

# Islam's democracy paradox: Muslims claim to like democracy, so why do they have so little?

Charles K. Rowley · Nathanael Smith

Received: 20 April 2008 / Accepted: 24 December 2008 / Published online: 20 January 2009  
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2009

**Abstract** In this brush-clearing paper, we demonstrate that there is a deficit both of democracy and of freedom in Muslim-majority countries by comparison with the rest of the world. We further demonstrate that these deficits are not fully explained by poverty or by oil but seem to have something to do with Islam itself. We further demonstrate that the democracy and freedom deficits are larger in the Islamic heartland than elsewhere in Muslim-majority countries. We show that the democracy deficit is not driven by demands for autocracy in Muslim-majority countries, and indeed, that individual Muslims value democracy more than non-Muslims. We suggest that the lack of religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries (the supreme power concept) may be a significant variable in explaining the democracy deficit.

**Keywords** Islam · Muslim · Culture · Islamic heartland · Islamic democracy deficit · Islamic freedom deficit · Islamic religious freedom deficit

## 1 Introduction

Muslim-majority countries enjoy less freedom and are less democratic than non-Muslim-majority countries. This empirical regularity is the central focus of this paper. While the negative statistical correlation between Islam and democracy and Islam and individual freedom is impossible to deny, some researchers dismiss the correlation as illusory or irrelevant, suggesting that the result is driven by such omitted variables as oil and poverty. This paper carefully tests such hypotheses.

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that not all Muslims are religiously motivated. Nevertheless we do not attempt to distinguish between the secular and the theological. Nor do we attempt to distinguish between various Muslim sects in this paper.

---

C.K. Rowley (✉) · N. Smith  
George Mason University, Fairfax, VI, USA  
e-mail: [crowley@gmu.edu](mailto:crowley@gmu.edu)

N. Smith  
e-mail: [nathan\\_smith@ksg03.harvard.edu](mailto:nathan_smith@ksg03.harvard.edu)

This paper does not delve into the complex nature of Islam<sup>1</sup> in order to explore characteristics that might lead followers of that religion to take up various positions with respect to democracy and autocracy. Nor does it explore the normative properties of various forms of democracy and autocracy to determine which system is superior or inferior and under what conditions. Those issues, important though they clearly are, and well-explored as they have been (Wintrobe 1998), are outside the scope of our review. Our primary goal is positive, namely to determine whether Islam's democracy deficit is a robust result, and if so, why. In this sense, the paper is brush-clearing in nature, designed to provide a factual framework that expands on earlier empirical contributions and that provides a useful basis for future public choice analysis.

Paradoxically, while we find that Muslim countries are less likely to be free or democratic, we also find that reported *public opinion* in Muslim-majority countries, on average, tends to be pro-democratic, indeed with attitudes towards democracy that are *more* favorable than those of individuals in non-Muslim countries.<sup>2</sup> This fact does nothing to lessen the robustness of Islam's democracy deficit, but it does make it more puzzling. If Muslims like democracy so much, why do they not have more of it?

We offer a hint of an answer which points the way for future research. Democratic deliberation requires freedom, especially freedom of opinion and speech. We find weak evidence that Muslim public opinion is less favorable to freedom; and there is a striking deficit of *religious* freedom, in particular, in the Muslim world, even when we control empirically for levels of democracy, political rights and civil liberties.

## 2 A literature review

There is a small but growing literature that attempts to identify empirically differences between the extent of democracy (and characteristics often identified with democracy) in majority Islamic and in majority non-Islamic nations. In this section, we briefly outline key contributions that helped to shape our own empirical analysis.

An early impulse for research on the relationship between Islam and democracy emanated from Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilization' hypothesis articulated in a controversial *Foreign Affairs* article in 1993 (Huntington 1993), and later in a book (Huntington 1996). Huntington argues, among other things, that '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, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures' (Huntington 1993, p. 40).

This 'clash of civilization' hypothesis has been widely taken as prophetic in the post-September 11, 2001 environment, yet, in non-Western, *non-Islamic* countries, democracy and freedom, according to available data, are quite widespread. Before 2008,<sup>3</sup> it is hard to identify major 'clashes' among civilizations in today's world other than those involving Islam. But there does appear to be a clear deficit of democracy in the Islamic world.

<sup>2</sup>We acknowledge that public opinion polls have to be treated cautiously in repressed countries where dictatorial regimes and/or conservative religious authorities crack down on dissent. In such circumstances, preference falsification is common (Kuran 1995). We treat this prospect seriously in our evaluation of the relevant polling data.

<sup>3</sup>Arguably, Russia's invasion of Western ally Georgia may be interpreted as the beginning of a new 'clash of civilizations' between what Huntington calls the 'Orthodox Russian' civilization and the Western/European civilization. Alternatively, however, this invasion may be interpreted as frustration within Russia at its loss of Empire mixed with concern about NATO advancing towards its national borders.

A 1999 paper by Robert Barro explores “Determinants of Democracy” and finds a significantly negative correlation between democracy and Islam even when other major determinants of democracy are controlled for. As an indicator of democracy, Barro relies on an earlier iteration of the same Freedom House data that we use in this paper (Barro 1999). He develops a panel study of over 100 countries from 1960 to 1995, finding that the propensity for democracy rises with per capita GDP, with primary schooling, and with a smaller gap between male and female educational attainment. Though the effect of economic variables weakens the impact of religion on democracy, Barro’s estimated coefficient still implies that the long-run level of electoral rights is lower by two points on Freedom House’s seven-point scale in a Muslim-majority country, as compared with his benchmark of a Catholic-majority country. A similar such relationship is discerned when Barro (1999) replaces the dependent variable (political rights) with Freedom House’s measure of civil liberties. Barro’s results are broadly supported by Manus Midlarsky whose 1998 study concludes that Islam is negatively associated with all available indexes of democracy (Midlarsky 1998, p. 498).

Perhaps the most forceful numbers-based exposition on Islam’s democracy deficit is Adrian Karatnycky’s 2002 paper published in the *Journal of Democracy* (Karatnycky 2002) based on the 2001 Freedom House Survey. Karatnycky identifies ‘a dramatic gap’ in democracy between Islamic countries and the rest of the world:

Since the early 1970s, when the ‘third wave’ of democratization began, the Islamic world—and its Arab core in particular—has seen little significant improvement in political openness, respect for human rights, or transparency . . . . In the 47 countries with an Islamic majority, only 11 (23 percent) have democratically elected governments, while 110 of the 145 non-Islamic states (76 percent) are electoral democracies. This means that a non-Islamic state is nearly three times more likely to be democratic than an Islamic state. Furthermore, none of the 16 Arab states is a democracy. (Karatnycky 2002, p. 103)

Karatnycky (2002) identifies an even more dramatic gap in freedom between majority-Islamic countries and the rest of the world. In 2001, there was only one Islamic country, Mali, registered as a free country by Freedom House, while 18 were Partly Free, and 28 were Not Free. Among the non-Islamic countries, by contrast, 85 were Free, 39 were Partly Free, and 21 were Not Free.

This differential is part of a long-term trend. Between 1981 and 2001, in the non-Islamic world, the number of Free countries increased by 35, the number of Partly Free countries increased by eight and the number of Not Free countries declined by 21. In the Islamic world, the number of Free countries remained at one, the number of Partly Free countries declined by two and the number of Not Free countries increased by ten.

Karatnycky (2002) also confirms that the democracy gap persists in every region where there are Islamic countries, including the post-communist world (though we do not confirm this result for sub-Saharan Africa). Notably, no Muslim-majority democracy has a majority-Arab population, and all Muslim-majority electoral democracies are located on the geographical and cultural edges of the Islamic world. Nevertheless, Karatnycky (2002) denies that Islam is inherently incompatible with democracy, pointing out that, when the large Muslim populations of India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey as well as the Muslim populations of North America and Western Europe are accounted for, a majority of the world’s Muslims actually live under conditions of democracy.

One possibility is that Islam may simply serve as a proxy for oil and gas natural resources. What Karatnycky (2002) calls the “Arab core” of the Islamic world is rich in such resources; and there is a widely noted negative relationship between democracy and natural resource wealth. The most thorough and recent exploration of this phenomenon is by

Michael Ross in a *World Politics* article, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?” (Ross 2001). Using pooled time-series cross-national data from 113 countries over the period 1971–1997, he tests three hypotheses, namely (1) oil resources hinder democracy, (2) that this negative influence does not extend beyond the Middle East and (3) that non-mineral wealth also impedes democracy.

Ross finds the oil-impedes-democracy claim to be both valid and statistically significant. Moreover, oil does relatively greater damage to democracy in poor states than in rich ones. He finds that this negative influence is not restricted to the Middle East. Oil wealth has impeded democracy in Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico and Nigeria. It may well have done so in oil-rich states in Central Asia. He also finds that non-fuel mineral wealth somewhat impedes democracy. While the major oil exporters are concentrated in the Middle East, major mineral exporters are scattered across Africa, Asia and the Americas and such wealth arguably has deterred democracy in such countries as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambodia and Peru.

