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Freedom in the Muslim World

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This paper presents the state of freedom in 40 of the 51 Muslim-majority countries of the world, where sufficient data are available.¹ Based on figures obtained from the *Human Freedom Index 2019*, I show how these countries rank on indicators of personal and economic freedom vis-à-vis the world average and each other.²

Freedom is a broad concept and can be measured along various dimensions. My main focus here, however, is personal freedom. Specifically, I look at the broad categories of personal freedom measured in the *Human Freedom Index*: rule of law; security and safety; freedoms of movement, religion, association, assembly and civil society, expression and information; and freedom as it relates to identity and relationships. I look at economic freedom as well, but as a separate category.

Why focus on Muslim-majority countries?

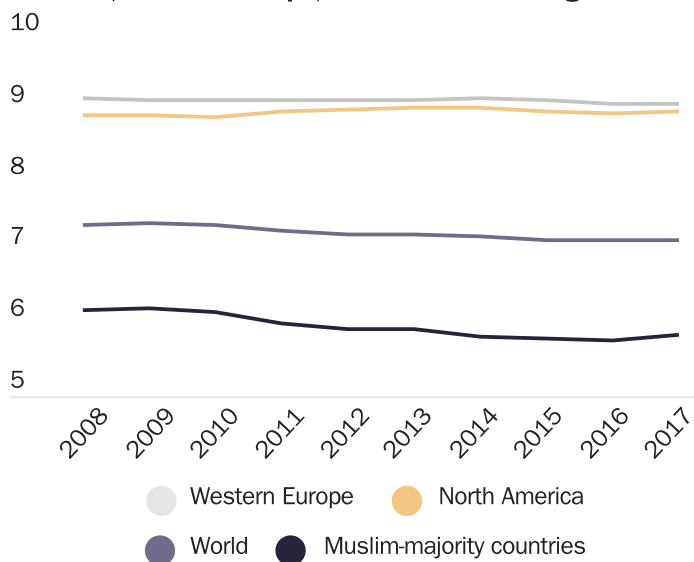
The first and simplest answer is that these countries create a meaningfully distinct part of the world, often called “the Muslim world.”

Second, we should be especially concerned with the Muslim world because it has extremely low levels of freedom.³ This can be seen in the freedom ratings from 2008 to 2017, shown in Figure 1, which measures personal freedom on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 represents the highest level of freedom. According to the 2017 figures, the Muslim world is dramatically less free (with an average score of 5.52) compared to the freest regions of the globe—North America and Western Europe (both close to 9.00)—and also the world

average (6.98). It has also become notably less free during the nine-year period from 2008 to 2017.

Third, despite this extremely low level of average personal freedom, the Muslim world is not a monolith. There is great variation among Muslim-majority countries. The gap between the freest Muslim-majority countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania) and the least free ones (Syria and Yemen) is in fact huge, while other Muslim-majority countries are positioned somewhere in between (see Figure 2 and Table 1).

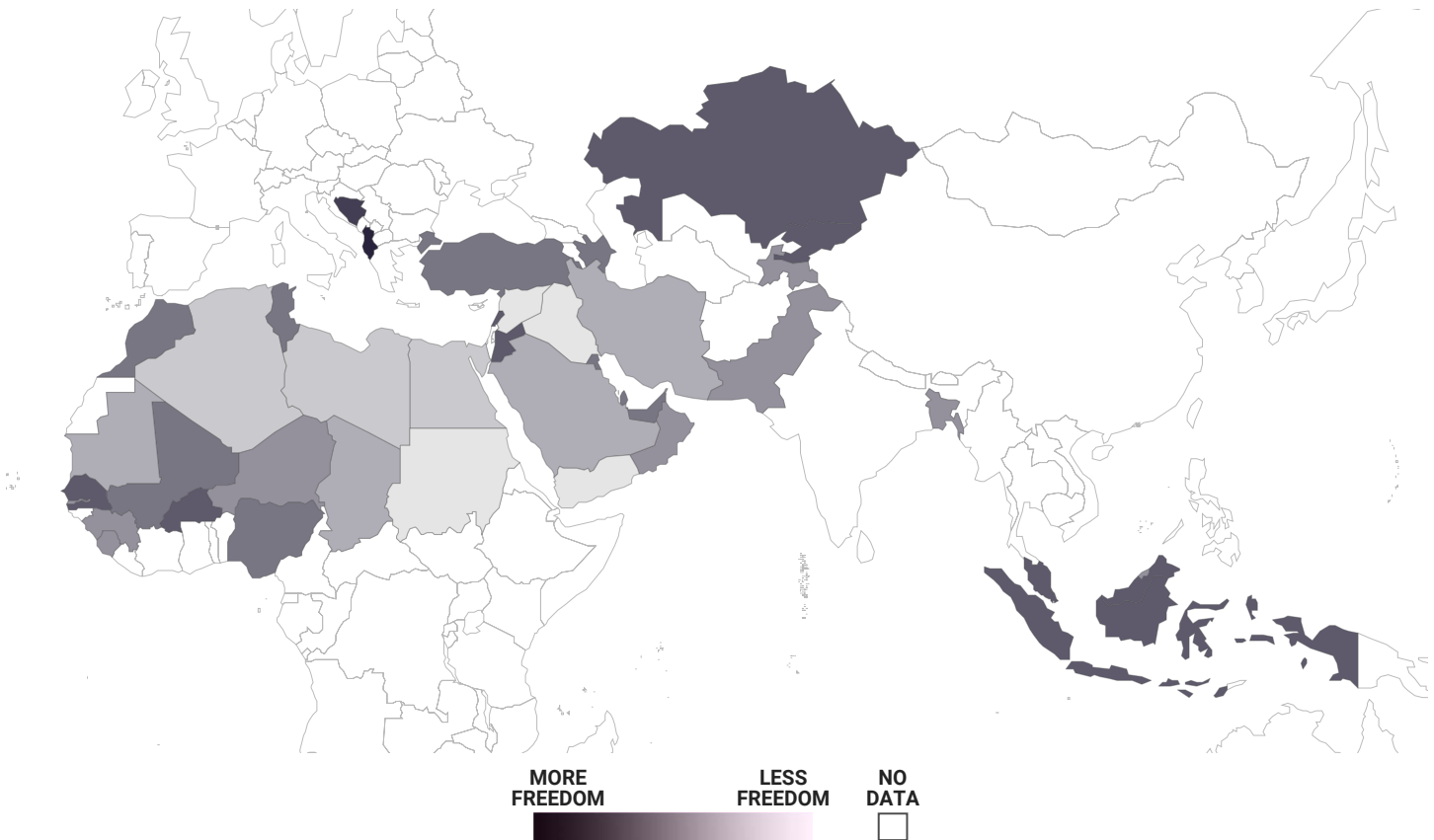
Figure 1
Personal freedom score in the Muslim world, North America, Western Europe, and the world average



Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Note: Based on 141 countries for which there are data over this time period.

Figure 2
Levels of personal freedom in Muslim-majority countries



Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

In this paper, I will take a closer look at these findings, show which Muslim-majority countries or regions are doing better or worse by various measures of freedom, and highlight some notable facts and patterns.

THE FREEST MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRY IS BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

When Muslim-majority countries are ranked according to their combined personal freedom scores (Table 1), two countries in Southeast Europe stand out as the most free: Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a freedom score of 8.04 (on a scale of 0 to 10), followed by Albania with a freedom score of 8.01. These scores are significantly above the world average (6.98), and very close to the scores of countries such as Greece (8.07) and Argentina (8.04).

These two Southeast European Muslim-majority countries are followed by Burkina Faso of West Africa (with a personal freedom score of 7.39), and the Kyrgyz Republic of Central Asia (with a personal freedom score of 7.05).

These four freest Muslim-majority countries have a combined population of about 30 million people. A similar

number of Muslims also live in the largely free countries of Western Europe and North America. In contrast, more than 1.8 billion of the world's 1.9 billion Muslims live in nations where personal freedom is below the world average. These include most of the 40 Muslim-majority countries measured in this study, along with the two other countries with the largest Muslim minorities: India—which is home to some 195 million Muslims and has a personal freedom score of 6.37, and China, which is home to 28 million Muslims and has a personal freedom score of 5.92. The overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims, in other words, live under low levels of freedom.⁴

Regionally speaking, the freest Muslim-majority countries are located in Southeast Europe, West Africa, and Central Asia. In general, these three regions are the freest regions of the Muslim world. In contrast, the least free region is the Middle East and North Africa (see Figure 3).

A part of the problem in the Middle East and North Africa is violent conflict. It is no wonder then that when we look at the very bottom of the personal freedom index in Muslim-majority countries (Table 1) we see the nations that have gone through occupation or civil war in the past

Table 1

Muslim-majority countries ranked according to personal freedom

Countries	Personal freedom	Countries	Personal freedom
Bosnia and Herzegovina	8.04	Tajikistan	5.49
Albania	8.01	Chad	5.49
Burkina Faso	7.39	Pakistan	5.47
Kyrgyz Republic	7.05	Bangladesh	5.37
World Average	6.98	Guinea	5.37
Senegal	6.97	Qatar	5.24
Kazakhstan	6.69	Algeria	5.2
Lebanon	6.52	Oman	5.2
Indonesia	6.38	United Arab Emirates	5.09
Sierra Leone	6.27	Libya	4.83
Jordan	6.23	Mauritania	4.83
Mali	6.15	Brunei Darussalam	4.76
Azerbaijan	6.10	Gambia, The	4.64
Tunisia	5.97	Iran	4.48
Kuwait	5.97	Saudi Arabia	4.32
Niger	5.92	Sudan	3.97
Bahrain	5.91	Egypt	3.95
Nigeria	5.90	Iraq	3.47
Turkey	5.74	Yemen, Rep.	2.75
Malaysia	5.70	Syria	2.53
Morocco	5.68		

Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Note: Personal freedom scores are based on the combined data on rule of law; security and safety; and the freedoms of movement, religion, association, assembly, civil society, expression, information, identity, and relationships.

