Politics and Religion (2026), **19**, 484–497
doi:10.1017/S1755048326100352

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

NOTE

Comparative *Shari'a*: measuring support for Islamism cross-nationally

Sam Dunham[1], C. Christine Fair[2], Rebecca Littman[3], Elizabeth Nugent[4] and Michael Robbins[5]

[1]Yale University, USA, [2]Georgetown University, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, USA, [3]University of Illinois Chicago, USA, [4]Princeton University, USA and [5]Arab Barometer, USA
Corresponding author: Sam Dunham; Email: samuel.dunham@yale.edu

Abstract
Studies testing the relationship between preferences for Islamism and preferences for democracy in the Muslim world are inconclusive—and likely the result of measurement issues. Previously, we introduced a four-question battery measuring conceptions of Islamism and found that responses vary predictably across two components: whether respondents consider a *shari'a*-based government to be one that provides services or one that imposes restrictive Islamic norms. Here, we demonstrate the consistency, generalizability, and utility of the battery through an analysis of 11,849 respondents in 11 Muslim countries. Defining a *shari'a*-based government as one that provides is significantly and positively correlated with support for democracy, while defining it as a government that imposes is negatively correlated with these preferences across the entire sample.

Keywords: comparative religion; religion and politics; Islamism; Islam and democracy; survey methodology

Popular support for Islamism, defined as an ideology that locates political legitimacy in the application of *shari'a*, has long been a subject of immense interest and intense debate for scholars and practitioners of politics in the Muslim world. A consequential component of this debate is the relationship between individuals' adherence to Islam and support for democratic values and politics. Critics claim an inherent incompatibility between Islam and democracy (Gellner, 1983; Kamrava, 1998; Kedourie, 1994; Lewis, 1994), while proponents advocate Islamic tenets as being fully compatible with democratic practices and preferences (Ciftci, 2021; Tessler, 2015), largely based on different interpretations of Islamic political theology. However, empirical studies using public opinion data from the Muslim world to test the relationship between preferences for a *shari'a*-based government and preferences for democracy are inconclusive (Berger, 2019; Ciftci 2013; *The World's Muslims* 2013).

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Political Science Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

Yet, rather than being evidence of no correlation or a complex relationship between preferences for Islamism and preferences for democracy, we argue that these inconclusive results are more likely an issue of measurement. The conception of Islamism derives from religion, a discursive tradition that is highly variable and possibly contradictory across individual practitioners (Asad, 1986). As such, Islam—like all religions—means different things to different people, and thus, so does its politicized version (Azmah, 1993). However, most studies operationalize support for Islamism by asking respondents' support for the implementation of Islamic law generally or the implementation of specific Islamic tenets or prescriptions. With few exceptions, existing studies fail to capture respondents' interpretation of Islamic law when measuring support for Islamism.

In order to understand whether and how support for Islamism matters for politics, scholars need to first know what respondents think of when they are asked about a *shari'a*-based government. In a previous piece (Fair et al., 2018), we introduced a four-question battery designed to measure what Islamism and a *shari'a*-based government mean to survey respondents. Using survey data from Pakistan, we found that commonly-held conceptions of *shari'a*-based government vary in predictable ways across two distinct components of this concept: whether respondents consider a *shari'a*-based government to be the one that provides services and is free of corruption or one that imposes restrictive Islamic social and legal norms.

In this research note, we demonstrate the consistency, generalizability, and utility of the battery. The Arab Barometer included our battery in its wave 5 instrument, conducted in 2018 and 2019, resulting in a sample of 11,849 respondents in 11 Muslim-majority countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen). We find that defining a *shari'a*-based government to be one that provides is positively correlated with support for democracy, while defining it as a government that imposes is negatively correlated with it, and that general support for *shari'a* is uncorrelated across the entire sample. We reintroduce this succinct battery as a necessary and useful tool for scholars collecting public opinion data related to Islamism in a variety of Muslim-majority contexts.

In the remainder of the note, we first review scholarly work on popular support for Islamism, highlighting conceptual components that form the basis of contemporary conceptions of *shari'a* as well as major measurement issues when these concepts are operationalized on surveys. We then introduce the question battery and employ our data to demonstrate that it captures meaningful variation on conceptions of Islamism within sampled populations remarkably consistently across sampled countries. Next, we return to the normative implications that motivate scholarly and policy interest in Islamism. Analyses reveal that how respondents construe *shari'a*-based governments determines whether their preferences for *shari'a* are positively correlated with preferences for democracy; those who conceptualize a *shari'a*-based government as providing are significantly more supportive of democracy, while those who conceptualize a *shari'a*-based government as imposing are significantly less supportive. The inclusion of variables measuring support for a delineated definition of *shari'a* offers more explanatory power than variables measuring support for a *shari'a*-based government. These results confirm that capturing the meaning of *shari'a*-based

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

government in addition to measuring support is necessary to accurately assess how preferences regarding religion in politics correlate with other political preferences.

