

Religiosity and its Political Effects⁽¹⁾

Dana El Kurd⁽²⁾

What is the effect of religiosity on public opinion? Islamist religiosity in particular has been linked to a variety of outcomes, including authoritarianism and violence. Nevertheless, many scholars have countered that there is in fact no relationship between religiosity in the Arab world and adverse political outcomes. Thus the debate remains unresolved to some degree. To adjudicate this debate, we use the Arab Opinion Index's 2016 data to examine the effect of individual religiosity on public opinion and political behavior. We find that there is no link between increased religiosity and negative views of democracy; in fact, the opposite is the case. There is also no link between religiosity and political participation. Finally, there is a positive correlation between religiosity and political tolerance.

Democracy

Arab

Public Opinion

Religiosity

Political Tolerance

The effect of religiosity on political opinion in the Arab world has long been an interest of American academia, particularly following the events of 9/11. The tenuous, generalized concept of “Islam” has been linked to a variety of outcomes, including authoritarianism and violence. In response, some scholars have countered that statistical analyses of such relationships showed no such trend. Thus the debate remained unresolved as to whether there really was a link between Islam and negative political outcomes.

Many of these studies emerged in the midst of the “War on Terror,” following 9/11 and throughout the invasion of Iraq. Eventually, academic research shifted to focus on Islamist parties and institutions, rather than political culture. In this way political scientists attempted to more accurately explain political trends in the Arab world. The Arab Spring and ensuing victory, and then defeat, of political Islam also piqued interest in Islamist parties, and their transformations during political openings. But, political Islam around the Arab world has been

largely defeated, most notably beginning with the coup against Mohammad Morsi in Egypt.

Thus, it stands to reason that individual opinions of religion, democracy, and other political outcomes have been affected by the latest trends in Arab politics. As such, it is important to reassess whether public opinion on democracy is affected by individual perceptions of religiosity. In this paper, we analyze whether individual religiosity has an effect on political participation, opinions of democracy, and intolerance of others. We show that there is no link between increased religiosity and negative views of democracy; in fact, the opposite is the case. There is no link between religiosity and political participation. Thirdly, there is no relationship between individual levels of religiosity and fear of Islamist parties, though there is some relationship between increased religiosity and fear of secular parties. Finally, there is a positive correlation between religiosity and political tolerance.

The organization of this paper will proceed as follows: I will review some of the relevant literature in more

¹ This study was originally released in *Siyasat Arabiya*, Issue 30 January 2018. *Siyasat Arabia* published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, is a peer-reviewed academic bi-monthly journal of Political Science, International Relations and Strategic Affairs.

² Researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. She holds a PhD in Government from the University of Texas at Austin with a focus on Comparative Politics and International Relations. She has written periodically for publications such as the *New Arab*, the *Washington Post*'s *Monkey Cage* blog and *Foreign Affairs* magazine. Her work has been published in *Middle East Law and Governance*, *Journal of Arabian Studies*, *Parameters*, *Journal of Global Studies* and *Siyasat Arabiya*. She can be reached at: dana.elkurd@dohainstitute.org. Her website is: <https://danaelkurd.weebly.com/>

detail regarding religiosity and political opinion. Then I will present the measurement derived from the Arab Opinion Index, used in this paper. Thirdly, I will present the results of the data. And finally, I will conclude with a discussion of the findings.

Literature Review

Islam in the Arab world has been linked to a number of negative outcomes. Some scholars argue outright that Islam and democracy are incompatible, and use the Muslim background of the Arab world as an explanation for its current authoritarianism. Kedourie, considered an expert on Arab “political culture,” famously wrote:

“the notion of popular sovereignty as the foundation of governmental legitimacy, the idea of representation, or elections, of popular suffrage, of political institutions being regulated by laws laid down by a parliamentary assembly, of these laws being guarded and upheld by an independent judiciary, the ideas of the secularity of the state, of society being composed of a multitude of self-activating groups and associations — all of these are profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition”⁽³⁾.