Ross (2001) argues that three causal mechanisms link oil with autocracy, namely (1) a *rentier* effect through which governments use low tax rates and high spending to dampen pressures for democracy, (2) a repression effect through which governments build up their internal forces to ward off democratic pressures, and a modernization effect, through which the failure of the general population to move into the industrial and service sectors renders them less likely to push for democracy. These links empirically are much more evident in the case of oil than in the case of non-oil mineral wealth. Nonetheless, Ross (2001) deploys Islam as an independent variable in his regressions. The coefficient on that variable is consistently significant, and with a negative sign.

Despite consistent empirical support for the Islamic democracy deficit hypothesis, there is some remaining dissent in the literature. Przeworski (2002) suggests that the best way to evaluate the determinants of democracy is to focus on “regime dynamics,” the patterns through which regimes, classified in binary fashion as either democracies or as dictatorships, emerge and fall. On the basis of a dataset that runs from 1950 to 1999, encompassing 135 countries (but excluding major oil producers) Przeworski (2002) does not attempt to explain how democracies—or autocracies—emerge, but finds that their chances of survival, once established, depend on per capita income. Przeworski’s most striking result is that:

No democracy ever, including the period before World War II, fell in a country with a per capita income higher than that of Argentina in 1976, \$6,055. This is a startling fact, given that since 1946 alone forty-seven democracies collapsed in poorer countries. In contrast, thirty-five spent 1046 years in wealthier countries and not one died. Affluent democracies survived wars, riots, scandals, economic and governmental crises, hell or high water . . . . Above \$6,055 . . . democracy lasts forever. (Przeworski 2002, p. 9)

Interestingly, Przeworski finds little difference between the survival chances of democracies and dictatorships once GDP per capita rises: increasing wealth makes all kinds of regimes more durable.

Using the same methodology, Przeworski (2002) rejects the notion that religious variables, including Islam, exercise influence on the emergence of democracy. He infers that the only observed effect of religion is that new democracies are more likely to emerge in Catholic-majority countries. This inference, in our view, is historically myopic. Przeworski’s data runs only from 1950 to 1999. Before Vatican II in 1967, the Catholic Church did not traditionally favor democracy, which likely explains why Catholic or near-Catholic countries were slow to democratize (Rowley and Dobra 2003). Since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has become a force for democracy in many parts of the world, thus explaining the

greater frequency of transitions to democracy in Catholic-majority countries.<sup>4</sup> Protestant and Islamic countries had relatively few democratic transitions, it would seem, for opposite reasons, namely (a) almost all Protestant countries already were democratic before 1950, and stayed so, while (b) few Islamic countries are democratic even today, but Przeworski's focus on dynamics causes him to lump together these quite different cases.

Another critique of the Islamic democracy deficit hypothesis, “The True Clash of Civilizations?” by Inglehart and Norris (2001), is part of a second literature, dealing with public opinion in the Muslim world, and in particular with support for democracy among Muslims. As studying public opinion at a global level is difficult, most such studies are regional in scope. Rose (2002) studies attitudes to democracy in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. He finds that “in post-Soviet countries, the civilization that matters is not Islam; it is, rather, one based on secular values . . . that has flourished in . . . Europe.” He finds that education and social class affect attitudes towards democracy, but “being a Muslim does not make a person more likely either to reject democracy or to endorse dictatorship.” Bratton (2003) studies public opinion data in Africa and finds, similarly, that “Muslims are just as supportive of democracy as non-Muslims.” Like Rose, he finds that “more than religion, modernization affects support for democracy.” He also finds, however, that only about half as many Muslims associate the word ‘democracy’ with “government by the people,” as opposed to other factors such as economic equality, civil liberties, and electoral choice, and also, anticipating our findings, that “political tolerance is lower among Muslims.” Melia (2003) did opinion research in post-Taliban Afghanistan and found strong support for democracy, and cites wider evidence that “across the world, Muslims are as likely as people of other faiths to believe in the virtues of democracy as a political system.” Similarly, Jamal and Tessler (2008), on the basis of surveys in nine Arab countries, find that “popular support for democracy [in the Arab world] is widespread.”

Inglehart and Norris (2001) draw on data from the *World Values Survey* to demonstrate that Muslim populations are *more* supportive of democracy on average than are non-Muslim populations, a result we reproduce using the same data source (slightly updated). Norris and Inglehart regard this striking empirical result as a refutation of Huntington's ‘clash of civilizations’ hypothesis. Theirs is the only paper on Muslim attitudes towards democracy that we are aware of, prior to this one, which (a) is global in scope, and (b) recognizes what we call “Islam's democracy paradox,” namely that though Muslims express support for democracy, they have little of it. Norris and Inglehart hint that the lack of gender equality in the Muslim world might account for the paradox, but offer no empirical or theoretical support.

### 3 Operational definitions

#### 3.1 Democracy

Democracy is an ambiguous concept with several different meanings. The concept emanates from Ancient Greece, where *demos kratia* meant ‘people authority’, in the sense of government by the majority vote of male citizens, an extremely elite group. Women, slaves, other subordinated groups, and all aliens were completely excluded from this privilege. This limited ideal was achieved (but quickly lost) by Athens in the fifth century B.C. From such

<sup>4</sup>This change of attitude towards democracy within the Catholic Church may turn out to be a harbinger for some future change in favor of democracy in the Muslim heartland.

early times, democracy became recognized as rule by the people as opposed to rule by one individual (autocracy) or rule by the few (oligarchy).

In modern times, democracy is defined as a system of government by all eligible members of a country, typically through representatives elected usually, but not always, by some form of majority vote, with each individual exercising an equal vote in a secret ballot. Democracies are defined, from this perspective, by process and not by title. Many so-called ‘people’s republics’ and ‘democratic republics’ in reality are autocracies (for example, The People’s Republic of China, and the now extinct German Democratic Republic).

### 3.2 The Polity IV variables

Our primary source of democracy data is the *Polity IV Project*.<sup>5</sup> This data set comprised 161 countries in 2004, some of which had experienced recent regime change. In 2002, a new variable was added to the *Polity IV* data series: POLITY2, to facilitate the use of the Polity regime measure for time-series analysis.

Democracy, for purposes of this dataset, is conceived as three essential, interdependent elements. One is the presence of institutions and procedures through which citizens can express effective preferences about alternative policies and leaders. Second is the existence of institutionalized constraints on the exercise of power by the executive. Third is the guarantee of civil liberties to all citizens in their daily lives and in acts of political participation. However the dataset does not include coded data on specific aspects of civil liberties such as the rule of law, systems of checks and balances and freedom of the press, which are viewed as means to, or specific manifestations of, these general principles.

This (inevitably subjective) operational democracy indicator is graded on an additive eleven-point scale (0–10) (with the quality of a defined democracy rising from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 10) derived from coding of (1) the competitiveness of political participation, (2) the openness and competitiveness of executive recruitment and (3) constraints on the chief executive. A mature and internally coherent democracy is operationally defined as one in which political participation is fully competitive, executive recruitment is elective and constraints on the chief executive are substantial.

The *Polity IV Project* codes autocracy, in a similar operational fashion, in terms of the presence of a distinctive set of political characteristics. Autocracies sharply restrict or suppress competitive political participation. Their chief executives are chosen, through a regulated process from within the political elite and, once in office, such autocrats exercise power with few institutional constraints and with few concerns for human rights.

An *autocracy indicator* is constructed additively from coding (1) the competitiveness of political participation, (2) the openness of political participation, (3) the openness and competitiveness of executive recruitment and (4) constraints on the chief executive. The scale of this variable runs from 1 (minimal) to 10 (maximum) autocracy.

In Sect. 4 of this paper, for empirical purposes, we combine the *Project IV* democracy and autocracy indicators into a single operational 21-point code, running from –10 (maximum autocracy) to +10 (maximum democracy).

### 3.3 The Freedom House variables

As we indicate above, any scale of measurement from autocracy to democracy must be subjective. In order to broaden our own empirical analysis of the Islam democracy deficit,

<sup>5</sup>This data set is compiled by Monty C. Marshall and Keith Jagers and provides political regime characteristics for the period 1800–2004. For the most part, we utilize 2004 data.

therefore, we draw also upon the extensive data base provided by the *Freedom in the World Survey* published by Freedom House ([www.freedom\\_house.org](http://www.freedom_house.org) 2007). This survey provides annual numerical ratings separately for the state of political rights and for civil liberties in each of 193 countries and 15 select territories. Each scale runs from 1 (maximum rights) to 7 (minimum rights). These ratings provide relevant alternatives to the *Project IV* measurement scale.