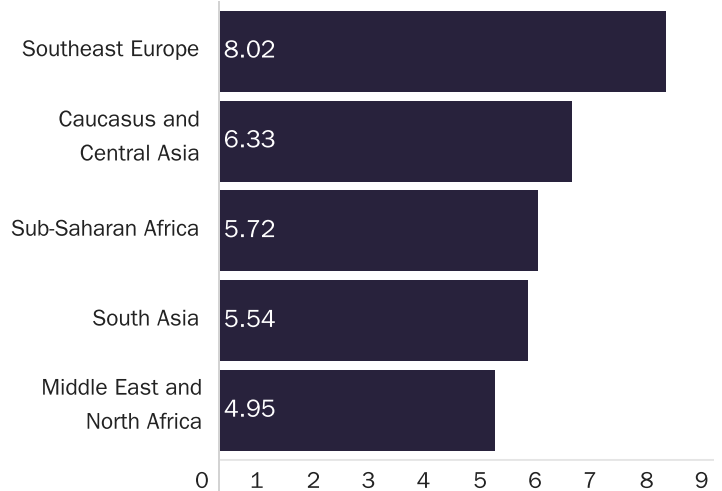
decade: Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. They are, in fact, the least free places in the world. It is a grim scene, and a reminder of James Madison's age-old wisdom, "Of all the enemies to public liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded."⁵

Another dreaded enemy of human liberty is authoritarianism. This is why Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have extremely low levels of personal freedom, which reflect their authoritarian political systems, oppressive laws, and draconian security forces.

THE WORST TRENDSETTERS ARE SYRIA, EGYPT, AND TURKEY

Data also show us the direction countries have taken toward or away from personal freedom during the period 2008–2017. Accordingly, among Muslim-majority countries, there were modest improvements in the Kyrgyz Republic,

Figure 3
Personal freedom score in Muslim-majority countries by region, 2017



Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Pakistan, and Tunisia. Meanwhile there were dramatic deteriorations in Syria, Egypt, Turkey, and Bahrain (see Figure 4). While the sharp decline of personal freedom in Syria can be explained by civil war, Egypt, Turkey, and Bahrain seem to have suffered under political regimes that have grown increasingly authoritarian.

WHAT EXPLAINS MORE OR LESS FREEDOM?

Why are some Muslim-majority countries more or less free?

First, let's see what does *not* answer this question. One possible explanation is geopolitical orientation, which in fact does not seem to define a country's freedom score. Examples are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose foreign policies toward the United States and its allies are very different, but whose freedom levels are similarly very low. In fact, Iran's personal freedom score is slightly higher than that of Saudi Arabia (see Table 1).

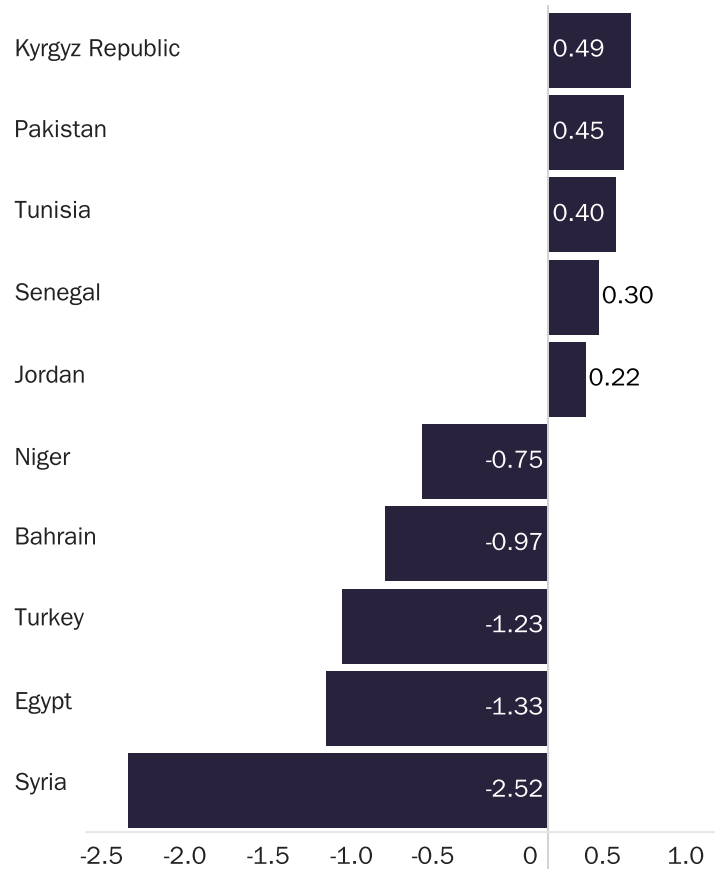
Also, whether a country is a monarchy or a self-declared republic does not seem to be definitive for its level of freedom. Indeed, most republics in the Arab world have long been autocratic states dominated by hegemonic parties and iron-fisted presidents. In fact, some monarchies in the Middle East and North Africa region, such as Jordan and Morocco, allow for greater levels of personal freedom than the republics of Algeria and Egypt.