Measuring conceptions of *Shari'a*

The study of the relationship between Islam and democracy is linked to contemporary geopolitics. As the third wave of democracy spread across much of the world, the countries of the Middle East and North Africa remained steadfastly authoritarian. While there were important democratic examples elsewhere in the Muslim world, such as in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Turkey, and Albania, many scholars and practitioners pointed to Islam as the reason why the Middle East remained undemocratic and an exception to broader global trends. More recently, the failure of democracy to take root in the Middle East and North Africa after the 2010–2011 Arab Spring uprisings, and the salience of the religious-secular divide in the ill-fated early elections, constitution drafting processes, and transitional justice attempts during nascent democratic transitions, have continued the debate about the compatibility of Islam and democracy.

Proponents of Islamic exceptionalism focus on the incompatibility of Islam's central tenets with democracy—much like earlier literature on the supposed incompatibility between Catholicism and democracy. One common claim was that by its very nature, *shari'a*, as religious law, was incompatible with the secular law necessary for democracy to take root. The logic of the argument centered on Islam's central role in adherents' lives in shaping not just politics but also prescribing rules for culture and society (Kamrava, 1998). In effect, it represents a "blueprint of a social order" which is effectively inescapable (Gellner, 1983, 1). Moreover, although countries with a Christian heritage were not immune to this challenge, scholars argued that Islam had no concept equivalent to "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" that creates a theological basis for the separation of church and state, a key characteristic of modern democracies (Lewis, 1994). According to this argument, Islam has been inseparable from the state since the religion's earliest days; the model Islamic state is one under religious leadership, making this system incompatible with rule by the will of the people. As a result, "the ideas of the security of the state, of society being composed of a multitude of self-activating groups and associations—all of these are profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition" (Kedourie, 1994, 6). Because of the theorized outsized influence of Islamic tenets, scholars also pointed to the public at large as a substantial barrier to democracy, due to their adherence to *shari'a*, preference for rule by religious leaders, and antipathy towards democracy as the rule of the people. This revived earlier arguments centered on civic culture, in which populations' values and beliefs were integral to the establishment and flourishing of democracy (Almond and Verba, 1989; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Here, scholars argued that Islam did not promote values that created pluralistic preferences among Muslims, most notably the protection of basic civil rights for all citizens, including women and ethnic or religious minorities (Diamond and Morlino, 2004).

On the other side of the argument are those scholars and practitioners who believe that Islam and democracy are compatible. They put forward scriptural or religious-based counter-arguments, such as identifying clear examples where democracy can be

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

accommodated within Islamic ideological discourses; instances of egalitarian behavior of the prophet; Islamic concepts that are generally democratic, such as the notion of *shura* (consultative deliberation in decision-making) or the notion of *ijtihad*, which references the continuing ability of religious scholars to interpret religious texts. Many studies also observe that preferences for democracy are high in many Muslim countries. Scholars mobilize a variety of theoretical frameworks to advance claims about Muslims' taste for democracy, including cultural claims, political-economic arguments, theories about modernization, social capital, and arguments about government performance under different regime types, among others (Spierings, 2014).[1]

For much of its history, the scholarship on the relationship between Islam and democracy was produced without empirical evidence that actually measured Muslims' support for *shari'a*-based governments and democracy, instead relying heavily on analysis of religious texts, interpretations, and practices. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars began to test these claims empirically with evidence produced by ambitious survey projects run across the Middle East. However, the empirical evidence produced has provided inconclusive evidence on the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Overall, scholarship finds a limited or insignificant relationship between variables measuring support for political Islam and those measuring support for democracy (Tessler, 2002).

At the same time, public opinion research revealed that stated support for democracy was among the highest in the MENA of any world region in the early 2000s. These results held across a range of contexts and definitions. Of nine predominantly Muslim countries surveyed by the World Value Survey in its fourth wave (1999–2004), in all but one, at least 86 percent expressed support for democracy when asked about it directly and were not especially likely to support strongman rule (Inglehart, 2003). Tessler and Gao (2005) found similar results in another set of surveys across MENA, with at least 90 percent of citizens favoring democracy in their country and support for secular versus Islamic democracy roughly evenly split. By implication, there may be a difference in the type of support for the democratic system that citizens want vis-a-vis the role of religion. It is nevertheless clear that the vast majority of those who support political Islam also support democracy.