The Freedom House ratings are based on a checklist of 10 political rights questions and 15 civil rights questions. Political rights questions are grouped into three sub-categories: (1) electoral process, (2) political pluralism and participation and (3) functioning of government. Civil liberties questions are grouped into four sub-categories: (1) freedom of expression and belief, (2) associational and organizational rights, (3) rule of law and (4) personal autonomy and individual rights. Points are awarded to each sub-category on a scale of 0 (worst) to 4 (best). These scores are then aggregated into a 1–7 overall rating for each country in terms of (1) political rights and (2) civil rights.

#### 4 Some simple arithmetic on Islam, democracy and freedom

##### 4.1 The extent and nature of Islam's overall democracy and freedom deficits

Muslim-majority countries are less democratic and less free than non-Muslim-majority countries. For the year 2004, the Polity IV data set ranked 153 countries on a scale of democratic governance ranging from -10 (most autocratic) to 10 (most democratic). For non-Muslim countries, the average Polity IV score was 5.24. For Muslim countries, the average score was -2.16. Not a single majority-Muslim country was assigned Polity IV's highest scores of 9 and 10, while 47 out of 115 non-majority-Muslim countries were assigned one of those scores.

Freedom House publishes data which ranks Political Rights and Civil Liberties on a scale from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free). In majority-Muslim countries, the average score for political rights in 2004 was 5.24,<sup>6</sup> for civil liberties 4.90. In non-majority-Muslim countries, political rights averaged 3.13, and civil liberties 3.04, so that both scores are about two points lower (i.e., freer) in non-Muslim than in Muslim countries. *Not a single* Muslim-majority country achieved Freedom House's top score of 1 for either civil liberties or political rights. Only two such countries, Mali and Senegal, scored a 2 in political rights, while only one such country, Mali, scored a 2 for civil liberties.

Are Muslim-majority countries less democratic and less free *because* they are Muslim, or are the Islamic world's democracy and freedom deficits explained by some other factor, which happens to be correlated with Islam? In particular, the lack of democracy and freedom in Muslim-majority countries are often attributed to (a) poverty, and (b) oil. It is true that Muslim-majority countries generally are poorer than non-Muslim-majority countries, even if we exclude the European Union and the English-speaking nations.<sup>7</sup> While the median country in the EU and/or the English-speaking world had a real GDP per capita in 2002 of \$24,282,<sup>8</sup> and the median non-Muslim-majority country outside the EU and English-

<sup>6</sup>That this average score turns out to be the same as the average Polity IV score for non-Muslim countries is a coincidence.

<sup>7</sup>That is, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as the UK and Ireland which are also in the EU.

<sup>8</sup>Authors' calculations based on data from the Penn World Tables. The year 2002 is used because of the comparative completeness of the data.



speaking world had \$4,173, the same statistic for the median Muslim-majority country was a bit less at \$3,707. Poorer countries tend to enjoy less democracy. It is also true that Muslim countries, on average, are more dependent on oil exports, though there is a wide variance. The share of oil in total exports in Muslim-majority countries is significantly higher than in non-Muslim-majority countries, and this relationship remains even if GDP is controlled for. Oil share of exports also has a negative impact on the Polity IV democracy score.

Oil and poverty do not, however, explain away Islam's democracy and freedom deficits, as we show in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that Islam's democracy and freedom deficits are not fully explained by poverty and/or by oil. In the regressions (a) both the Polity IV and the Freedom House scores are lower (with statistical significance) for Muslim-majority countries, (b) this statistical significance continues to hold when log GDP per capita is controlled for and (c) it continues to hold when log GDP per capita *and* oil share of exports are controlled for. Moreover, the magnitude of the coefficients does not decrease very much. The predicted differences in democracy and freedom between a country with a 0% Muslim share and a 100% Muslim share are 7.7 points in the Polity IV measure, 1.7 points in Freedom House's Political Rights measure, and 1.3 points in Freedom House's Civil Liberties measure. That these differences are similar to the differences between the raw averages for Muslim and non-Muslim countries underline the fact that oil and poverty do little to explain Islam's democracy and freedom gap.

The final regression in Table 1 restricts the sample to Muslim-majority countries and draws out a striking fact about democracy and freedom in the Islamic world: *democracy in Muslim-majority countries is inversely correlated with income*. Despite the relatively small sample size (37 countries), this result is significant at the 1% level. We revisit this finding below.

#### 4.2 The dynamics of Islam's democracy and freedom deficits

Islam has existed for over a thousand years, so if the democracy and freedom deficits observed in Muslim-majority countries are a consequence of Islam, we might expect them to be long-standing. Of course, it is true that democracy has rarely if ever existed in the Islamic world historically, but the same was true of other regions until relatively recently. As the regressions in Table 2 show, Islam's *relative* democracy deficit appears to be a recent phenomenon.

In 1950, the statistical impact of Islam on the Polity IV score was actually *positive*, though not significant. Only in 1965 did Islam begin to have a negative and significant effect on the Polity IV score. For three decades afterwards, the coefficient on Islam continued to become more strongly negative. At the same time, the coefficient on log GDP per capita as a determinant of the Polity IV score, though remaining significant at the 1% level, trended downwards, so that by 2000 it was one-third lower than in 1950. Democracy has spread through many poorer countries,<sup>9</sup> but has penetrated the Islamic world much less than other regions.

#### 4.3 The missing income-democracy correlation

In most of the world, there is a strong positive correlation between wealth and democracy, but this does not apply in the Islamic world. In fact, whereas in non-Muslim-majority

<sup>9</sup>Care must be exercised, however, in interpreting such developments. In particular, so-called democracies in much of sub-Saharan Africa are often one party shams controlled by 'Big Men' kleptocrats. See Rowley (2000) for several such examples.



**Table 1** Islam's democracy deficit

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Polity IV score, 2004	Polity IV score, 2004	Polity IV score, 2004	Political rights, 2004 (Freedom House)	Political rights, 2004 (Freedom House)	Political rights, 2004 (Freedom House)	Civil liber- ties, 2004 (Freedom House)	Civil liber- ties, 2004 (Freedom House)	<i>Only Muslim countries</i> Polity IV score, 2004
Muslim share of population (CIA World Factbook)	-0.095 (7.60)**	-0.086 (6.74)**	-0.077 (5.58)**	-0.028 (6.97)**	-0.023 (6.15)**	-0.017 (3.98)**	-0.024 (7.27)**	-0.013 (3.94)**	-0.054 (0.75)
Log GDP per capita, 2004 (Penn World Tables)		1.128 (2.79)**	1.382 (3.29)**		0.670 (5.79)**	0.800 (6.10)**		0.766 (7.51)**	-2.287 (2.86)**
Oil share of exports (WITS, 2005/6)			-0.057 (4.78)**			-0.019 (5.13)**		-0.017 (5.76)**	
World Integrated Trade Systems									
Constant	5.959 (10.44)**	-3.762 (1.05)	-4.670 (1.23)	2.896 (15.71)**	8.626 (8.48)**	9.384 (7.96)**	2.844 (18.39)**	9.150 (9.99)**	21.380 (2.48)*
Observations	153	146	113	161	153	115	161	115	37
R-squared	0.28	0.32	0.52	0.23	0.39	0.53	0.25	0.59	0.21

Absolute value of *t* statistics in parentheses

\*Significant at 5%

\*\*Significant at 1%

**Table 2** Islam's democracy deficit: dynamic increase

Year	Polity IV score, by year										
	(1) 1950	(2) 1955	(3) 1960	(4) 1965	(5) 1970	(6) 1975	(7) 1980	(8) 1985	(9) 1990	(10) 1995	(11) 2000
Muslim share of population (CIA World Factbook)	0.077 (1.79)	0.001 (0.04)	-0.043 (1.84)	-0.042 (2.04)	-0.055 (3.33)	-0.056 (3.48)	-0.074 (4.71)	-0.077 (5.15)	-0.078 (5.74)	-0.094 (7.88)	-0.086 (7.35)
Log GDP per capita (Penn World Tables)	4.826 (3.79)	4.881 (4.64)	4.328 (5.27)	3.744 (5.34)	2.955 (5.28)	2.692 (5.12)	2.471 (4.73)	3.056 (6.10)	3.204 (7.29)	1.449 (3.85)	1.435 (3.92)
Constant	-36.468 (3.45)	-37.387 (4.29)	-32.412 (4.81)	-28.654 (4.95)	-23.721 (5.17)	-22.409 (5.12)	-19.811 (4.48)	-24.056 (5.65)	-23.562 (6.27)	-6.816 (2.10)	-6.768 (2.12)
Observations	42	53	75	86	115	123	124	124	129	151	153
o/w Muslim	3	5	13	17	26	31	32	32	33	39	40
R-squared	0.27	0.32	0.38	0.35	0.29	0.26	0.30	0.39	0.47	0.39	0.37

Absolute value of *t* statistics in parentheses

\* Significant at 5%

\*\* Significant at 1%

countries wealth is associated with more democracy, in Muslim-majority countries wealth is actually associated with *less* democracy. Table 3 shows the average Polity IV score for Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority countries at different levels of average GDP.