Meanwhile, a factor that does seem to influence freedom is whether the legal system is secular or religious. The 10 most personally free Muslim-majority countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Burkina Faso, Kyrgyz Republic, Senegal, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Indonesia, Sierra Leone, and Jordan) either have fully secular legal systems or have very limited applications of Islamic law. In contrast, the least free Muslim-majority countries, besides those devastated by civil war, are mostly what scholar Daniel Philpott calls "religiously repressive states": Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Brunei Darussalam, Mauritania, and the United Arab Emirates.⁶ However, there are also "secular repressive states"—such as Egypt, Libya, and Algeria—whose personal freedom levels are very low.

Therefore, personal freedom in the Muslim world seems highest in secular states that also have more moderate political regimes—as opposed to draconian regimes, such as in Egypt. Social attitudes, religious traditions, and customs also matter, as human liberty can be suppressed not only by autocratic states but also by illiberal societies.

Figure 4

Most improved and deteriorated Muslim-majority countries in personal freedom, 2008–2017



Source: Human Freedom Index 2019.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: MOST SCARCE IN SAUDI ARABIA

When Muslim-majority countries are ranked according to their religious freedom scores (Table 2), Southeast European and West African states, in line with their overall personal freedom scores, fare well. These include Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, in addition to Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, and The Gambia.

In almost all these countries, "the constitution carries robust provisions guaranteeing religious freedom, is absent of any reference to Islam or the Sharia, public schools don't force students to be instructed only in one religion, and there are also no laws banning conversion away from Islam."⁷ Also, Islamic traditions in these societies, which often include Sufi orders, are broadly tolerant, and have a history of coexistence with other faith traditions, such as Christianity or traditional African religions.

In contrast, the Muslim-majority country with the lowest level of religious freedom is Saudi Arabia, whose Basic Law, ostensibly based on the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition, does not allow the practice or manifestation of any religion

Table 2

Muslim-majority countries ranked according to their religious freedom score

Countries	Religious freedom	Countries	Religious freedom
Albania	9.19	Mauritania	5.66
Senegal	9.02	Kazakhstan	5.51
Mali	8.60	Azerbaijan	5.46
Guinea	8.54	Iraq	5.33
Bosnia and Herzegovina	8.52	Oman	5.03
Sierra Leone	8.45	Algeria	4.94
Chad	8.16	United Arab Emirates	4.70
Burkina Faso	8.02	Qatar	4.69
Niger	7.80	Kuwait	4.65
Gambia, The	7.57	Turkey	4.49
World average	7.48	Morocco	4.43
Bahrain	7.46	Syria	4.41
Nigeria	7.33	Tajikistan	4.36
Lebanon	7.15	Iran	4.27
Kyrgyz Republic	7.13	Pakistan	4.04
Libya	6.94	Malaysia	3.93
Sudan	6.49	Indonesia	3.85
Tunisia	6.46	Egypt	3.73
Jordan	6.33	Saudi Arabia	3.21
Bangladesh	5.93		

Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Note: Religious freedom scores are based on the freedom of establishing and operating religious organizations and being free from legal and regulatory restrictions in addition to harassment and physical hostilities. Data for Yemen and Brunei Darussalam are not available.

other than Islam. Apostasy away from Islam, or blasphemy against it, is considered a capital crime, while religious practice is imposed on society by the “religion police” (Table 2).

A MOST NEEDED GOOD: FREE EXPRESSION

“What the Arab world needs most is free expression.” That was the title of the last column Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi wrote for the *Washington Post* in October 2018—a few days before his gruesome murder in Istanbul by the officials of his own government.⁸

Data suggest that the late Khashoggi’s yearning for free expression was valid for not just much of the Arab world—with the notable exceptions of Lebanon and Tunisia—but also much of the Muslim world: only 7 of the 40 Muslim-majority states measured by the *Human Freedom Index* have free-expression scores higher than the world average (Table 3).

The worst case is Syria, where a high number of journalists have been killed in the midst of civil war or jailed and murdered by one of the warring parties, including the regime.

Countries such as Turkey, Tajikistan, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan also have extremely low scores of free expression due to their high numbers of jailed journalists and their extensive governmental interference in free expression and free access to information.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION: IN THE ARAB WORLD, TUNISIA AND LEBANON STAND OUT

The indicator on freedom of association, assembly, and civil society in the *Human Freedom Index* measures important ways in which a society has room to self-organize without interference or suppression by the state. The higher the score a country has in this measure, the more freedom its