Measurement issues

We find that one of the biggest challenges to conclusively understanding the relationship between support for Islamism and support for democracy is how support for *shari'a* has been measured in existing studies. In fact, we believe it explains our collective inconclusive findings on the relationship between support for Islamism and support for democracy.[2]

Many scholars rely on cross-national datasets that ask similar questions about respondents' support for Islam in politics. For example, a Pew survey asks respondents about the extent to which they want their government to implement *shari'a* and in which areas, including penal laws, personal status laws, and inheritance laws (*The World's Muslims*, 2012), while the World Values Survey asks about support for a "greater role of religion in politics" in Muslim countries (Inglehart et al., 2018). Other scholars employ survey questions about the extent to which respondents prefer that

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

shari'a should be the source of law; possible answers range from *shari'a* being the only source to *shari'a* being considered alongside other religious, secular, and civil sources (Ciftci, 2010; Ciftci, 2013; Ciftci et al., 2019; Dzutsati and Warner, 2021; Rheault and Mogahed, 2008). Some employ surveys that ask about respondents' support for religious influence on the government, but in the form of a formal role for religious leaders or politicians who hold strong religious beliefs (Breznau et al., 2011; Buckley, 2016; Driessen, 2018). Still others ask about respondents' beliefs surrounding the creation of *shari'a*—whether the Qur'an is the literal and direct word of God, or authored by mortals—and whether it is open to interpretation, multiple interpretations, or should be understood literally (Berger, 2019). A final set of studies measures respondents' level of agreement that governments or parties (both generally and specific governments/parties) that implement *shari'a* are normatively good (Davis and Robinson, 2006; Moaddel, 2006), or choosing to vote for an Islamist party (García-Rivero and Kotzé, 2007; Kurzman and Naqvi, 2010; Wegner and Cavatorta, 2019). We leave aside those studies that operationalize aspects of religiosity as a proxy for support for Islam in politics, as this erroneously conflates religious behavior with religious beliefs in line with earlier scholarship.[3]

These are all undoubtedly interesting and important aspects of how religious beliefs may affect those in the political realm. However, these questions do not capture what respondents understand to substantively comprise *shari'a*. This is arguably the most important aspect of Islam for politics—how adherents understand the concept, what it means to them (particularly in the political realm), and thus what they are supporting when they say they support its implementation or a political actor advocating for its implementation. In our previous research, differentiating between aspects of *shari'a*, when asking about support, we find a conditional and nuanced relationship between conceptions of *shari'a* and support for democracy (Fair et al., 2018; Fair and Patel, 2022). This fits an understanding of both Islam specifically and religion generally that allows for multifacetedness: some aspects promote support for democracy, while others diminish it. For example, Islam has a strong egalitarian emphasis, which might contribute to support for a political system that promotes equality at the ballot box (Ciftci, 2013). The importance Islam places on providing for the poor through *zakat* could be translated into a political system that promotes redistribution, which is common in many democracies (Davis and Robinson, 2006). Yet, as with any religion, there are also teachings that may prove more challenging for democratic governance, such as general social conservatism. Restrictions related to full gender equality, for example, may be inhibitors to democratic development (Ciftci, 2013).[4] As such, as in any religious tradition, there may be aspects of Islam that foster support for democracy and others that limit it.

In the next section, we outline the battery which permits scholars to accurately test for a link between Islam and support for democracy and help resolve inconclusive empirical findings by allowing for Islamic or Islamist orientations to, in some instances, hinder democracy while in other instances be fully compatible with it.

Data and methods

We explore the relationship between conceptions of *shari'a* and support for democracy among a nationally representative sample of Arab citizens aged 18 and

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

Table 1. Survey respondents by country

Country	Total respondents	Respondents asked *shari'a* conceptualization questions
Algeria	2332	1167
Egypt	2400	1066
Iraq	2462	1254
Jordan	2400	1196
Lebanon	2400	611
Libya	1962	1010
Morocco	2400	1189
Palestine	1521	617
Sudan	1758	857
Tunisia	2400	1201
Yemen	2400	1199
Total	24,435	11,367

above, surveyed face-to-face by the Arab Barometer in 2018 and 2019.[5] The Arab Barometer asked questions about *shari'a* to Muslim respondents only, so the analysis is limited to members of this faith. Additionally, our battery was administered to a split sample, meaning only respondents randomly chosen to participate in form B of the survey instrument were asked to answer these questions. It also only includes observations for which data about the survey enumerator was available. As a result, our sample of respondents includes approximately half of the total Muslim population sampled across 11 countries (see Table 1).[6]