An obvious explanation for the lack of democracy in wealthy Muslim countries is that these countries are mostly oil states, and natural resources provide rulers with a source of wealth that makes them less accountable to their subjects. And it turns out that when oil's share of exports is controlled for (see Table 4) the negative correlation between wealth and democracy/freedom loses significance, though it retains its sign. Moreover, when an interaction term between the Muslim variable and log GDP per capita is inserted, this term is significant at the 10% level, with a negative sign, with the Polity IV score as a dependent variable, and significant at the 5% level when either of the Freedom House scores is substituted.

**Table 3** The missing correlation between GDP and democracy/freedom in the Muslim world

GDP	Average Polity IV score	
	In non-Muslim countries	In Muslim countries
Under \$1,000	0.33	0.40
\$1,000–\$2,500	1.47	0.22
\$2,500–\$7,500	5.45	–2.00
\$7,500–\$15,000	5.59	–2.43
Over \$15,000	9.46	–8.00

Source Polity IV, Penn World Tables, CIA World Factbook (for Muslim/non-Muslim dummy)

**Table 4** The non-correlation between GDP and democracy/freedom in the Muslim world

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	2004	2004	2004	2004	PR2004	CL2004
	polity	polity	polity	polity		
Log GDP per capita in 2002	1.982 (4.60) <sup>**</sup>	–2.354 (2.98) <sup>**</sup>	–0.239 (0.19)	1.980 (4.41) <sup>**</sup>	0.997 (7.26) <sup>**</sup>	0.914 (8.64) <sup>**</sup>
Oil share of exports	–0.058 (3.65) <sup>**</sup>		–0.049 (2.21) <sup>*</sup>	–0.054 (4.34) <sup>**</sup>	–0.017 (4.48) <sup>**</sup>	–0.015 (5.05) <sup>**</sup>
Muslim (>50% share of population)				11.122 (1.22)	5.643 (1.99) <sup>*</sup>	4.351 (1.99) <sup>*</sup>
Interaction term: Muslim country * log GDP per capita in 2002				–2.071 (1.90)	–0.842 (2.48) <sup>*</sup>	–0.657 (2.51) <sup>*</sup>
Constant	–10.448 (2.71) <sup>**</sup>	17.204 (2.64) <sup>*</sup>	1.649 (0.16)	–10.476 (2.61) <sup>*</sup>	11.262 (9.20) <sup>**</sup>	10.552 (11.18) <sup>**</sup>
Observations	89	37	24	113	115	115
R-squared	0.28	0.20	0.26	0.52	0.55	0.61

Absolute value of *t* statistics in parentheses

<sup>\*</sup> Significant at 5%

<sup>\*\*</sup> Significant at 1%

While the negative correlation between income and democracy in the Islamic world is explained away by the oil variable, the absence of the positive correlation between income and democracy, which is observed in the rest of the world, remains a puzzle. That this absence is statistically robust is shown by the negative coefficient on the interaction term between Islam and GDP in Table 4. Over time, most countries experience economic growth. In the past few years, economic growth has been especially strong in developing countries in every region of the world. Since GDP is correlated with democracy, economic growth gives us grounds for optimism that the world will continue to become more democratic as well. Unfortunately, the missing, or even inverse, income-democracy correlation prevents this optimistic forecast from being applicable to the Islamic world.

#### 4.4 The democracy and freedom deficits in the historic Islamic heartland

Arabs exercise a disproportionate influence on the image of Islam because Arabia was where Islam originated and contains the Muslim holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Also, because the Arab world is politically fragmented, almost half of all Muslim *countries* are Arab. Yet Arabs comprise only about one-fifth of the world's Muslims. It has been argued that Arab countries have special features politically. As we have seen, Karatnycky (2002) pointed out that the democracy deficit that characterizes Muslim-majority countries is especially severe in what he calls its "Arab core," which contained no democracies at that time. (In Mauritania, the one Arab country that is *not* in the historic core, a democratic election was held in 2007, making it the Arab world's only electoral democracy; but this democratic moment appears to have been aborted by a coup in 2008.) Since Karatnycky's contribution, Iraq is arguably transitioning to democracy, but only under the special circumstances of a prolonged U.S. military occupation.

However, Arab ethnicity is not the only thing the countries of the "Arab core" share. All but one of them share a formative event in their history. Islam appeared in the Arabian peninsula in the 7th century, then expanded in a surge of explosive conquests, after which the lands ruled by Islam stretched from Central Asia and modern Pakistan all the way to Spain. Later, sometimes much later, and sometimes peacefully rather than by conquest, Islam spread to Southeast Asia, Africa, the Balkans, and further into central Asia.

If we classify the countries whose territory, or a substantial part of it, was part of the Islamic empire by 750 A.D., and which have not since been conquered and settled by non-Muslim peoples (e.g. Spain and Israel) as Islam's "historic heartland," this region includes the entirety of the "Arab core" except for Mauritania, as well as seven other countries: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The more-severe freedom and democracy deficits which Karatnycky notices in the "Arab core" appears to extend to all the countries within this "historic heartland," Arab and non-Arab alike.

Of the twenty-two "historic heartland" countries represented in our data, *not one* has a Freedom House political rights or civil liberties score lower than 4, with most political rights scores being 6 or 7, the two worst rankings, nor did any of them have a Polity IV score better than 2, with most scores below  $-5$ , as shown in Table 5.

That there is something unique about the historic heartland of Islam is confirmed by the regressions in Table 6.

Regressions (1)–(3) show that when a dummy variable is entered for a country's location in Islam's historic heartland, this variable is overwhelmingly significant in explaining the Polity IV score and the two Freedom House indicators. The Muslim share of population indicator's coefficient keeps its sign and remains large enough to be suggestive, but loses

**Table 5** The historic heartland of Islam

Country	Political rights, 2004 (Freedom House)	Civil liberties, 2004 (Freedom House)	Polity IV score, 2004
1. Afghanistan	5	6	—
2. Algeria	6	5	2
3. Azerbaijan	6	5	−7
4. Bahrain	5	5	−7
5. Egypt	6	5	−6
6. Iran	6	6	−6
7. Iraq	7	5	—
8. Jordan	5	4	−2
9. Kuwait	4	5	−7
10. Lebanon	6	5	—
11. Libya	7	7	−7
12. Morocco	5	4	−6
13. Oman	6	5	−8
14. Pakistan	6	5	−5
15. Qatar	6	5	−10
16. Saudi Arabia	7	7	−10
17. Syria	7	7	−7
18. Tajikistan	6	5	−3
19. Turkmenistan	7	7	−9
20. UAE	6	6	−8
21. Uzbekistan	7	6	−9
22. Yemen	5	5	−2

Source: Freedom House,  
Polity IV

statistical significance. When the oil share of income is controlled for in regressions (4)–(6), however, we see that the Muslim share recovers significance. Here, the results depend on the indicator used: *both* presence in the historic heartland *and*, with significance at the 1% level, Muslim share of population, significantly explain the Polity IV score, but only Muslim share is significant for Freedom House’s civil liberties score, and neither is (quite) significant with respect to political rights. This result may be affected by loss of data, as oil share of exports could not be calculated for all countries.

Regression (7) restricts the sample to Muslim-majority countries, and confirms that, within the Islamic world, location in the historic heartland is a significant determinant of the Polity IV score (but not the Freedom House scores); interestingly, within the Muslim world oil share is *not* significant. Regressions (8)–(9) use a global sample *excluding* the historic heartland: when oil is not controlled for, majority-Muslim countries in the “periphery” are actually not significantly less free or less democratic than non-majority-Muslim countries; but, in this case, controlling for oil share actually *restores* the significance of the coefficient, reflecting that the Muslim periphery is not especially rich in oil.