Scholars have gone on to extrapolate further from such claims. For example, scholars have argued that it is Islam’s patriarchy in particular which links it with authoritarianism⁽⁴⁾. Even those scholars who do not make this argument explicitly often discuss Islam and democracy as being two mutually exclusive concepts⁽⁵⁾. And finally, some scholars take the middle approach and argue that, while Islam is not the reason for the Arab world’s tumultuous political landscape, a liberal Islam compatible with democracy cannot be expected to emerge⁽⁶⁾.

Following this trend in the literature, some scholars pushed back against these notions and empirically tested whether there was a link between Islam and negative political outcomes. Tessler⁽⁷⁾ for example found that when using individual level data, using surveys, the reality is quite different. A “strong Islamic attachment” did not seem to have any significant

effect on support for democracy, or lack thereof. Clearly, when we examine survey data rather than rely on personal opinion or regime-level quantitative analysis, we can understand such relationships in a more nuanced way. Given also that many of these analyses occurred during the tumultuous era following 9/11, it stands to reason that a re-examination of these trends would be useful again today.

Data and Measurement

The Arab Opinion Index survey data from 2016 was used to conduct this analysis. In that survey, we gathered a number of indicators that capture the concept of “religiosity,” as well as political participation, opinions towards democracy, and political tolerance.

First, beginning with the concept of religiosity, we operationalized this using the question: “Regardless of whether you go to mosque or not, how religious are you?” This answers ranged from “very religious” to “not believing” and were ranked 1 through 4 for ease of data analysis.

As for the concept of political participation, we created two different indices capturing different aspects of political participation. These indices encompassed a number of different indicators into one measurement.

The first index regarding political participation captures it straightforwardly. The index encompasses such questions as:

- 1) Have you participated in signing a petition?
- 2) Have you participated in a nonviolent protest or march/
- 3) Are you a member of an opposition group?

These questions were measured by a numerical scale, with 1 being “no participation,” 2 is “participated once,” and 3 as “participated more than once.” The Cronbach’s Alpha score to gauge the internal consistency of this index was at 0.749, meaning it is a moderately consistent measure of political participation.

3 Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*. 2nd ed. (London, UK: F. Cass, 1994.) p. 5-6

4 M. Steven Fish, “Islam and Authoritarianism.” *World Politics* 55 (2002): 4-37.

5 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster), 1996; Bassam Tibi, “Why They Can’t Be Democratic.” *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (2008): 43-48.

6 Daniel Brumberg, “Islam Is Not the Solution (or the Problem).” *The Washington Quarterly* 29 (2005): 97-116.

7 Tessler (2002)

The second index captures a slightly broader indicator of participation. It takes into account work by Putnam and others regarding social embeddedness as an indicator of healthy democratic practices. This index encompassed four questions asking about participation regarding:

- 1) Cultural groups
- 2) Unions
- 3) Professional Associations
- 4) Charity groups

The Cronbach Alpha score to gauge the internal consistency of this index was at 0.84, meaning it is a very consistent measure of political participation.

Thirdly, to assess opinions towards democracy, we depended on two different questions in the survey regarding democracy/democratic practices. These questions asked how much the respondent agreed with the following ideas:

- 1) Democracy has its problems but it is the best form of government.
- 2) Our society is not suited for democracy.

All three questions were gauged using a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 being “very much agree” with the statement, and 4 being “very much oppose” the statement.