Key variables of interest

Our first variables of interest capture respondents' level of agreement with different conceptions of *shari'a*. They are intended to capture in the abstract the degree to which a respondent believes that a government implementing *shari'a* would align with the following:

> Q605a. Here is a list of things some people say about the *shari'a* government. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
> 1. A government that provides basic services such as health facilities, schools, garbage collection, and road maintenance.
> 2. A government that does not have corruption.
> 3. A government that uses physical punishments to make people obey the law.
> 4. A government that restricts women's roles in public.

Each respondent was presented with each of the four statements above, in succession, and asked to choose the statement that best characterized his or her own agreement with the statement: "I strongly agree," "I agree," "I disagree," or "I strongly disagree." Respondents could also refuse the question or respond with

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

"don't know," though the enumerator did not read out these possible responses. In our coding of 1–4, higher responses indicate more agreement, and don't know/refuse are treated as missing.

We first constructed simple indices from the responses to these four questions. As expected, answers to questions 605A_1 and 605A_2 and answers to questions 605A_3 and 605A_4 loaded onto the same factor.[7] To generate our index for a "provides" conception of *shari'a*, we took the mean of respondents' agreement with questions 605A_1 and 605A_2. To generate our "imposes" index, we took the mean of respondents' agreement with questions 605A_3 and 605A_4.

Our next variables of interest measure respondents' preferences over the extent to which laws governing their country are based on *shari'a*, similar to the type of question typically used in survey-based research to measure support for *shari'a*:

Q605: From your point of view, should the laws of our country . . .
1. . . . entirely be based on the *shari'a*;
2. . . . mostly be based on the *shari'a*;
3. . . . equally be based on *shari'a* and the will of the people;
4. . . . mostly be based on the will of the people; or
5. . . . entirely be based on the will of the people?

High scores indicate strong support for a system based on *shari'a*, middle scores indicate a mix of Islam and the will of the people, and lower scores indicate support for a system based exclusively on the will of the people. We treat refusals and non-responses as missing.

Finally, we measure respondents' preferences for democracy:

Q516. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
4. Democratic systems may have problems, yet they are better than other systems.

Again, respondents were asked to choose the level of agreement that best characterized their own agreement with the statement: "I strongly agree," "I agree," "I disagree," or "I strongly disagree." In our recoding of the question, greater values indicate higher levels of support for democracy. Refusals and non-responses were coded as missing.

In addition, in our full model, we include controls based on existing studies of support for *shari'a* and political preferences in the Middle East: demographic characteristics, including age, gender, education, employment status, income insecurity, as well as marital and parental status; individuals' reported levels of religiosity as measured by the strength of self-identification as a religious person and frequency of individual prayer; gender and religious appearance of the enumerator (Blaydes and Gillum, 2013); and country-level fixed effects. All of these attributes have been found in existing studies to have an independent effect on support for religion in politics. The full text of each question from which our measurements are generated is included in the appendix under Variable Descriptions.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