Table 3

Muslim-majority countries ranked according to their freedom of expression

Countries	Freedom of expression	Countries	Freedom of expression
Bosnia and Herzegovina	8.65	Egypt	6.54
Albania	8.61	United Arab Emirates	6.31
Lebanon	8.30	Libya	6.27
Senegal	8.25	Kyrgyz Republic	6.24
Nigeria	8.16	Kazakhstan	6.22
Tunisia	8.14	Mauritania	6.01
Mali	7.87	Sudan	5.69
World average	7.75	Saudi Arabia	5.57
Burkina Faso	7.74	Iran	5.43
Chad	7.52	Iraq	5.41
Indonesia	7.52	Gambia, The	5.40
Kuwait	7.46	Oman	5.35
Algeria	7.31	Niger	5.28
Sierra Leone	7.25	Yemen, Rep.	4.99
Pakistan	7.22	Brunei Darussalam	4.56
Morocco	7.14	Turkey	4.38
Bangladesh	7.00	Tajikistan	4.27
Qatar	6.96	Bahrain	4.13
Guinea	6.94	Azerbaijan	4.01
Malaysia	6.80	Syria	1.89
Jordan	6.60		

Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Note: These freedom scores are based on laws and regulations that influence media, political control on media content, state control over internet access, access to foreign newspapers and cable/satellite, and the number of journalists killed or jailed.

citizens have to establish political parties and civil society organizations or to raise public protests.

Among Muslim-majority countries (Table 4) these freedoms are most respected in Southeast European and West African states, conforming with their overall pattern of high levels of freedom. In contrast, Arab monarchies around the Persian Gulf—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman—have extremely low levels of freedom in this category. Also grim are the scores of the Southeast Asian monarchy of Brunei Darussalam, the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan, and the North African state of Libya.

In the Arab world, only Lebanon and Tunisia have high levels of freedom of association, assembly, and civil society, in line with their levels of free expression, which are also above the world average.

MUSLIM WOMEN ARE FREER UNDER SECULAR LAW

The *Human Freedom Index* also measures specific personal freedoms of women—freedom of movement and relationships; rights in divorce and inheritance; and security from the misogynistic custom of female genital mutilation. And on these measures, the overall score of the Muslim world (4.85) is disturbingly low. For a comparison, both Western Europe and North America rank close to 10 on this measure, whereas the world average is 7.7 (see Figure 5).

Worse, the trend in the past 10 years also shows a dramatic decline in the Muslim world in this measure.

However, there is also significant variation among Muslim-majority countries. Countries with secular legal systems are recognizably more free for women compared to those that apply Islamic law. Examples of the former are

Table 4

Muslim-majority countries ranked according to their freedom of association, assembly, and civil society

Countries	Freedom of association	Countries	Freedom of association
Albania	10.00	Jordan	5.00
Senegal	10.00	Bahrain	5.00
Bosnia and Herzegovina	9.50	Iraq	4.50
Lebanon	9.00	Turkey	4.50
Nigeria	9.00	Kuwait	4.00
Pakistan	9.00	Malaysia	4.00
Guinea	9.00	Kazakhstan	4.00
Tunisia	8.00	Iran	4.00
Mali	7.50	Egypt	3.50
Burkina Faso	7.50	Sudan	3.50
World average	7.11	Azerbaijan	3.00
Indonesia	7.00	Qatar	2.50
Bangladesh	7.00	Libya	2.50
Chad	6.50	Oman	2.50
Mauritania	5.50	Saudi Arabia	2.00
Niger	5.50	Tajikistan	2.00
Algeria	5.00	Brunei Darussalam	1.00
Morocco	5.00	United Arab Emirates	0.50

Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Note: These freedom scores are based on the freedoms of association and assembly, and of establishing and operating political parties, professional organizations, educational, cultural, and sporting organizations. Data for Syria, Yemen, Sierra Leone, Kyrgyz Republic, and The Gambia are not available.

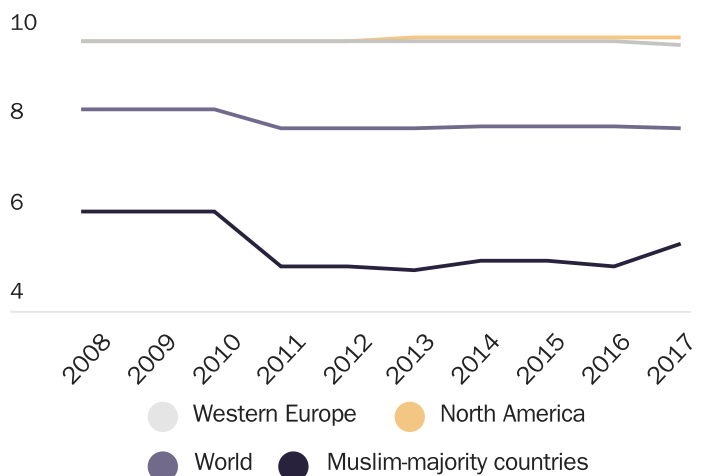
Kazakhstan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kyrgyz Republic, and Azerbaijan, where women's freedoms seem as high as those in Western liberal democracies (see Table 5).

In contrast, countries that claim to apply Islamic law—in family law, and in some cases also the penal code—typically have the lowest levels of women's freedom. Stark examples are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, and Sudan.

Regionally speaking, Muslim women are freest in Southeast Europe and Central Asia, and least free in the Middle East and North Africa (see Figure 6).