Finally, we attempted to gauge political tolerance/intolerance by asking a question regarding the turnover of power to varying types of political parties. Specifically, we asked two questions: whether Islamist parties coming to power “worried” the

respondent, and whether secular parties coming to power “worried” the respondent. We assessed those questions separately. Finally, we asked the following question, 3 times:

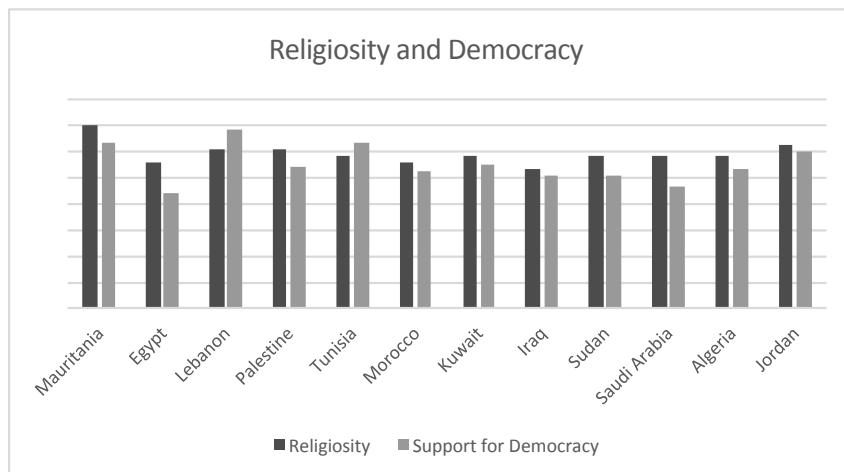
- 1) If ___ did not gain the necessary seats in fair and free elections, do you support that ___ take power?

Variations of this question included a political party the respondent does not agree with, an Islamist party, and a non-Islamist party. Using these three questions, we created an index of “political tolerance,” which had a Cronbach Alpha score of 0.77. As previously mentioned, such a score means the index is moderately internally consistent.

Analysis

We use the abovementioned index measures and indicators to test whether religiosity had an impact on opinions of democracy, types of political participation, and political tolerance. Beginning with religiosity and democracy, I graphed religiosity levels in each country against how much support for democracy there was in each country. In this graph, the question used to indicate support for democracy was: “How much do you agree with the following statement?: Democracy has its problems but it is the best form of government.” Results can be found in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Religiosity and Democracy



It becomes clear from this graph that there is no strong correlation between religiosity and democracy. In some countries, high levels of religiosity went hand in hand with low support for democracy, such as in Saudi Arabia. In other countries high levels of religiosity showed the opposite, such as in Mauritania. The correlation between the two variables was also low, at 0.08.

When we conduct regression analysis, things become a bit clearer. In the following regression analysis,

using an ordered logit model given the dependent variable, we test to see if there is any relationship between religiosity and different indicators of democracy. Regression is useful because it allows us to control for other possibly relevant variables. These relevant variables include age, gender, employment, opinions of the economy, personal preference for security, and education. We used the two different indicators of opinions of democracy, listed in the above section. Results can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Regression Analysis of Religiosity and Support for Democracy

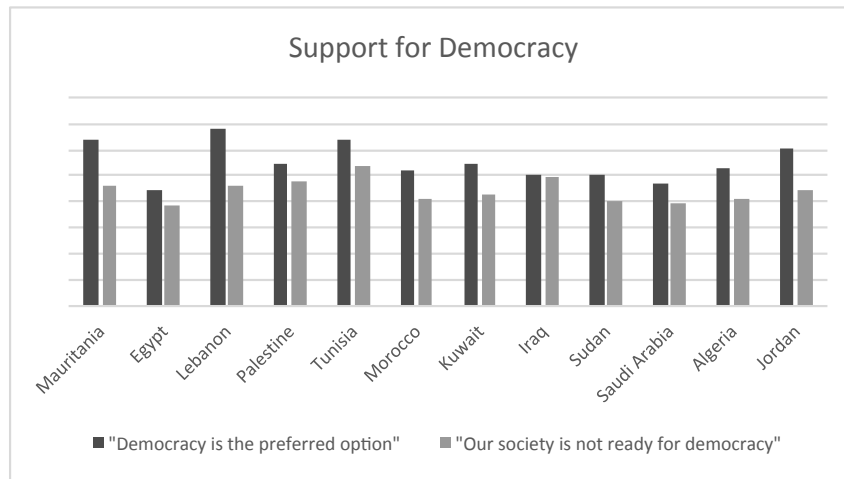
	Model 1: “Democracy is the preferred option”	Model 2: “Our society is not ready for democracy”
Religiosity	***0.131 (0.022)	**0.052 (0.022)
Country	***0.053 (0.006)	***0.023 (0.005)
opinion towards economy	***0.192 (0.023)	***0.116 (0.021)
opinion towards security	***-0.136 (0.043)	** -0.097 (0.042)
type of employment	**0.107 (0.044)	0.007 (0.043)
Age	***0.011 (0.002)	***-0.005 (0.002)
Gender	-0.047 (0.047)	** -0.117 (0.046)
Education	***0.055 (0.006)	**0.015 (0.007)
Sample Size (N)	7,959	7,959
Wald chi2(8)	329.18	76.15
Prob > chi2	0.000	0.000