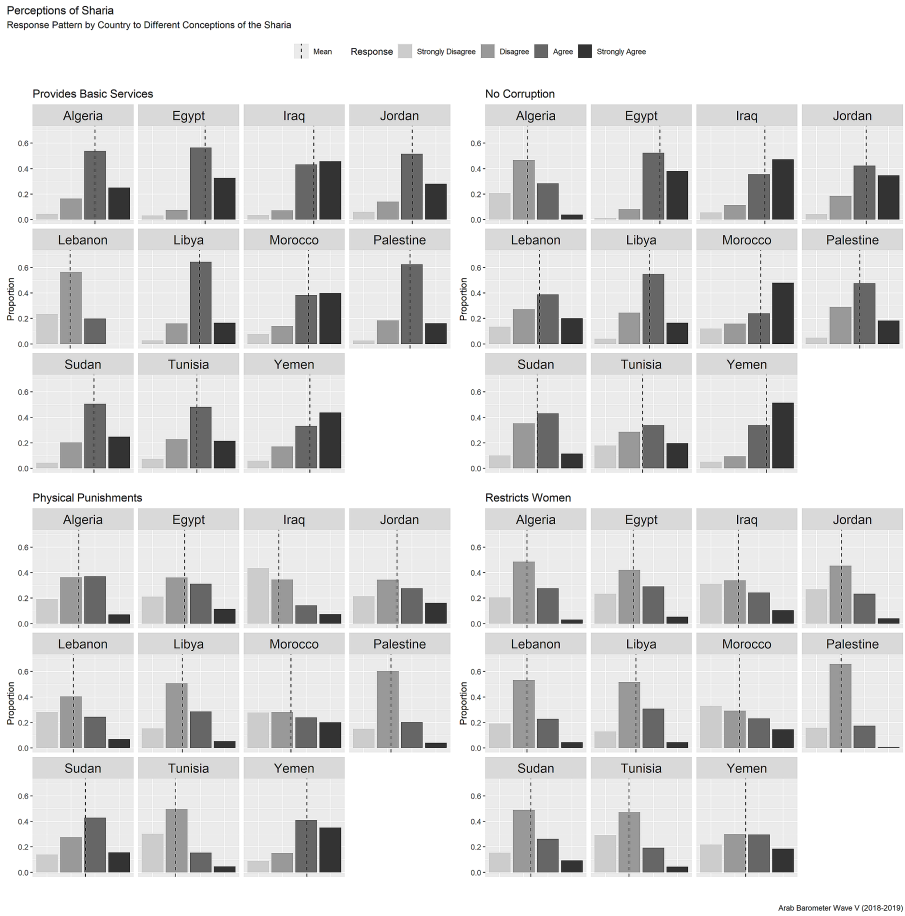


Figure 1. Perceptions of *Shari'a*: Response patterns by country to different conceptions of the *Shari'a*.

Cross-national conceptions of *Shari'a*

To begin, we ask: how do Muslim respondents in different countries conceptualize *shari'a*? There is significant variation across countries in respondents' agreement that a *shari'a*-based government is defined as one that provides basic services, is without corruption, uses physical punishments to induce compliance, or restricts women's role in public. Figure 1 demonstrates that most respondents understand *shari'a* to be strongly related to government service provision. In all countries except Lebanon, the median respondent "agrees" with this understanding of *shari'a*. In Iraq and Yemen, the response is "strongly agree." Lebanon is the only country where most Muslims disagree. Only in Tunisia do at least a quarter of respondents disagree or disagree strongly.

There is a greater variation in whether a government under *shari'a* has corruption. In most countries, the median respondent "agrees" that there is no corruption when *shari'a* is implemented. However, in Algeria, the median response is "disagree." The perception that there is no corruption under *shari'a* government

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

is particularly strong in Iraq, Morocco, and Yemen, where the modal response is "strongly agree." Algerians, Sudanese, Tunisians, and Lebanese are far less likely to hold this perception.

There is a far weaker link among ordinary Muslims between *shari'a* and imposition. In all but two countries (Yemen and Sudan), the median respondent disagrees that *shari'a* government includes the use of physical punishments. Iraqis, Tunisians, and Libyans are especially likely to say that physical punishments are not a part of *shari'a* government. There is greater uniformity across countries on the perception that *shari'a* government restricts women in public. In all countries, the median response is "disagree," but Yemenis and Sudanese are somewhat more likely to associate *shari'a* with restrictions on women in public than those in other countries.

In summary, despite general agreement, there are clear country-specific differences across the region. Yemenis in particular are more likely to see all four aspects, including interpretations that both provide and impose, compared with those in other countries. Lebanese Muslims are comparatively unlikely to associate any of these definitions with the *shari'a* government. Other nuanced differences also exist: Algerians are the least likely to say government under *shari'a* is free of corruption, while Egyptians are relatively likely to understand *shari'a* government as imposing physical punishments.

Preferences for *Shari'a* and democracy

Next, we ask: how do different conceptualizations of *shari'a*-based government correlate with support for democracy, and does their inclusion improve understanding of the relationship between support for *shari'a* and support for democracy?[8] Table 2 includes the results of three models with country fixed effects. The first specification includes the variable measuring support for *shari'a*-based government, but does not include the conceptualization of a *shari'a*-based government. The second drops support for *shari'a* and only includes the conception of *shari'a*-based government. The third includes both support for *shari'a* and conceptions of *shari'a*-based government. The results of additional analyses, presented in the Appendix in Table A4, demonstrate that these conceptions of *shari'a* are robust predictors in a number of model specifications.