One of the gravest violations of women's freedoms, female genital mutilation, also seems regional, but in a peculiar way: while it is prevalent in certain Muslim-majority countries in Africa and a few pockets in the Middle East, it is nonexistent in other parts of the Muslim world, or at least there are no reliable data suggesting otherwise (see Figure 7). This seems to confirm the view that the brutal practice stems from culture instead of religion as such.

Figure 5
Women's freedom score over time in the Muslim world, North America, Western Europe, and world average



Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Note: Based on 141 countries for which there are data over this time period.

Table 5

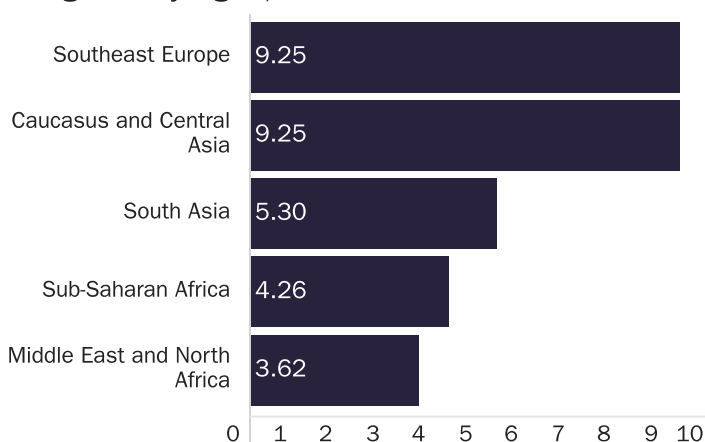
Muslim-majority countries ranked according to women's freedoms

Countries	Women's freedoms	Countries	Women's freedoms
Kazakhstan	10.00	Tunisia	4.50
Kyrgyz Republic	9.50	Bahrain	4.50
Bosnia and Herzegovina	9.50	Brunei Darussalam	4.50
Azerbaijan	9.50	Morocco	4.00
Albania	9.00	Jordan	4.00
Turkey	9.00	Nigeria	3.64
Tajikistan	8.00	Mauritania	2.66
World average	7.70	Guinea	2.56
Burkina Faso	7.48	Syria	2.50
Lebanon	6.50	Algeria	2.50
Libya	6.50	Oman	2.50
Mali	6.34	United Arab Emirates	2.50
Senegal	6.04	Iraq	2.34
Indonesia	6.00	Iran	2.00
Bangladesh	6.00	Qatar	2.00
Niger	5.96	Saudi Arabia	2.00
Sierra Leone	5.70	Yemen, Rep.	1.62
Kuwait	5.50	Gambia, The	1.00
Chad	5.24	Egypt	0.76
Pakistan	5.00	Sudan	0.26
Malaysia	5.00		

Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Note: These scores are based on women's freedom of movement and relationships; rights in divorce and inheritance; and security from the misogynistic custom of female genital mutilation.

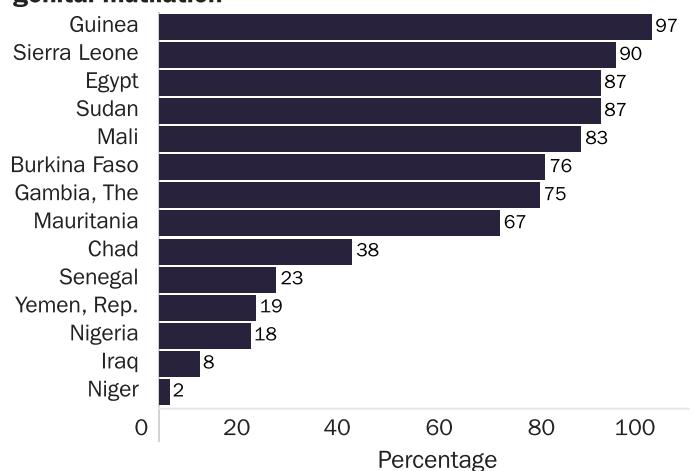
Figure 6
Women's freedom scores in Muslim-majority countries categorized by region, 2017



Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Note for Figure 7: Based on 30 countries, 14 of which are the Muslim-majority ones, for which there are data.

Figure 7
Percentage of women in Muslim-majority countries (ages 15–49) who have undergone any type of female genital mutilation



Source: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Global Database.

Table 6

Muslim-majority countries ranked according to their economic freedom

Countries	Economic freedom	Countries	Economic freedom
Albania	7.67	Tunisia	6.20
Jordan	7.44	Bangladesh	6.18
Bahrain	7.35	Senegal	6.17
Malaysia	7.34	Mauritania	6.11
Indonesia	7.27	Burkina Faso	6.07
Gambia, The	7.23	Tajikistan	6.05
United Arab Emirates	7.17	Mali	5.91
Kazakhstan	7.10	Pakistan	5.91
Qatar	7.07	Guinea	5.86
Lebanon	6.97	Yemen, Rep.	5.84
Kyrgyz Republic	6.92	Niger	5.83
Nigeria	6.86	Iran	5.72
World average	6.80	Sierra Leone	5.71
Oman	6.76	Chad	5.42
Bosnia and Herzegovina	6.69	Iraq	5.21
Morocco	6.69	Syria	5.05
Turkey	6.67	Egypt	5.05
Brunei Darussalam	6.62	Algeria	4.77
Saudi Arabia	6.52	Sudan	4.67
Kuwait	6.41	Libya	4.45
Azerbaijan	6.34		

Source: James Gwartney, Robert Lawson, Joshua Hall, and Ryan Murphy, *Economic Freedom of the World: 2019 Annual Report* (Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 2019).