Counterintuitively, we find that religiosity has a statistically significant and positive effect on support for democracy (Model 1) and, at the same time, has a statistically significant and positive effect on the anti-democratic notion that “society is not ready for democracy” (Model 2). The effect of religiosity on support of democracy is higher, given the bigger coefficient and higher statistical significance. Nevertheless, religiosity clearly does not have a unidirectional effect on support for democracy.

In fact, when we look at the correlation between the two questions that serve as indicators of democracy, we find that there is indeed a high correlation (0.433).

And when we look at a graph of the relationship, we find that as the “democracy is best” value goes up, so does the “society is not ready for democracy” value. The amount of increase depends on the country in question; in some countries the difference between the two values is not very large, and in others it is more substantial. This gives us the indication that there are country-specific reasons for why people believe society is not suitable for democracy in some places more than others. Nevertheless, the graph confirms that religiosity clearly does not have a unidirectional effect on support for democracy.

Figure 2: Different Indicators for Support of Democracy



To gauge whether religiosity had any effect on political participation, we use the two indices of political participation we described above. The first index captures straightforward political participation. The correlation between the first index and religiosity is very small, at -0.068. This indicates that there is not much of a relationship between religiosity and straightforward political participation. This is surprising given the manner in which political Islamist groups have gained traction as opposition

groups in many countries during and following the Arab Spring. The second index captures social embeddedness, or a wider form of participation. The correlation between the second index and political participation is also quite small, -0.0388.

When we look at regression analysis of the subject, this lack of correlation is confirmed to some degree. In Table 2 below, model 1 analyzes the first index, and model 2 analyzes the second.

Table 2: Religiosity and Political Participation

	Model 1: Political Participation	Model 2: Social Embeddedness
Religiosity	***-0.056 (0.011)	-0.021 (0.016)
Country	***-0.018 (0.003)	-0.005 (0.006)
opinion towards economy	0.012 (0.009)	0.029 (0.020)
opinion towards security	**0.040 (0.019)	-0.007 (0.039)
type of employment	***0.084 (0.020)	0.017 (0.039)
Age	***0.003 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.002)
Gender	** -0.041 (0.021)	-0.016 (0.041)
Education	** -0.005 (0.002)	**0.015 (0.007)
sample size (N)	7,959	2,489

As we can see from the regression models, religiosity had no statistically significant effect on social embeddedness. Religiosity did have a statistically significant effect on political participation, specifically a negative effect. But, the coefficient is very small, and the effect can therefore be considered considerably weak.