Given the large overlap between Arab countries and historic heartland countries, it is hard to determine econometrically whether Arab ethnicity or the historical legacy of early Islamic conquest explains the more intense freedom and democracy deficits observed here. But the historical variable not only has a more intelligible connection to political outcomes

**Table 6** Islam's democracy deficit and the historic heartland

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	2004 polity	PR2004	CL2004	2004 polity	PR2004	CL2004	Only Muslim countries 2004 polity	Non-Muslim countries and periphery: excludes historic heartland 2004 polity	2004 polity
Historic heartland	-9.668 (5.42) <sup>**</sup>	2.195 (4.19) <sup>**</sup>	1.761 (4.09) <sup>**</sup>	-4.698 (2.35) <sup>*</sup>	1.009 (1.57)	0.678 (1.36)	-5.391 (2.30) <sup>*</sup>		
Share Muslim	-0.025 (1.51)	0.008 (1.65)	0.008 (1.92)	-0.049 (2.71) <sup>**</sup>	0.011 (1.98)	0.009 (2.08) <sup>*</sup>		-0.020 (1.23) <sup>*</sup>	-0.049 (2.68) <sup>**</sup>
Log GDP, 2002	1.847 (4.70) <sup>**</sup>	-0.816 (7.08) <sup>**</sup>	-0.716 (7.57) <sup>**</sup>	1.584 (3.76) <sup>**</sup>	-0.842 (6.33) <sup>**</sup>	-0.795 (7.66) <sup>**</sup>	0.223 (0.19)	2.242 (5.37) <sup>**</sup>	1.767 (4.02) <sup>**</sup>
Oil share of exports				-0.048 (3.89) <sup>**</sup>	0.017 (4.39) <sup>**</sup>	0.016 (5.05) <sup>**</sup>	-0.028 (1.25)		-0.056 (3.60) <sup>**</sup>
Constant	-10.378 (2.97) <sup>**</sup>	9.975 (9.80) <sup>**</sup>	9.060 (10.83) <sup>**</sup>	-6.722 (1.76)	9.813 (8.16) <sup>**</sup>	9.438 (10.07) <sup>**</sup>	-0.230 (0.03)	-13.796 (3.73) <sup>**</sup>	-8.240 (2.07) <sup>*</sup>
Observations	146	153	153	113	115	115	24	128	100
R-squared	0.44	0.45	0.48	0.54	0.54	0.60	0.41	0.26	0.35

Absolute value of *t* statistics in parentheses<sup>\*</sup>Significant at 5%<sup>\*\*</sup>Significant at 1%

than the ethnic one, but also explains why the freedom and democracy gaps extend to the seven non-Arabic countries in the historic heartland.

The fact that Islam's democracy deficit is especially severe in the historic heartland of Islam may be interpreted as evidence that Islam, somehow, is the cause of that deficit, for it is there that Islam has the deepest historical roots, has had the most time to shape and to transform the culture,<sup>10</sup> and may thereby have gained the strongest influence.

#### 4.5 Are Muslim-majority democracies “less” Muslim?

If Islam is an impediment to democracy, are majority Muslim-majority countries that are democratic in some sense “less” Muslim than Muslim countries that are not? In view of the difficulty of defining a general measure of the *degree* of Islam, and the small size of the set of Muslim democracies, we examine the question on a case-by-case basis.

There are ten sizeable Muslim-majority countries<sup>11</sup> that had Polity IV scores greater than 0 as of 2004: Albania, Algeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Turkey. Of these, Malaysia and Sierra Leone are only 60% Muslim, Albania 70%. Bangladesh and Indonesia have large Muslim majorities, 83% and 86%, respectively, but they are late converts to Islam, and Indonesian Islam is unusually moderate and syncretist:

To a significant degree, the striking variations in the practice and interpretation of Islam—in a much less austere form than that practiced in the Middle East—in various parts of Indonesia reflect its complex history. Introduced piecemeal by various traders and wandering mystics from India, Islam first gained a foothold between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries in coastal regions of Sumatra, northern Java, and Kalimantan. Islam probably came to these regions in the form of mystical Sufi tradition. Sufism easily gained local acceptance and became synthesized with local customs. (Library of Congress Country Studies)

Four of the Muslim-majority democracies—Senegal (94% Muslim), Sierra Leone (60%), Niger (80%), and Mali (90%)—are in sub-Saharan Africa. For whatever reason, Sub-Saharan Africa is the one region in the world where the Islamic democratic and freedom deficits are *not* observed.<sup>12</sup> Muslim countries in sub-Saharan Africa are significantly more democratic and free than Muslim countries elsewhere, whether we use the Polity IV score or the Freedom House measure of political rights (though not civil liberties). And among sub-Saharan African countries, Islam has no significant effect on democracy or civil liberties.<sup>13</sup> Sub-Saharan Islam is generally regarded as comparatively tolerant and moderate, though there is some dissent.

Algeria is a 99% Muslim country in the historic heartland of Islam. But its Polity IV score in 2004 was only 2, having jumped from −3 the previous year, and before that, it was negative for Algeria's entire history since independence. Algeria was the scene of an abortive democratic revolution in 1989, which is suggestive of an explanation for democratic deficit

<sup>10</sup>The role of culture, and difficulties in countering it via preference modifications is explored by Munger (2006).

<sup>11</sup>Leaving out tiny Comoros and Djibouti, with under 1 million population. For Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon, no Polity IV score was provided for 2004.

<sup>12</sup>But see Rowley (2000) for doubts on the degree of democracy in this region.

<sup>13</sup>In fact, the coefficients observed in regressions of democracy and political rights against Islam among sub-Saharan countries are slightly *positive*, though they fall far short of statistical significance.



in the Islamic world: Muslim-majority electorates may just vote for the ‘wrong’ political parties. At the peak of the “Third Wave” of democratization, as the communist dominoes were toppling in Eastern Europe, popular pressure induced the ruling Front de Liberation National regime in Algeria to hold democratic elections (Feldman 2003, pp. 3–4). Sixty-two percent of the vote went to an obscure political start-up, the Islamic Salvation Front. Could an Islamist party lead a democracy? As it turned out, they never got the chance: the FLN rejected the election results and plunged the country into civil war. A description of the most recent election by *The Economist*, in March 2007, sheds light on the state of Algerian—if it deserves the name—democracy today:

15 years ago the FIS, which is now banned, offered a real alternative to the regime. Today there are plenty of parties but less real choice. As the recent campaign got under way, many Algerians were more interested in the presidential election across the Mediterranean, in France. In Algeria, the National Liberation Front, the country’s sole legitimate party from independence in 1962 until a political opening in 1989, easily won the day, with its allies in second and third place. Two parties with strong traditions of opposition were almost entirely excluded: the Islamists of el-Islah, which had been the largest opposition party in the last parliament, were reduced to three seats after the government blocked their former leader from standing for reasons that were never clearly explained; and the Socialist Forces Front, a liberal party based in the Berber region of Kabylia, decided, for the second time in a row, to boycott the proceedings. (*The Economist*, 5/24/2007)

That leaves Turkey as a significant exception to the observed Islamic democracy deficit paradox. Turkey is 99.8% Muslim. Today, unlike Algeria, Turkey has a strong democratic tradition. Since 1950, Turkey’s Polity IV score has always been positive except during two brief episodes (1971–72 and 1980–82) when the military seized power. Turkey is the only Muslim-majority country that has enjoyed credible, competitive elections and made its laws through parliamentary politics for most of the twentieth century,<sup>14</sup> albeit under the continuous shadow of a military imbued with the resolutely secular tradition first imposed by Ataturk.

Why? Turkey is not part of the “historic heartland” as we have defined it here, because (most of) the territory of modern Turkey was not under Islamic rule in 750 A.D., because the Byzantine Empire halted the advance of the early Arab conquerors, and was gradually conquered only in the course of the later Middle Ages by the Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, with Constantinople (now Istanbul) finally falling in 1453. So one reason that Turkey is democratic may be that it lacks the historical legacy of early Islamic conquest. Although the Ottoman sultans held the title of “caliph,” making them notional leaders of the entire Islamic world, the Ottoman Empire was primarily a southeastern European Empire that aspired to be the successor to the Roman Empire. Looking westwards from the outset, the sultans modified many of the narrow religious interpretations that emanated from Arabia and shared this greater pragmatism with the Balkan nations.

Nevertheless, the critical element of Turkish democratic success since Ataturk appears to be a secularist tradition that has emerged to exclude the influence of Islam from Turkish politics. The army acts as a guarantor of secularism, indeed, from time to time, at democracy’s expense. Earlier configurations of the current ruling party, for example, were repeatedly banned from office by the army as being too Islamist in composition. Of course, the banning of political parties, especially parties with popular support, to some extent contradicts the

<sup>14</sup>See Rowley (2004) for an optimistic view of ongoing democratic reforms in Turkey.

notion of democracy, and Turkey's democratic credentials are somewhat tarnished by such military interventions.

Our tentative conclusion is that the few Muslim-majority countries that are democratic, at least outside of sub-Saharan Africa, do seem to be in some sense “less” Islamic than the rest, either in the simple sense that they have large non-Muslim minorities, or in that the local version of Islam is comparatively moderate for evident historical reasons.

#### 4.6 Other omitted variables

Due to limitations of data and/or space we have omitted to consider some variables that some readers may suspect are important. Among these are (a) economic inequality, (b) foreign intervention, and (c) ethnic fractionalization.

An observer of Saudi Arabia might suspect that the real cause of Islam's democracy deficit is inequality: the proceeds of resource extraction enrich a relatively small elite, which uses its power to oppress the larger majority. Yet it is not true that the income distributions of Muslim-majority countries in general are unusually unequal. The most unequal countries in the world are almost all in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. If anything, the Gini coefficients that prevail in the Muslim-majority world are relatively low.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Barro's earlier analysis (Barro 1999) finds that inequality is, at most, a weak determinant of democracy.