Regressions separating the data by individual country show that there is some country-level variation. While the positive relationship between conceiving of a *shari'a*-based government as one that provides and support for democracy is generally consistent across countries, the relationship between conceiving of a *shari'a*-based government as one that restricts and support for democracy is more mixed. Exploring this country-level variation is beyond the scope of this research note (see Table A8, Table A9, and Table A10 in the appendix).

We interpret the combined results—that support for a *shari'a*-based government is only significantly correlated with support for democracy when controlling for respondents' conceptions of a *shari'a*-based government, though conceptions remain significant on their own—as evidence that measuring respondents' understanding of *shari'a*-based government is necessary either in place of or in addition to measuring

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

Table 2. Support for *Shari'a*, perceptions of *Shari'a* (index), and support for democracy

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Democracy support	Democracy support	Democracy support
Support for *shari'a* as basis of law	0.00881		−0.0196*
	(0.00588)		(0.00843)
Provides index		0.165***	0.171***
		(0.0144)	(0.0147)
Imposes index		−0.0444***	−0.0441***
		(0.0133)	(0.0134)
Age	0.000504	0.000530	0.000729
	(0.000507)	(0.000713)	(0.000721)
Male	−0.0124	−0.0130	−0.0161
	(0.0142)	(0.0201)	(0.0202)
Education	0.0298***	0.0369***	0.0371***
	(0.00428)	(0.00607)	(0.00612)
Employed	0.0332*	0.0301	0.0340
	(0.0150)	(0.0211)	(0.0213)
Income insecure	0.00674	−0.000283	−0.00124
	(0.00715)	(0.0100)	(0.0102)
Married	−0.00115	−0.00955	−0.0154
	(0.0182)	(0.0254)	(0.0257)
Has children	0.00639	0.00956	0.0116
	(0.0165)	(0.0231)	(0.0234)
Religiosity	0.00891	0.00301	0.00814
	(0.0109)	(0.0153)	(0.0157)
Prayer frequency	0.0283***	0.0186**	0.0185*
	(0.00499)	(0.00714)	(0.00722)
Enumerator male	−0.0248	−0.0261	−0.0185
	(0.0155)	(0.0220)	(0.0222)
Enumerator rel. appearance	0.00985	0.0267	0.0253
	(0.0153)	(0.0217)	(0.0219)
Constant	2.611***	2.302***	2.337***
	(0.0476)	(0.0848)	(0.0869)
Country fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	16548	8268	8131
Adjusted R^2	0.042	0.066	0.066

Standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

respondents' level of support for a *shari'a*-based government given that respondents have differing understandings of what is meant by *shari'a* itself.

Conclusion

For years, scholars have discussed the impact of Muslim religious identity on a number of variables, including support for democracy. Overall, these findings have been contradictory, partial, or inconclusive. The result has been a mixed set of tentative conclusions: some aspects of Islam and its teachings may increase support for democracy, and some may decrease it. More recently, scholars have hypothesized complex pathways and mechanisms to help explain such findings. What we seek here is a simpler and more easily implemented solution.

We suggest that scholars like Ciftci are correct to disentangle different aspects of Muslim religious identity to explain this complex relationship. In a similar vein, we find that parsing differences in understanding of *shari'a*—the fundamental blueprint within Islam informing social and political life—has major implications for the relationship between Islam and support for democracy at the individual level. In effect, those who see *shari'a* as a legal code focused on good governance and providing services for the citizens are more supportive of democracy. After all, at least in theory, this is also what a democracy is designed to do better than other political systems. For Muslims with this interpretation of *shari'a*, there is, in effect, no contradiction with democracy as hypothesized by scholars like Gellner and Kedourie. Instead, *shari'a* and democracy seek similar goals. It follows that those who understand *shari'a* primarily in these terms would also support democracy.

On the other hand, those Muslims who understand *shari'a* as a legal code that implements corporal punishments or restricts the rights of members of women are less supportive of democracy. This follows from the fact that in a full democracy, citizens would potentially be able to overrule such opinions at the ballot box. Certainly, women may be unlikely to favor greater restrictions on themselves compared with men and be opposed to this point of view if it were put to a vote. As a result, Muslims who interpret *shari'a* in this manner are likely to be opposed to democracy, which is consistent with what we find in the statistical models presented.

Thus, we advance the literature in an important way. These findings suggest that much of the existing disagreement in the literature boils down to the simple fact that there is no one agreed-upon interpretation of *shari'a*. Our approach is to emphasize four potential aspects of this religious code. There are additional elements that could be queried, but we find that this approach sheds important light on our key variable of interest and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the link between Islam and democracy.