Note: These scores are based on data on size of government, legal system and property rights, access to sound money, freedom to trade internationally, and regulation of credit, labor, and business.

A BETTER SCENE: ECONOMIC FREEDOM

A key component of human freedom is economic freedom. And on this measure, it is fair to say that the contemporary Muslim world is doing better than it is on personal freedom. Yet, with an average economic freedom score of 6.23, it is still much below the world average of 6.80 (Table 6).

When we look at the diversity among Muslim-majority countries on this measure, we also see an interesting pattern: the lowest levels of economic freedom are found in Arab republics such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Algeria, and Libya. In contrast, Arab monarchies such as Jordan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have economic freedom levels above the world average. Even Saudi Arabia has more economic freedom than these Arab republics.

This pattern may sound surprising, but it is actually quite understandable. The Arab republics in question all emerged

during the mid-20th century through revolutions instigated by ambitious officers who soon became iron-fisted dictators, including Jamal Abdel Nasser, Hafez al-Assad, Saddam Hussein, Jaafar Nimeiry, Houari Boumédiène, and Muammar el-Qaddafi. These dictators were all influenced by the ideological current called “Arab socialism,” and they ended up creating corrupt, draconian bureaucracies that dominated—and suffocated—their societies.

In contrast, Arab monarchies preserved the more traditional ways of social organization, which included “a rich trading tradition, one that celebrates markets open even to the humblest members of society.”⁹

This Islamic tradition has been more successful—at least in the economic realm—than the more modern socialist systems. That is why, as scholar Victor Menaldo observes, when compared to Arab republics, “Arab monarchies are more

Table 7

Muslim-majority countries ranked according to their rule of law

Countries	Rule of law	Countries	Rule of law
United Arab Emirates	6.37	Mauritania	4.22
Qatar	6.34	Morocco	4.20
Brunei Darussalam	6.22	Niger	4.10
Bahrain	5.90	Indonesia	4.08
Oman	5.88	Turkey	3.97
Jordan	5.80	Mali	3.94
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5.47	Sierra Leone	3.93
Malaysia	5.42	Kyrgyz Republic	3.81
Kuwait	5.34	Algeria	3.80
Saudi Arabia	5.34	Egypt	3.63
Albania	5.29	Pakistan	3.51
World average	5.10	Sudan	3.40
Burkina Faso	4.86	Guinea	3.21
Tunisia	4.76	Bangladesh	3.13
Senegal	4.68	Chad	3.11
Kazakhstan	4.54	Tajikistan	3.01
Gambia, The	4.46	Iraq	2.56
Iran	4.38	Yemen, Rep.	2.37
Lebanon	4.34	Libya	2.32
Nigeria	4.33	Syria	1.83
Azerbaijan	4.29		

Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

Note: These scores are based on data relating to procedural justice, civil justice, and criminal justice.

conducive to the rule of law and less corruption; exhibit more secure property rights; have bigger financial systems; and experience faster economic growth.”¹⁰

ANOTHER PECULIAR SCENE: RULE OF LAW

The relative success of Arab monarchies in economic freedom is also reflected in their scores in rule of law, a measure based on procedural justice, civil justice, and criminal justice (see Table 7). Data show that, while they have low levels of freedom in many areas, Gulf monarchies have higher levels of rule of law than most other Muslim-majority states. Those monarchies include the United Arab Emirates (6.4), Qatar (6.3), Bahrain (5.9), Oman (5.9), and Kuwait (5.3).

For a comparison, the countries with the highest levels of rule of law in the world are Denmark (8.7), Finland and Norway (both 8.6), and Sweden and the Netherlands (both 8.5).

Among Muslim-majority countries, Jordan (5.8), Bosnia and Herzegovina (5.5), Malaysia (5.4), and Albania (5.3) also have rule of law scores above the world average (5.1). They are joined by Saudi Arabia (5.3), whose rule of law score is the only freedom category where the kingdom ranks above the world average.

In contrast, rule of law is mostly absent, understandably, in the war-torn countries of Syria (1.8), Libya (2.3), Yemen (2.4), and Iraq (2.6). Tajikistan (3.0), Chad (3.1), and Bangladesh (3.1) also have extremely low scores in this area.

DOES DEMOCRACY HELP FREEDOM?

What is the connection between democracy, a political system based on representation, and human freedom, a political ideal based on rights?