Finally, we analyzed the effect of religiosity on political tolerance. As previously mentioned, we gauged political tolerance by looking at whether

respondents had worries about Islamist or secular parties. When we look at simple correlations between religiosity and fear of Islamist parties, the correlation is predictably very weak, at 0.051. The correlation doubles when we look at the link between religiosity and fear of secular parties, at 0.102, but it remains relatively weak. Finally, for the most nuanced view, we run two regression models. Given the ranking order of the dependent variables in each of these regressions, we use an ordered logit model. Results can be found in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Religiosity and Political Tolerance

	Model 1: Fear of Islamist parties	Model 2: Fear of secular parties
Religiosity	-0.031 (0.023)	***0.154 (0.016)
Country	***0.031 (0.006)	** -0.014 (0.006)
opinion towards economy	***0.066 (0.022)	***0.267 (0.021)
opinion towards security	***-0.358 (0.043)	***0.198 (0.042)
type of employment	***0.194 (0.044)	***-0.304 (0.045)
Age	***0.006 (0.001)	***-0.007 (0.002)
Gender	0.009 (0.047)	-0.067 (0.047)
Education	**0.028 (0.006)	***-0.019 (0.006)
Sample Size (N)	7,959	7,959

These regressions confirm the simple correlation scores; religiosity predictably has little effect on fear of Islamist parties, but has a slightly positive effect on fear of secular parties. This means that more religious respondents were more likely to fear or be intolerant of parties they considered secular.

For a more holistic look at political tolerance, we use the index described in the previous section and run a regression focused on that aspect. This index more accurately captures the idea of tolerating dissimilar groups in society. Results of this regression can be found below in Table 4.

Table 4: Religiosity and Political Tolerance 2

	Model 1: Religiosity and Political Tolerance
Religiosity	***0.047 (0.009)
Country	***0.025 (0.002)
opinion towards economy	***0.115 (0.009)
opinion towards security	**0.034 (0.018)
type of employment	***-0.057 (0.019)
Age	-0.001 (0.001)
Gender	0.043 (0.019)
Education	***0.015 (0.002)
Sample Size (N)	7,959

Interestingly, in the more holistic measure of political tolerance, religiosity actually has a positive and statistically significant effect on tolerance. This is in contrast to what is often expressed regarding political Islam and conservatism in the Arab world.

Discussion

The results of this paper suggest that we need to reassess the perceptions of conservatism and religiosity that exist both in common parlance, as well as in the political science literature on the subject. Religiosity in many instances either had no effect on political opinions or behaviors, or had a positive effect on such aspects as political tolerance or support for democracy.

When we think about the specific political conditions in the Arab world following the Arab Spring, these findings become more understandable. Following the

Arab Spring, the resurgence of authoritarian regimes and the persecution of political Islam have caused a situation in which those who espouse religiosity or conservatism in their daily lives, i.e. those more likely to support Islamist actors, are more likely to be targeted. Thus, they must support democracy and tolerance in order to preserve themselves. So one explanation for why religiosity in these findings has a positive effect on support for democracy is that, from the perspective of these respondents, the way to avoid repression by an authoritarian regime is to support a democratic system in which there are safeguards against persecution. Islamist actors also made strides electorally immediately following the Arab Spring, so those who might support such actors understand that democracy would bring their parties to the fore. More research is needed to elucidate the causal mechanisms at work here, but these hypotheses may help explain the results we see in this paper.

References

- Brumberg, Daniel. "Islam Is Not the Solution (or the Problem)." *The Washington Quarterly* 29 (2005): 97-116.
- Fish, M. Steven. "Islam and Authoritarianism." *World Politics* 55 (2002): 4-37.
- Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Kedourie, Elie. *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*. 2nd ed. London, UK: F. Cass, 1994.
- Putnam, Robert D. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Tessler, Mark. "Do Islamic Orientations Influence Attitudes toward Democracy in the Arab World? Evidence from the World Values Survey in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 43, no. 3-5 (October 1, 2002): 105-25. doi:10.1057/9780230603332_5.
- Tessler, Mark. "Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes toward Democracy in Four Arab Countries." *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 3 (April 2002): 337-54. doi:10.2307/4146957.
- Tibi, Bassam. "Why They Can't Be Democratic." *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (2008): 43-48.