The key advancement in this research note is to clearly demonstrate across a range of country contexts, religious environments, and political systems that the relationship remains robust. Although we focus on how this approach can better elucidate the relationship between Islam and democracy, there is little reason to think that our contribution would be limited to this relationship. Given that we establish that Muslims do not all have the same interpretation of *shari'a* when they specify their level of support for implementing it, ignoring such differences in scholarly work has likely

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

obfuscated the relationship between support for *shari'a* and other variables. Examining such questions should be the subject of future research, and we highly encourage scholars to take this broader insight and apply it to their models that seek to understand Muslim political behavior at the individual level.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352.

Financial support. The authors declare none.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1. For examples, see inter alia Inglehart and Norris (2003); Norris and Inglehart (2012); Tessler (2002); Abou El Fadl (2004); Esposito and Voll (1996); El-Affendi (2003); Sachedina (2001); Hofmann (2004); Tessler and Jamal (2008); Fish (2002); Benstead (2015), We note that, as Spierlings argues, in arguments both in favor of and opposition to the compatibility between Islam and democracy, there is an assumption that the more religious an individual Muslim is, the more democratic or anti-democratic they are.
2. Of course, "democracy" is also a contested term with a range of understandings and conceptualizations. We measure respondents' support for democracy by asking them to gauge their level of agreement or disagreement with a statement about democracy's preferability over other forms of government. We choose this measure because it is straightforward and does not impose a particular understanding of democracy on the respondent. However, follow-up work could measure variation in respondents' understandings of democracy as well.
3. For example, Tessler (2002); Hofmann (2004); Grim and Finke (2006).
4. Countries with other religious traditions have also treated minority groups, including women, as less equal and limited their full engagement in the political system prior to expanding political and voting rights.
5. See https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-v/ for details on the full survey instrument and sampling.
6. Arab Barometer Wave V includes Kuwait, but these questions were not implemented in this country due to restrictions by the relevant authorities.
7. Cronbach's alpha for provides index = 0.5773, for imposes index = 0.5700. Please see Tables A2 and A3 and Figure A1 for factor analysis.
8. We treat the dependent variable, support for democracy, as continuous. We present ordered logit models that treat the support for democracy measure as ordinal in the appendix in Tables A6 and A7.

References

Azmah A (1993) *Islams and Modernities*. London: Verso.

Abou El Fadl K (2004) Islam and the challenge of democracy. In Abou El Fadl K (eds), *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 144. March.

El-Affendi A (2003) What is liberal Islam?: The elusive reformation. *Journal of Democracy* **14**(2), 34–39.

Almond GA and Verba S (1989) *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Asad T (1986) The idea of an anthropology of Islam. Occasional papers series (Georgetown University. Center for Contemporary Arab Studies). Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University.

Benstead LJ (2015) Why do some Arab citizens see democracy as unsuitable for their country? *Democratization* **22**(7), 1183–1208.

Berger L (2019) Shari'a, Islamism and Arab support for democracy. *Democratization* **26**(2), 309–326.

Blaydes L and Gillum RM (2013) Religiosity-of-interviewer effects: Assessing the impact of veiled enumerators on survey response in Egypt. *Politics and Religion* **6**(3), 459–482.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

