, Italy, Finland, and France. On average, respondents in Muslim-majority countries had about a 50 percent chance of being tolerant. The comparable figure for respondents from Western countries was about 85 percent. Can we attribute this disparity to the different prevalence of Muslims in these two groups of countries?

Not entirely. For one thing, one Western country – France – exhibited a level of tolerance lower than or equal to four of the nine Muslim-majority countries in our sample (Morocco, Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia). Two of the four are in the Middle East. This finding suggests that it is possible for Muslim-majority countries to be as tolerant as Western countries are.

For another thing, we found that Muslims in Western countries were generally more tolerant than Christians in Western societies were. We suspect that a self-selection process was at work here. On average, Muslim immigrants in the West may be among the most tolerant residents of their countries of origin. They may immigrate partly because of their relatively liberal values. In addition, their high level of tolerance may reflect the fact that they are “outsiders” who experience the consequences of intolerance more than majority Christians do. That circumstance could increase their sympathy for other minority-group members who experience intolerance, making them more tolerant. Nonetheless, this finding suggests that, in some contexts, having a Muslim religious background does not lead to relative intolerance and having a non-Muslim religious background does not lead to relative tolerance.

Finally, we found that in Muslim-majority countries, practicing Christians were as intolerant as practicing Muslims were. Although Christians represent a significant minority in only three of the nine Muslim-majority countries in our sample (they comprise about 2 percent of Jordan’s population, 7 percent of Indonesia’s, and 10 percent of Egypt’s), this finding suggests that characteristics of Muslim-majority countries other than the influence of Muslim background might be partly responsible for their relatively high level of intolerance.

The Effects of Socio-Economic Context
That is in fact just what we found: a country’s level of economic development and its level of income inequality are significantly associated with its citizens’ average level of tolerance, independent of the prevalence of Muslims in the country. Let us consider the meaning of this finding in detail.

Sociologists have established that the greater the degree to which people enjoy job security, the less they fear losing their jobs to “outsiders,” including immigrants and minority group members. Sociologists have also established that job security is more common in rich, economically developed countries than in poor, less economically developed countries. Using International Monetary Fund data, we compared the rich G7
countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the USA) with the countries of the Middle East and North Africa in 2013. We found that the average purchasing power of each individual’s annual income was 3.9 times higher in the G7 countries. Moreover, while the unemployment rate in the G7 countries was 7.6 percent in 2013, the unemployment rate in the most populous countries of the Middle East and Africa was nearly twice as high (for example, 13.6 percent in Egypt and 13.4 percent in Iran; World Bank, 2014). The implication of these facts is that job security, and therefore tolerance of immigrants and members of racial and religious minority groups, is bound to be lower in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, irrespective of the proportion of Muslims in those countries. Our statistical analysis showed that this is in fact the case.

We also found that people living in countries with high levels of income inequality are more likely than people living in countries with low levels of inequality to be tolerant, irrespective of the proportion of Muslims living in them and how wealthy the countries are. Why is this so? In all countries, people in less privileged positions face more job insecurity than do people in more privileged positions. Moreover, the greater the gap between rich and poor, the more job insecurity less privileged people are likely to experience. We found that this generalization holds regardless of how rich a country is and regardless of the proportion of Muslims who live in it. It follows that in countries with more income inequality, intolerance will be higher, even when economic development and the proportion of Muslims are relatively high.

Significantly, the Muslim-majority countries that we studied tend to be relatively unequal and relatively poor (even though some, mainly small Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa are oil-rich). In short, a significant part of the reason that the Muslim-majority countries in our study are relatively intolerant is bound up not with the prevalence of Muslims in them but with their socio-economic conditions. If they were richer and less unequal, they would likely become more tolerant.

However, even after taking level of economic development and degree of income inequality into account, Muslim-majority countries in our sample were significantly less tolerant than Western countries were. We speculate that at least part of the reason for the remaining difference has to do with yet another contextual factor: the historical involvement of Western countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

France and Great Britain colonized much of the Middle East and North Africa from the 1830s to the 1940s. The leaders of these European powers drew the national borders of some Middle Eastern countries in a way that maximized ethno-religious conflict and intolerance. They may have done so because they knew little and cared less about the tribal, ethnic, and religious differences that divided the region. Alternatively, they may have known these things only too well and sought to maximize their influence by applying Julius Caesar’s advice to “divide and conquer.” Iraq is a case in point. It brought Sunni Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Shi’a Arabs, and several smaller ethnic and religious groups uncomfortably together in one political jurisdiction. In the early 1970s, the United States inflamed matters. Iraq’s oil resources were owned mostly by large Western petroleum companies. When Iraq sought to gain control over its oil resources, the USA arranged to arm Iraqi Kurds to fight against their own government, thus fanning inter-ethnic animosity and intolerance.

In other cases, Western powers stunted the growth of budding democratic movements in the region. For example, in Iran the Constitutional Revolution of 1909 and the democratic movement of the 1950s were undermined by a 1953 coup orchestrated by
the CIA and Britain’s MI6. The Western powers opposed the democratically elected prime minister of Iran because he wanted his country to gain control over its own oil fields. Subsequently, the United States supported a new authoritarian regime, just as it supported other authoritarian regimes throughout the region and continues to support them today. These examples suggest that, if the people of the Middle East and North Africa have mixed feelings about liberal democracy today, the West must take some responsibility for preventing the flowering of democratic movements.

Conclusion
We do not mean to suggest that the contextual and historical factors we have identified account for all of the difference in tolerance between Muslim-majority and Western countries. Cultural psychologists and sociologists have recently demonstrated that political extremism is associated with certain cultural traits that are more common in Muslim-majority countries than in Western countries (Gelfand et al., 2013). These traits include fatalism (putting one’s faith in a higher authority rather than taking responsibility for one’s actions), cultural “tightness” (low tolerance for deviance and strong justification for punishing people who commit deviant acts), and opposition to gender equality. More research is needed to determine the degree to which these cultural traits independently account for the difference in tolerance between Muslim-majority and Western countries.

One thing is clear even at this stage, however. Observers who attribute the weakness of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa to the prevalence of Muslims in the region oversimplify a complex situation. They tend to ignore the economic and political context of tolerance and intolerance. Our analysis shows that this context is an important part of the story. With further research, it may turn out to be the most important part.

References