Another factor not explored here is the role of foreign intervention as a determinant of democracy. Specific cases can be identified in which Western intervention in the Muslim-majority world seems to have been detrimental to democracy. Two notorious examples are the CIA-backed overthrow of Iran's elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, in 1953, and repeated Western support for Saddam Hussein at several stages in his notorious dictatorship. But foreign intervention has by no means uniquely affected the Islamic world. The United States, for example, has intervened in many regions in the post-World War II era, including several interventions in Latin America, some in East Asia and, most of all, in Western Europe and Japan, which not only experienced heavy US involvement in economic and political reconstruction—the US wrote Japan's constitution—but have been continuously occupied by US troops. This makes the issue more complex, because not only the fact, but also the character, of foreign intervention appears to be relevant, creating a steep challenge for empirical work.

Some cases of democratic failure in Muslim-majority countries seem to be due to ethnic fractionalization. In Iraq, for example, democracy is, arguably, especially difficult to achieve because of a triangular ethnic struggle between Kurds, Shias, and Sunnis, and the lack of an Iraqi identity with deep historical roots (since the country was artificially created by Winston Churchill, the then British Commonwealth Secretary, during World War I (Armstrong 2002)). Defining ethnicity is problematic, and ethnic variables such as Sunni/Shia that are clearly related to Islam create endogeneity problems, so an empirical investigation would pose an identification challenge beyond the scope of this paper. Turkey, Indonesia, Albania, Malaysia, Sierra Leone, and most other Muslim democracies are ethnically fragmented, which does not favor the ethnic fragmentation hypothesis. Moreover, since ethnic fragmentation is correlated with poverty—sub-Saharan Africa contains some of the most ethnically fragmented regions of the world (Alesina et al. 2003)—it is hard to tell whether ethnic fragmentation is detrimental to democracy independently of poverty. (India is a famous counter-example.)

<sup>15</sup> A list of countries by income inequality based on UN and CIA data is available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_income\\_equality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_income_equality).

## 5 Islam, democracy and public opinion

A plausible explanation for the lack of democracy in the Muslim-majority world would be that there is little *demand* for democracy in Muslim-majority countries. Maybe, for cultural reasons, Muslims just have less desire for self-government than non-Muslims. That might explain why the usual positive correlation between income and democracy is missing in the Muslim world. When other peoples become richer, they demand more of the things they want, and are more willing and able to engage in the political mobilization required to get and sustain democracy. Muslims, not regarding democracy as desirable, do not use greater wealth to secure it.

This hypothesis turns out to be false, according to data taken from the World Values Survey, an ongoing project that studies values worldwide through surveys. Four waves of WVS surveys have been conducted, starting in 1980, in 80 societies in all. Participants are assured that their answers will be kept confidential. To conduct standardized questionnaires in such varied settings is, of course, a very challenging task. Not all Muslim (or non-Muslim) countries were covered, some questions had to be modified to suit country circumstances, and some ground teams report failures to complete some interviews or to reach some locations. That said, surveys were executed successfully in some notably repressive and/or dangerous places, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and post-Saddam Iraq, which mitigates the possible bias that could result from the greater ease of conducting surveys in more liberal, stable places. Though the quality no doubt falls short of surveys conducted in easier environments, this unique dataset is of adequate size and quality to shed light on many important questions.

WVS questions concern a wide range of topics in the general area of values, including morals, religion, attitudes towards sex and family, economics, and politics. Our analysis focuses on a small subset of the WVS questions which relate to democracy and freedom.

### 5.1 Pro-democratic Muslims

Analysis of hundreds of thousands of observations from countries all over the world, available in the *World Values Survey* dataset, indicates that not only are people in Muslim-majority countries no *less* supportive of democracy, but that they appear to be *more* pro-democratic than others.

Table 7 shows the distribution of answers of individuals in non-Muslim-majority and Muslim-majority countries to the survey question: “Is having a democratic political system a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?” Fifty-seven

**Table 7** Muslim and non-Muslim attitudes towards “a democratic political system”

Is having a democratic political system a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?	Non-Muslim countries		Muslim countries	
	Observations	Percentage	Observations	Percentage
Very good	56,171	44.7	15,569	57.3
Fairly good	55,616	44.2	9,660	35.5
Fairly bad	10,434	8.3	1,406	5.2
Very bad	3,539	2.8	542	2.0
Observations	125,760	100.0	27,177	100.0

Sources: World Values Survey, CIA World Factbook

**Table 8** Muslim and non-Muslim attitudes to democracy and the economy

In democracy, the economic system runs badly	Non-Muslim countries		Muslim countries	
	Observations	Percentage	Observations	Percentage
Agree strongly	9,109	8.1	1,819	7.1
Agree	31,306	27.7	4,960	19.4
Disagree	57,114	50.6	14,087	55.1
Strongly disagree	15,408	13.6	4,686	18.3
Total	112,937	100.0	25,552	100.0

Sources: World Values Survey, CIA World Factbook

**Table 9** Muslim and non-Muslim attitudes on “squabbling” in democracies

Democracies are indecisive and have too much squabbling	Non-Muslim countries		Muslim countries	
	Observations	Percentage	Observations	Percentage
Agree strongly	13,880	12.0	2,820	11.0
Agree	47,095	40.8	8,025	31.3
Disagree	43,496	37.7	11,145	43.4
Strongly disagree	10,987	9.5	3,663	14.3
Total	115,458	100.0	25,653	100.0

Sources: World Values Survey, CIA World Factbook

percent of respondents in Muslim-majority countries, and only forty-five percent of respondents in non-Muslim-majority countries, answered that it was “very good,” and the entire opinion distribution in Muslim-majority countries is skewed in favor of more democracy. The interpretation of these results is complicated by the fact that many Muslim respondents live in countries that are nominally democratic but lack civil liberties and electoral competition.

Further survey questions attempt to evoke negative attitudes towards democracy by suggesting some flaws of the democratic system. Individuals in Muslim-majority countries appear slightly more inclined than individuals in non-Muslim-majority countries to proffer pro-democratic answers and to contradict claims about democracy’s flaws. For example, Table 8 indicates that 73% of people in Muslim-majority countries, as compared with 64% in non-Muslim-majority countries, disagree with the claim that democracy is bad for the economy.

On the issue of “squabbling,” Table 9 indicates that individuals in Muslim-majority countries are significantly more pro-democratic, with 58% of respondents disagreeing with the charge that democracies are characterized by excessive squabbling, whereas in non-Muslim-majority countries a majority actually *agrees* with the charge.

On the relationship between democracy and order, Table 10 indicates that while the margin is narrower, the same pattern holds: 68% of respondents in Muslim-majority countries disagree with the statement that democracies fail to maintain good order, as compared to only 63% of respondents in non-Muslim-majority countries.

Finally, the WVS asked respondents their attitudes towards a Churchillian-type statement that “democracy may have its problems but it’s better than any other form of government.” Once again, as Table 11 indicates, opinion in Muslim-majority countries is more

**Table 10** Muslim and non-Muslim attitudes on democracy and maintaining order

Democracies aren't good at maintaining order	Non-Muslim countries		Muslim countries	
	Observations	Percentage	Observations	Percentage
Agree strongly	9,411	8.1	2,131	8.3
Agree	33,375	28.8	5,959	23.2
Disagree	55,922	48.3	13,041	50.7
Strongly disagree	17,073	14.7	4,569	17.8
Total	115,781	100.0	25,700	100.0

Sources: World Values Survey, CIA World Factbook

**Table 11** Muslim and non-Muslim attitudes towards democracy as the best form of government

Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government	Non-Muslim countries		Muslim countries	
	Observations	Percentage	Observations	Percentage
Agree strongly	43,999	37.8	13,016	47.9
Agree	56,564	48.6	11,056	40.7
Disagree	12,746	11.0	2,128	7.8
Strongly disagree	2,988	2.6	951	3.5
Total	116,297	100.0	27,151	100.0

Sources: World Values Survey, CIA World Factbook

pro-democratic, with 48%, compared to 38% in non-Muslim-majority countries, “agreeing strongly” that democracy is the best form of government.

While these statistics are striking, we have already shown that few Muslim-majority countries actually live under conditions of democracy. Is their favorable attitude simply a case of “the grass is greener on the other side?” This can be tested by regressing the survey responses on attitudes towards democracy against control variables, and especially against the nature of the polity in which the respondents live. The results are shown in Table 12.

The results do not confirm the “grass is greener” hypothesis. In general, individuals living in more democratic countries appear to be, if anything, more favorable to democracy. But the pro-democratic slant of public opinion in Muslim-majority countries is confirmed, as the coefficient on Muslim share of population is consistently positive.