Global data, as presented in the *Human Freedom Index*, show a strong correlation of 0.82 between democracy and

Figure 8
Correlation between democracy and human freedom in the world, 2017



Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

human freedom, both personal and economic (see Figure 8). This means that we can typically expect a country to be more free as it moves toward democracy.

In the Muslim world, however, this correlation seems weak: only 0.56 (see Figure 9). For example, Turkey is more democratic than the Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, Jordan, and Burkina Faso; however, these four countries are more free than Turkey.

These data suggest that, compared to the global scene, democracy serves freedom less effectively in the Muslim world. Why could that be the case?

One explanation is that democracies in the Muslim world, especially with the involvement of Islamist parties, tend to take an illiberal form, where human rights and freedoms, as they are universally defined, may be curbed by popular consent.

The underlying problem here was defined by journalist Fareed Zakaria more than 20 years ago as “illiberal democracy.” The term referred to “democratically elected regimes . . . [that] are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms.”¹¹ While this is a global problem—observed in recent years in India or Hungary, for example—it seems particularly relevant to the Muslim world. As scholar Shadi Hamid points out, for Islamist parties, which may thrive in democracy, “illiberal democracy is not an unfortunate fact of life but something to believe in and aspire to.”¹² Hence democracy in the Middle East, Hamid adds, has the risk of turning “Islamist and illiberal.”¹³

Figure 9
Correlation between democracy and human freedom in the Muslim world, 2017



Source: *Human Freedom Index 2019*.

This problem does not justify political repression or the support of secular autocracies against popular Islamist parties—a policy often adopted by Western powers and one that has often achieved counterproductive results.¹⁴ But it does call for a strategy for nurturing *liberal* democracy in Muslim-majority societies, in which both secular and Islamic forces can coexist without either of them becoming hegemonic and intolerant of the other. The political trajectory Tunisia has followed since the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, where Islamist and secularist parties agreed on a liberal constitution thanks to political compromise, suggests that this is not an impossible ideal.

CONCLUSION: A BURNING FREEDOM DEFICIT

The Muslim world is a much more complex and diverse part of the globe than the uniformity often implied by the term.

However, with a few bright exceptions, Muslim-majority countries also paint a clear picture: *there is a burning freedom deficit in the Muslim world*.

Surely, this is a complex problem caused by a diverse set of factors, such as authoritarian governments, foreign interventions, ethnic or sectarian conflicts, oppressive interpretations of religion, and illiberal cultural codes. They all beg to be further pondered, analyzed, and challenged by Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and activists—and others who care about the state of freedom in the world.

NOTES

1. According to the Pew Research Center there are currently 51 Muslim-majority countries in the world. *Mapping the Global Muslim Population. A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2009). Eleven of them are not included in this paper due to lack of sufficient data. These are Afghanistan, Comoros, Djibouti, Kosovo, Maldives, Mayotte, the Palestinian territories, Somalia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Western Sahara. Also, there are large Muslim minorities in India, Ethiopia, China, Russia, and elsewhere, which are not included in this paper.

2. All data in this paper are obtained from the *Human Freedom Index 2019*, which uses 76 distinct indicators of personal and economic freedom to rank 162 countries for which sufficient data are available. Ian Vásquez and Tanja Porčnik, *Human Freedom Index 2019* (Washington: Cato Institute, Fraser Institute, and Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2019).

3. For a recent analysis of this freedom deficit in the Muslim world and its historical origins, see Ahmet T. Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

4. The largest Muslim minorities in Western liberal democracies are in France (5.72 million); Germany (4.75 million); the United Kingdom (4.13 million); the United States (3.45 million); Italy (2.98 million); Spain (1.18 million); Canada (1.14 million); Netherlands (880,000); Belgium (879,000); Sweden (800,000); Austria (712,000); Australia (650,000); Switzerland (440,000); Denmark (313,000); Finland (150,000); Norway (142,500); Ireland (70,000); and Portugal (65,000). For these numbers and also the global Muslim population, see: “Muslim Population by

Country 2020,” World Population Review.

5. James Madison, “Political Observations,” *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1865), pp. 491–92.

6. Daniel Philpott, *Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 114–49.

7. Philpott, *Religious Freedom in Islam*, p. 52.

8. Jamal Khashoggi, “What the Arab World Needs Most Is Free Expression,” *Washington Post*, October 17, 2018.

9. Salem Ben Nasser Al-Ismaily, Miguel Cervantes, and Fred McMahon, *Economic Freedom of the Arab World: 2019 Annual Report*, (Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 2019), p. 2.

10. Victor A. Menaldo, “The Middle East and North Africa’s Resilient Monarchs,” *Journal of Politics* 74, no. 3 (July 2012): 707–22.

11. Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November/December, 1997).

12. Shadi Hamid, “The Future of Democracy in the Middle East: Islamist and Illiberal,” *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2014.

13. Hamid, “The Future of Democracy in the Middle East.”

14. For a critique of the Western policy of “cozying up to authoritarian regimes, as long as they were secular,” see Dalibor Rohac, “Understanding Political Islam,” Cato Institute Economic Development Bulletin no. 20, June 23, 2014.