Breznau N, Lykes VA, Kelley J and Evans MDR (2011) A clash of civilizations? Preferences for religious political Leaders in 86 Nations. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **50**(4), 671–691.
Buckley D (2016) Demanding the divine? Explaining Cross-National Support for clerical control of politics. *Comparative Political Studies* **49**(3), 357–390.
Ciftci S (2010) Modernization, Islam, or social capital: What explains attitudes toward democracy in the Muslim world? *Comparative Political Studies* **43**(11), 1442–1470.
Ciftci S (2013) Secular-Islamist cleavage, values, and support for democracy and Shari'a in the Arab World. *Political Research Quarterly* **66**(4), 781–793.
Ciftci S (2021) *Islam, Justice, and Democracy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
Ciftci S, Wuthrich FM and Shamaileh A (2019) Islam, religious outlooks, and support for democracy. *Political Research Quarterly* **72**(2), 435–449.
Davis NJ and Robinson RV (2006) The Egalitarian face of Islamic orthodoxy: Support for Islamic Law and Economic Justice in Seven Muslim-Majority Nations. *American Sociological Review* **71**(2), 167–190.
Diamond L and Morlino L (2004) The quality of democracy: An overview. *Journal of Democracy* **15**(4), 20–31.
Driessen MD (2018) Sources of Muslim democracy: The supply and demand of religious policies in the Muslim world. *Democratization* **25**(1), 115–135.
Dzutsati V and Warner CM (2021) The socioeconomic matrix of support for sharia: A cross-national study of Muslims' attitudes. *Religion, State and Society* **49**(1), 4–22.
Esposito JL and Voll JO (1996) *Islam and Democracy*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
Fair CC, Littman R and Nugent ER (2018) Conceptions of Shari'a and support for militancy and democratic values: Evidence from Pakistan. *Political Science Research and Methods* **6**(3), 429–448.
Fair CC and Patel P (2022) Support for domestic Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh: Insights from a novel survey. *Politics and Religion* **15**(4), 673–699.
Fish MS (2002) Islam and authoritarianism. *World Politics* **55**(1), 4–37.
García-Rivero C and Kotzé H (2007) Electoral support for Islamic parties in the middle East and North Africa. *Party Politics* **13**(5), 611–636.
Gellner E (1983) *Muslim Society*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Grim BJ and Finke R (2006) International religion indexes: Government regulation, government favoritism, and social regulation of religion. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* **2**, 1.
Hofmann SR (2004) Islam and democracy: Micro-level indications of compatibility. *Comparative Political Studies* **37**(6), 652–676.
Inglehart R, Haerpfer C, Moreno A, Welzel C, Kizilova K, Diez-Medrano J, Lagos M, Norris P, Ponarin E and Puranen B (eds) (2018) *World Values Survey: Round Six - Country-Pooled Datafile*. Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute & WVSA Secretariat.
Inglehart R (2003) How solid is mass support for democracy—And how can we measure it? *PS: Political Science & Politics* **36**(1), 51–57.
Inglehart R and Norris P (2003) The true clash of civilizations. *Foreign Policy* (135), 63–70.
Inglehart R and Welzel C (2005) *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kamrava M (1998) *Democracy in the Balance: Culture & Society in the Middle East*. New York: Chatham House Publishers, Seven Bridges Press.
Kedourie E (1994) *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*. London: F. Cass.
Kurzman C and Naqvi I (2010) Do Muslims vote Islamic? *Journal of Democracy* **21**(50), 50–63.
Lewis B (1994). *Islam and the West*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Moaddel M (2006) The Saudi public speaks: Religion, gender, and politics. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* **38**(1), 79–108.
Norris P and Inglehart RF (2012) Muslim integration into Western Cultures: Between origins and destinations. *Political Studies* **60**(2), 228–251.
The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity (2012) Technical report. Pew Research Center, August.
The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society (2013) Technical report. Pew Research Center, April.
Rheault M and Mogahed D (2008) *Iranians, Egyptians, Turks: Contrasting Views on Sharia*. Gallup, July.
Sachedina A (2001) *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*. New York, United States: Oxford University Press.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

Spierings N (2014) The influence of Islamic orientations on democratic support and tolerance in five Arab Countries. *Politics and Religion* **7**(4), 706–733.
Tessler M (2002) Islam and democracy in the Middle East: The impact of religious orientations on attitudes toward democracy in four Arab Countries. *Comparative Politics* **34**(3), 337–354.
Tessler M (2015) *Islam and Politics in the Middle East: Explaining the Views of Ordinary Citizens*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Tessler M and Gao E (2005) Gauging Arab support for democracy. *Journal of Democracy* **16**(3), 83–97.
Tessler M and Jamal A (2008) The democracy barometers (Part II): Attitudes in the Arab world. *Journal of Democracy* **19**(1), 97–110.
Wegner E and Cavatorta F (2019) Revisiting the Islamist–Secular divide: Parties and voters in the Arab world. *International Political Science Review* **40**(4), 558–575.

Sam Dunham is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at Yale University. He can be reached at samuel.dunham@yale.edu.

C. Christine Fair is a Professor of Security Studies within the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. She can be reached at ccf33@georgetown.edu.

Rebecca Littman is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois Chicago. She can be reached at rlittman@uic.edu.

Elizabeth Nugent is an assistant professor of politics at Princeton University. She can be reached at enugent@princeton.edu.

Michael Robbins is Director and co-Principal Investigator at Arab Barometer. He can be reached at mdr7@princeton.edu.

Cite this article: Dunham S, CC Fair, R Littman, E Nugent, and M Robbins (2026). Comparative *Shari'a*: measuring support for Islamism cross-nationally. *Politics and Religion* **19**, 484–497. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 07:10:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100352