The main finding, which emerges very strongly, is that an explanation of Islam’s democratic deficit as a function of negative cultural attitudes to democracy must be rejected. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris summarized this evidence in a 2001 *Foreign Policy* article as a confirmation of President Bush’s views:

“The peoples of the Islamic nations want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation,” President Bush declared in a commencement speech at West Point last summer. He’s right. Any claim of a “clash of civilizations” based on fundamentally different political goals held by Western and Muslim societies represents an oversimplification of the evidence. Support for the goal of democracy is surprisingly widespread among Muslim publics, even among those living in authoritarian societies. (Inglehart and Norris 2001, p. 68)

**Table 12** Muslim support for democracy

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? Having a democratic political system	I'm going to read off some things that people sometimes say about a democratic political system. Could you please tell me if you agree strongly, agree, disagree or disagree strongly, after I read each one of them? In democracy, the economic system runs badly	Democracies are indecisive and have too much squabbling	Democracies aren't good at maintaining order	Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government
Age	0.001 (5.39)**	−0.001 (6.82)**	−0.002 (12.94)**	−0.003 (16.45)**	0.001 (9.81)**
Sex (Male = 1, Female = 2)	−0.050 (10.83)**	−0.071 (13.63)**	−0.020 (3.81)**	−0.039 (7.47)**	−0.034 (7.25)**
Marital Status (Single = 1, Married = 2)	−0.004 (0.80)	0.024 (4.42)**	0.017 (3.04)**	0.013 (2.41)*	0.020 (4.02)**
Muslim share of population in respondent's country	0.003 (21.03)**	0.005 (26.09)**	0.001 (7.68)**	0.003 (14.59)**	0.002 (14.55)**
Muslim respondent	−0.083 (6.41)**	−0.141 (9.26)**	−0.123 (7.66)**	−0.074 (4.73)**	0.007 (0.48)
Log GDP per capita in 2004	0.048 (12.78)**	0.162 (34.77)**	0.102 (20.90)**	0.190 (40.10)**	0.172 (40.78)**
Polity IV score in 2004	0.001 (1.25)	−0.005 (3.68)**	−0.028 (18.83)**	−0.007 (4.91)**	−0.009 (7.18)**
Constant	2.722 (61.30)**	1.400 (27.83)**	2.017 (38.67)**	1.133 (22.13)**	1.849 (49.46)**
Observations	96812	90614	92192	91996	94287
R-squared	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.04

Absolute value of *t* statistics in parentheses

Answers range from 1 (least democratic response) to 4 (most democratic response)

\* Significant at 5%

\*\* Significant at 1%

A potential criticism of this conclusion might be that almost all regimes in the world officially claim to be “democracies.” This raises two questions. First, are respondents’ answers biased by fear, so that they say what they think the government wants? Second, what do Muslims respondents, especially those living in pseudo-democracies, mean by the word “democracy?” That significant minorities of respondents in Muslim countries did *not* favor democracy suggests that respondents were not simply toeing the party line out of fear, but pseudo-democracy still complicates the interpretation of results. Bratton (2003) reports that Africans were asked whether they support “our present system of government with free elections and many parties”—democracy by another name—and that Muslims and non-Muslims were still equally supportive of democracy. It would be useful for future research if the World Values Survey asked (a) about attitudes to democracy by description as well as by name, and (b) whether respondents think their home countries are democratic or not. The possibility cannot be ruled out that more sophisticated public opinion research might reveal Muslim support for democracy to be superficial, accepting the word ‘democracy’ but rejecting the substance of democratic processes. For now, though, evidence for this is lacking, and the conclusion must be that public opinion in Muslim countries is strongly supportive of democracy, if anything even more so than in the non-Muslim world.

## 5.2 Muslims’ relative valuation of freedom

If there is so much demand for democracy among Muslims, why do they not secure more of it? No doubt many ruling elites are reluctant to surrender power to the electorate, but it is not clear why this factor should specially affect Muslim countries, and in more and more non-Muslim countries the people have made their rulers democratically accountable. Past attempts to explain Islam’s democracy deficit have generally not taken into account evidence of Muslim public support for democracy. Thus, Huntington, unusually explicit but summarizing a widespread view, writes that “the general failure of liberal democracy to take hold in Muslim societies is a continuing and repeated phenomenon for an entire century beginning in the late 1800s [which] has its source at least in part in the inhospitable nature of Islamic culture and society to Western liberal concepts.” (Huntington 1996, p. 114) His claim is at odds with strong and widespread evidence of public support for democracy in Muslim countries. But it may fit better with the evidence about Muslim attitudes to individual freedom.

Not all kinds of individual freedom are prerequisites for democracy. It is not clear, for example, what freedom of dress, or sexual freedom,<sup>16</sup> has to do with the ability of a country to sustain a political system in which the people can hire and fire their leaders through the ballot box. But it *is* an essential aspect of democracy that minorities are free to speak their minds and to organize, in hopes of becoming majorities. A certain degree of freedom of speech, opinion, and association therefore seems to be a prerequisite for democracy and a necessary condition of its continuation. Negative attitudes or indifference to basic freedoms on the part of the public might therefore make democracy unsustainable even if attitudes to democracy *per se* are positive. Are Muslim attitudes towards basic freedoms less favorable than non-Muslims?

There are World Values Survey questions that ask respondents for the relative valuation of (a) freedom versus equality, and (b) government order versus freedom. Unfortunately, the first of these questions was asked only in Turkey, the second, only in Turkey, Azerbaijan,

<sup>16</sup>One possible link between sexual freedom and democracy is that if women are not allowed to appear in public without male escorts, this limits freedom of association.



**Table 13** Relative valuations of freedom versus equality

[Which is more important:] Freedom or equality	Non-Muslim	Percentage	Muslim (Turkey)	Percentage
Freedom above equality	56,058	54.2	467	41.5
Equality above freedom	39,910	38.6	633	56.2
Neither	7,510	7.3	26	2.3
Total	103,478	100.0	1,126	100.0

Sources: World Values Survey, CIA World Factbook

**Table 14** Relative valuations of government order versus freedom

Government order vs. freedom	Non-Muslim	Percentage	Muslim (Turkey, Azerbaijan, Albania, Bangladesh)	Percentage
To maintain order in society	38,679	56.4	5,398	85.8
To respect freedom of the individual	29,883	43.6	890	14.2
Other answer	15	0.0		0.0
Total	68,577	100.0	6,288	100.0

Sources: World Values Survey, CIA World Factbook

Albania and Bangladesh. The pattern of responses to these questions is shown in Tables 13 and 14.

The results are striking. Relative to respondents in non-Muslim-majority countries, Turks clearly place more value on equality relative to freedom. And Turks, Azeris, Albanians and Bangladeshis place far more value on government order relative to freedom than respondents in non-Muslim-majority countries. Whether these results can be generalized to the rest of the Muslim world cannot be confidently inferred from this data.

It is far from self-evident why lower valuations of freedom relative to order and equality should be observed among Muslim populations. There is one freedom, however, that is both clearly deficient in Muslim-majority countries relative to others, and seems likely to be causally related to the Islam variable: religious freedom.<sup>17</sup>

### 5.3 Islam's religious freedom deficit

That Islam has a religious freedom deficit is in itself unsurprising, for democratic countries have more religious freedom, and Muslim-majority countries are less democratic. But the lack of religious freedom in Muslim countries does not seem to be a mere side-effect of the lack of democracy. For Muslim countries experience less religious freedom *even when the level of democracy is controlled for*.

<sup>17</sup>On the issue of religion and freedom see Bernholz (2006), Iannaccone (1998), Iannaccone and Berman (2006).

Our data about religious freedom is taken from a data set derived from U.S. State Department International Religious Freedom Reports, and published by the Association of Religion Data Archives. The main dependent variable we use is the answer to the question “In the [State Department] Report [on religious freedom], how is freedom of religion described?” We also explore the statistical determinants of selected other questions: (a) whether the government ‘generally respects’ freedom of religion, (b) whether foreign missionaries are allowed to operate, (c) whether there are limits on proselytizing, preaching or conversion, (d) social attitudes towards other religions, and (e) attitudes towards other or non-traditional religions.

Regression analyses of the determinants of religious freedom are shown in Table 15.

Religious freedom is related positively to democracy. Democratic countries have more religious freedom than non-democratic countries. There is no sign of a relationship between religious freedom and GDP, so this variable is omitted from most of the regressions. The key finding is that not only is the Muslim share of population associated with less religious freedom directly, but this coefficient retains its statistical significance, for our main dependent variable, even when the Polity IV score is controlled for. When other measures of religious freedom are used, the coefficient on Islam sometimes appears significant and sometimes not. It is very large and highly significant as a determinant of *restrictions on conversion and proselytizing*.

We saw earlier that there was something different about the historic heartland of Islam, possibly because Islam has had more time to permeate the culture there. This raises the question: Is the religious freedom deficit a feature of the Muslim world generally, or is the historic heartland driving these results? We can test this by regressing religious freedom against indicators of Islam while excluding the historic heartland. The results are shown in Table 16. The coefficients generally retain sign but lose significance, with one exception: restrictions on proselytizing and conversion are still associated strongly, and with statistical significance at the 1% level, with Islam.

