

# Popular Views about Islam and Politics in the Arab World

by Mark Tessler

Democratic currents have swept across much of the developing and post-communist world during the last quarter century. Until this year, however, the Arab world had been largely unaffected by this revolution. The first *Arab Human Development Report* (AHDR), prepared by a distinguished group of Arab intellectuals and published by the United Nations Development Programme in 2002, described a “deficit of freedom” and lamented that political systems “have not been opened up to all citizens,” and that “political participation is less advanced in the Arab world than in other developing regions.”

Subsequent reports reiterated this assessment. Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace wrote in *Foreign Affairs* (2004) that in most Arab countries “real progress toward democracy is minimal.” The 2005 AHDR complained that “from the perspective of freedom and good governance...the Arab arena [still has not seen] the kind of widespread, thorough-going reform for which [earlier] reports called.” In 2009, based on Freedom House indicators, not one of the 21 Arab countries was fully free and only six were even partly free; and in 2010 Freedom House downgraded three of the latter and assigned them a “not free” rating.

Ordinary citizens in the Arab world have long been discontent with this situation and called for political reform and a transition to democracy. Public opinion research indicates that vast majorities want their countries to be governed by a political system that is democratic. Indeed, recent studies report that 80–90 percent of the men and women interviewed in nationally representative surveys believe that democracy would

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be the best form of government for their country and that, despite its limitations, democracy is better than any other political system. Moreover, research in other world regions indicates that support for democracy, though substantial in these instances as well, is neither as high overall nor as consistently high in all countries as in the Arab world. The disproportionately high support for democracy among Arab publics may, at least in part, be a response to the persistence of authoritarianism.

The pro-democracy revolutions and uprisings in the Arab world that began in January 2011 should be understood against this background. They make clear that

ordinary citizens in the Muslim Middle East not only desire democratic governance but often have very strong views about the way their societies should be governed. From Morocco to Yemen, the nebulous collective known simply as “the people” (“al-sha‘ab”) has taken to the streets to demand increased accountability, fundamental reform, and a democratic alternative to the prevailing political and economic order.

In so doing, these ordinary citizens have shown that they are not passive, parochial and predisposed to defer to authority, as Western accounts of Arab and Muslim publics sometimes contend.

The desire and struggle for democracy is not the whole story, however. Along with broad support for democracy, there is a deep and nearly equal division of opinion about the extent to which, and the way in which, Islam should play a role in political affairs. The relationship between Islam and politics is arguably the most important and hotly-debated issue pertaining to governance in the present-day Arab world. Further, this division is just as pronounced

## The Relationship between Attitudes toward Democracy and toward Islam

	Separation of Islam and Politics	
Support for Democracy	Strong Agree/Agree	Disagree/Strong Disagree
Not Strong	6.3% (non-democratic secular system)	7.9% (non-democratic Islamic system)
Very Strong / Strong	44.4% (secular democracy)	41.4% (democracy with Islam)



*Street Scene in Cairo*

among those who support democracy as it is among the population at large. The table on page 1, based on interviews conducted between 2006 and 2009 with 13,019 randomly selected men and women in eight Arab countries, illustrates this distribution of political system preferences.

Differences of opinion about Islam's role in government and political affairs are by no means new, but the "Arab Spring" has made debates about "political Islam" even more important and salient. It is in this connection that Ali Gomaa, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, wrote in April 2011 that Egypt's revolution has swept away decades of authoritarian rule but has at the same time "highlighted an issue that Egyptians will grapple with as they consolidate their democracy: the role of religion in political life." Political figures and personalities in other Arab countries made similar statements around this time. Speaking about the opportunities and challenges with which the Arab Spring has presented his country, a Tunisian political party leader entitled his speech, "What Kind of Democracy for the New Tunisia: Islamic or Secular?" An Iraqi constitutional lawyer and media personality wrote that a central element in the struggle to define Iraq's emergent democracy is "how to balance religion and secularism."

### Explaining Differences

To the extent that political conditions are changing in the Arab world and that the political systems in at least some countries are becoming democratic, at least in comparison to what came before, the political conceptions and preferences of ordinary citizens will increasingly play a role in shaping the political formulae that guide the transitions taking place. This makes it more important than ever not only to measure and map public attitudes toward democracy, Islam, and the relationship

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between the two, but also to investigate the reasons that different individuals come to different conclusions about the way their country should be governed and about the role that Islam should play in government and political affairs.

In seeking to explain as well as describe Arab political attitudes, the research summarized in these few pages focuses on Islam and seeks to account for some of the variance in popular views about the religion's political role. It first asks whether certain individual-level circumstances

and experiences tend to push men and women toward a particular political system preference so far as Islam is concerned. More specifically, it considers whether a person's level of education or economic situation increases the likelihood that he or she will either favor a political role for Islam or, alternatively, believe that religion is a private matter and should be kept apart from political life. The study thereafter shifts to the societal level of analysis and asks whether the degree to which educational level and economic circumstance predispose an individual toward one position or the other on the question of Islam's political role is constant across societies or, alternatively, varies as a function of the level of development of the country in which he or she lives.