If Islam’s democracy deficit cannot explain away Islam’s religious freedom deficit, might the causal link run the other way? That is, might Islam promote restrictions on religious discourse which spill over into, or serve as pretexts for restrictions on political discourse, thus preventing democratic deliberation and thwarting demand for democracy? Constraints on religious/political discourse may come from either government or the threat of private violence. For example, individuals in Muslim-majority countries may well fear for their lives should they promote ‘apostasy’, knowing that political authorities may turn a blind eye to religiously motivated assassinations. Over time, effective prevention of exit from Islam becomes self-sustaining, as people come to assume that conversion is a one-way street, into, but not out of, Islam. Bernholz (2006) and Hillman (2007) have argued convincingly that supreme religious values are not only impediments to democracy but also major determinants of terrorism in the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, strict enforcement of homogeneity in one sphere, religion, is likely to be prejudicial to the development of free debate in another sphere, democratic politics.

Once again, the observer must be cautious in interpreting polled data obtained within oppressive regimes. Individuals may well express false preferences on religious matters where revealed apostasy results in legal penalties. In such circumstances, true preferences concerning religious freedom, especially on the issues of proselytization and conversion, may not always be accurately represented in public opinion polls (Kuran 1995).

<sup>18</sup>For an important analytical history of terrorism in the modern age see Shughart (2006).

**Table 15** The Islamic world's religious freedom deficit: (1)–(4) In the Report, how is freedom of religion described? (5) Does the Introduction section of the Report mention that the Government 'generally respects' freedom of religion? (6) According to the Report, are foreign or other missionaries allowed to operate? (7) According to the Report, is proselytizing, public preaching, or conversion limited? (8) According to the Report, what are social attitudes towards conversions to other religions? (9) According to the Report, what are social attitudes towards other or non-traditional religions?

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	freedom of religion	freedom of religion	freedom of religion	freedom of religion	'generally respects'	missionaries	proselytizing	attitudes to conversion	attitudes to other faiths
Polity IV 2004 score	-0.026 (10.70)**		-0.021 (3.61)**	-0.023 (8.13)**	-0.035 (8.97)**	-0.016 (4.79)**	-0.017 (3.93)**	-0.012 (3.29)**	0.000 (0.11)
Muslim share of population		0.003 (6.67)**		0.001 (2.08)*	0.001 (1.92)	0.001 (1.78)	0.005 (5.88)**	0.004 (6.05)**	0.002 (2.09)*
(CIA World Factbook)									
Log GDP per capita, 2004 (Penn World Tables)			0.017 (0.68)						
Constant	0.418 (22.84)**	0.241 (10.34)**	0.231 (1.09)	0.379 (14.48)**	0.454 (12.56)**	0.269 (8.99)**	0.279 (7.11)**	0.184 (5.58)**	0.473 (11.92)**
Observations	152	160	67	152	152	152	152	152	152
R-squared	0.43	0.22	0.19	0.45	0.49	0.24	0.41	0.39	0.04

Note. All dependent variables are scaled from 0 to 1, with 0 representing the most religious freedom, 1 the least

Absolute value of *t* statistics in parentheses

\* Significant at 5%

\*\* Significant at 1%

**Table 16** Religious freedom in non-Muslim countries versus the Muslim periphery

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	In the Report how is freedom of religion described?	Does the Introduction section of the Report mention that the Government 'generally respects' freedom of religion?	According to the Report, are foreign or other missionaries allowed to operate?	According to the Report, is proselytizing, public preaching, or conversion limited?	According to the Report, what are social attitudes towards conversions to other religions?	According to the Report, societal attitudes toward other or non-traditional religions?
Muslim share of population (CIA World Factbook)	0.001 (0.87)	0.001 (1.51)	0.001 (0.76)	0.003 (3.55)**	0.003 (4.10)**	0.001 (1.03)
Polity IV 2004 score	−0.021 (6.84)**	−0.035 (7.99)**	−0.014 (3.91)**	−0.015 (3.08)**	−0.010 (2.73)**	0.001 (0.25)
Constant	0.373 (13.61)**	0.451 (11.88)**	0.263 (8.50)**	0.275 (6.61)**	0.182 (5.51)**	0.474 (11.72)**
Observations	133	133	133	133	133	133
R-squared	0.30	0.38	0.13	0.19	0.20	0.01

Absolute value of *t* statistics in parentheses

\* Significant at 5%

\*\* Significant at 1%

## 6 Conclusion

In this brush-clearing paper, our simple arithmetic has shown (a) that there is a deficit both of democracy and of freedom in Muslim-majority countries, but (b) that Muslim public opinion is largely supportive of democracy, though not of religious freedom. This is Islam's democracy paradox: democracy is popular, yet rare. We show that Islam's democracy and freedom deficits are not fully explained by poverty or oil but appear to have something to do with the nature of Islam itself. Moreover, the democracy and freedom deficits are larger in the Islamic heartland than elsewhere in the Muslim-majority countries.

A careful review of public opinion surveys, suggests that the democracy deficit does *not* reflect a lack of demand for democracy or a preference for autocracy among individual Muslims. Indeed, if anything, public opinion in Muslim-majority countries is more pro-democratic than elsewhere, but, importantly, it may be less favorable to freedom, and especially to religious freedom.

**Acknowledgements** We are grateful to an anonymous referee for important suggestions that have significantly improved the quality of this paper. We are also grateful to participants in a seminar at the Consortium for the Economic Study of Religion at George Mason University on March 15, 2008. We are especially grateful to William Bainbridge, Larry Iannaccone, Robert Nelson, Jared Rubin and Ali Hasanain for valuable contributions.

## References

- Alesina, A., Devleeschauwer, A., Easterly, W., Kurlat, S., & Wacziarg, R. (2003). Fractionalization. *Journal of Economic Growth*, 8, 2.
- Armstrong, K. (2002). *Islam: a short history*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Barro, R. (1999). Determinants of democracy. *Journal of Political Economy*, 107(6), S158–S183.
- Bernholz, P. (2006). International political system: supreme values and terrorism. *Public Choice*, 128(1–2), 221–231.
- Bratton, M. (2003). Briefing: Islam, democracy, and public opinion in Africa. *African Affairs* (2003), 102, 493–501.
- Feldman, N. (2003). *After Jihad: America and the struggle for freedom and democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hillman, A. (2007). Economic and security consequences of supreme values. *Public Choice*, 131(3–4), 259–280.
- Huntington, S. P. (1993). The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3), 22–49.
- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. New York.
- Iannaccone, L. R. (1998). Introduction to the economics of religion. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 36(3), 1465–1495.
- Iannaccone, L. R., Berman, E. (2006). Religious extremism: The good, the bad, and the deadly. *Public Choice*, 128(1–2), 109–129.
- Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2001). The true clash of civilizations. *Foreign Policy*, 135, 62–70.
- Jamal, A., & Tessler, M. (2008). The Democracy barometers: attitudes in the Arab world. *The Journal of Democracy*, 19, 1.
- Karatnycky, A. (2002). Muslim countries and the democracy gap. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(1), 99–112.
- Kuran, T. (1995). *Private truths, public lies: the social consequences of preference falsification*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Melia, T. O. (2003). What Muslims want: in Afghanistan and elsewhere—Democracy. *HeinOnline-4 Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 155.
- Midlarsky, M. I. (1998). Democracy and Islam: implications for civilizational conflict and the democratic peace. *International Studies Quarterly*, 42, 485–511.
- Munger, M. (2006). Preference modification vs. incentive manipulation as tools of terrorist recruitment: The role of culture. *Public Choice*, 128(1–2), 131–146.
- Przeworski, A. (2002). Democracy and economic development. In E. D. Mansfield & R. Sisson (Eds.), *Political science and the public interest* (pp. 1–27). Columbus: Columbus Ohio State University Press.
- Ross, M. L. (2001). Does oil hinder democracy? *World Politics*, 53, 325–361.
- Rose, R. (2002). How Muslims view democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(4).
- Rowley, C. K. (2000). Political culture economic performance in sub-Saharan Africa. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 16, 133–158.
- Rowley, C. K. (2004). Conservatism and economics: A sweet Turkish delight. *Public Choice*, 119(1–2), 1–12.
- Rowley, C. K., & Dobra, M. (2003). The glorious revolution of 1688: successful constitutional and institutional adjustment in a period of rapid change. In R. Mudambi, P. Navarra, & G. Sobbrío (Eds.), *Economic welfare, international business and global institutional change* (pp. 264–293). Cheltenham Northampton: Edward Elgar.
- Shughart, W. F. (2006). An analytical history of terrorism 1945–2000. *Public Choice*, 128(1–2), 7–39.
- Wintrobe, R. (1998). *The political economy of dictatorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [www.freedom\\_house.org/template.cfm?page=351&ana\\_page=333&year=2007](http://www.freedom_house.org/template.cfm?page=351&ana_page=333&year=2007).