I have been gathering and analyzing public opinion data with which to investigate these and related questions about why some ordinary citizens believe that Islam should play an important political role while other men and women favor a separation of religion and politics. The data used to construct the table on the previous page and to carry out the analyses summarized below were collected during the first wave of the Arab Barometer survey project, which I direct in partnership with Professor Amaney Jamal and a team of scholars from

the Arab world. These data are available and may be downloaded from the Arab Barometer web site ([www.arabbarometer.org](http://www.arabbarometer.org)). The Arab Barometer surveys, which are based on face-to-face interviews with nationally representative samples of adults, were carried out in Morocco, Algeria, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Yemen.

As stated, the individual-level analysis investigates the explanatory power of education and economic circumstance in accounting for variance in citizen

views about Islam's political role. It tests two hypotheses: that less well educated individuals are more likely to favor a political role for Islam than are better educated individuals; and that individuals who judge their economic circumstances to be unsatisfactory are more likely to favor a political role for Islam than are those who judge their economic circumstances to be satisfactory. The reasoning underlying both of these propositions is that individuals who are more disadvantaged will be more likely than individuals who are less disadvantaged to believe a political system that incorporates Islamic elements will do a better job of meeting their needs than does the regime that currently governs their country.

### Findings

The Arab Barometer data show mixed results about these hypotheses. The data provide strong support for the first proposition. Less well-educated men and women are indeed, to a degree that is statistically significant, more likely than better educated persons to believe that Islam should play an important role in government and political affairs. By contrast, the data do not support the second hypothesis. There is not a significant relationship between an individual's economic situation and his or her views about Islam's political role.

A more nuanced picture emerges when the analysis proceeds to the societal level. In order to test the individual-level hypotheses about education and economic situation under differing societal conditions, the eight countries surveyed during the first wave of the Arab Barometer have been divided into two categories based on the United Nations "human development" index, which itself is based on literacy rate, life expectancy, and various other standard of living indicators. Countries with a lower level of human development, relative to others, are Morocco, Yemen, Palestine, and Algeria; and those with a higher level, relative to others, are Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Jordan.

Interestingly, the findings for both groups of countries are the same for education. Among populations in both the more

developed and the less developed Arab countries, individuals with lower levels of education are more likely than better educated individuals to favor a political formula that incorporates an Islamic dimension. In the case of education, a country's human development level does not have a "conditioning effect" and, accordingly, findings about the impact of education on views about political Islam can be generalized with greater confidence, at least across the countries included in the analysis.

This is not the case for economic circumstance, however. In countries with lower human development levels but not in countries with higher human development levels, persons who judge their economic circumstances to be unsatisfactory are disproportionately likely to oppose a separation of religion and politics and to favor a political role for Islam. Whether or not an individual's economic situation helps to explain his or her attitude toward political Islam is thus conditional. Only in countries possessing particular characteristics, a lower level of development according to the U.N.'s human development index in this case, does an individual's economic situation have explanatory power.

### Conclusion

The findings suggest that both level of education and economic circumstance play a role in shaping the way that ordinary citizens in the Arab world think about the kind of political system they want. They also show that the degree to which these individual-level factors influence attitudes is not always constant but may in some cases be dependent on societal-level conditions. This illustrates the importance of carrying out both individual-level and societal-level analyses when seeking to understand the reasons that people hold certain views.

These findings are offered not only to shed light on some of the dynamics shaping Arab political attitudes, and on the data and methodology used in such research, they are also offered to give a sense of a much larger and more ambitious study devoted to popular conceptions and

preferences related to governance in the Arab and Muslim Middle East. There are many other individual-level and society-level factors that help to shape Arab attitudes toward Islam and politics, and some may turn out to be even more important determinants and conditionalities than those considered here. Further, there may be patterns of interaction among these factors that make it possible to offer a more elaborate and multidimensional portrait of the way political attitudes relating to Islam are formed in the Arab world. Drawing upon data from many more public opinion surveys, these possibilities are being explored in a larger project that I am conducting with an award from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

### About the Author

Mark Tessler is Samuel J. Eldersveld Collegiate Professor of Political Science, and Vice Provost for International Affairs at the University of Michigan. Professor Tessler specializes in comparative politics and Middle East studies. He has studied and/or conducted field research in Tunisia, Israel, Morocco, Egypt, and Palestine (West Bank and Gaza). He is one of the very few American scholars to have attended university and lived for extended periods in both the Arab world and Israel. He has also spent several years teaching and consulting in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Many of Professor Tessler's scholarly publications examine the nature, determinants, and political implications of attitudes and values held by ordinary citizens the Middle East. This work has been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Institute for Peace, the U.S. State Department, and others. Professor Tessler received an award from the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 2010 for the current phase of this work, which investigates popular perceptions and preferences relating to the political role of Islam.