



Reassessing the Reasons of Democracy Deficit in the Middle East through the Role of Islam

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Abstract

There has been a large number of challenges to undemocratic regimes in the Middle East by their populations due to the denial of their participation in decision-making processes. Among many factors, Islamic faith and ruling are regarded to have more role in political conflicts than others. Particularly, the idea that Islam and democracy are not compatible with each other has prevailed and led to the neglect of other reasons in debates. This study analyzes the reasons for democracy deficit in the region such as the environment of mistrust abetting governments to abandon basic human and political rights, hydrocarbon revenues that make regimes independent from populations, the prevalent role of tribalism in government structures which is inherent to traditional Middle Eastern politics, the lack of civil society and the effect of Islam. The study asserts that the role of Islam is unfairly exaggerated since it does not offer a certain political system. Besides, such approaches also underestimate the strong damages other reasons cause. By analyzing the impact of Islam on governance, its use as a tool by political and anti-political Islamists as well as its compliance with democracy, this research aims to reveal to what extent Islam can be attributed to the democracy deficit of the region.

Keywords: Islam, Sharia, Middle East, Arab States, Authoritarianism

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Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi
ISSN:2147-7523, E-ISSN: 2630-5631
Cilt: 7, Sayı: 2, ss. 35-59
Geliş Tarihi: 25.01.2020
Kabul Tarihi: 30.09.2020
DOI: 10.26513/tocd.679944

Ortadoğu'daki Demokrasi Eksikliğinin Sebeplerinin İslam'ın Rolü Üzerinden Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi

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Öz

Ortadoğu'nun demokratik olmayan rejimlerine, halkları tarafından karar verme sürecine dahil edilmemeleri nedeniyle çok sayıda meydan okumalarda bulunulmuştur. Ancak siyasi çatışmalarda bütün faktörler arasında en büyük rolün İslam ve İslami yönetim biçimine ait olduğu iddia edilmiştir. Özellikle İslam ve demokrasi uyumsuzluğu fikri baskın gelmiş ve diğer nedenlerin ihmal edilmesine yol açmıştır. Bu çalışma bölgede demokrasi eksikliğine neden olan (1) hükümetlere temel siyasi ve hakları iptal etme hakkı veren güvensizlik ortamı, (2) rejimleri halklara olan bağımlılıktan kurtaran hidrokarbon gelirleri, (3) Ortadoğu yönetimlerinde geleneksel olarak bulunan kabilecilik bağlarının belirleyici olması, (4) sivil toplumun eksikliği ve (5) İslam'ın etkisi gibi nedenleri incelemektedir. Çalışma, İslam'ın herhangi bir siyasi yönetim biçimi önermemesine rağmen çekişmelerdeki rolünün abartıldığını iddia etmektedir. Ayrıca, bu tür yaklaşımlar diğer sebeplerin güçlü etkisinin küçümsendiği manasına gelmektedir. Bu araştırma, İslam'ın bölgenin demokrasi eksikliği üzerinde ne kadar rolü olduğunu, dinin yönetim üzerindeki etkisi, siyasi İslamcılar ve karşıtlarınca bir malzeme gibi kullanılması ve demokrasi ile olan uyumunu inceleyerek ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam, Şeriat, Ortadoğu, Arap Ülkeleri, Otoriteriyalizm

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1. Introduction

Middle Eastern countries have been in a political (system) impasse since they gained their independence in the first half of the 20th century. Particularly, Arab states have become arenas of political contention between ruling elites and people. All democratic demands of peoples have been refused by rulers and mostly suppressed by force. There are several main reasons that can be laid down for the ongoing strife. First, continuous wars and intense conflicts in the region have caused governments to prioritize security over basic political, economic, social and human rights.¹ When people asked for more freedom, authoritarian regimes confronted them with severe security conditions and limited their basic rights. Besides authoritarian regimes, foreign powers also exacerbated the political turmoil through intervention. Second, hydrocarbon revenues controlled by regimes strengthened the power of rulers in opposing their peoples. Thus, they have been thinking that people do not deserve to participate in decision-making since they do not make any economic contribution to the state.² Third, tribalism is also one of the reasons that fundamentally impede democracy. In countries like Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Jordan, the state is governed and owned by some large families and the throne is hereditary. While the house of the ruling family believes that the country is their private property, any request for political power from other tribes or groups are considered an attempt to extort their properties. Fourth, one-man rule and/or oligarchic administrations in the Middle East do not allow civil society to be influential in the population since civic groups are deemed a threat to their undemocratic regimes.³ The final factor is the power of Islam as a religion and Islamic groups. As for groups, they are not allowed to participate in the political system and be active in public life. Almost all the ways for participation are strictly controlled or banned, which culminate in fundamentalism or terrorism. Regarding Islam, some scholars argue that it is the root of authoritarianism since it does not comply with democracy.

¹ Gema Martin Munoz, "Democracy and the Arab World: The 'Islamist dilemma'," in *Why Europe Must Engage with Political Islam*, ed. Amr Elshobaki (Barcelona: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2010), 22.

² Caterina Perlini, *Democracy in the Middle East: External Strategies and Domestic Politics* (Bucharest: IRIA, 2015), 75.

³ Amy Hawthorne, *Middle Eastern Democracy; Is Civil Society The Answer?* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 2004), 3.

This study tries to uncover how the aforementioned first four factors impede the transition to democracy. It also examines the role of Islamic creed, ruling, and Islamist groups in political contentions. As indicated below, Islamic rule, the Sharia, is not common in the region and current Sharia systems are not identical to each other. In addition, Islam does not propose any political system. developed. Islamist groups were not allowed to govern, thus, to what extent they are part of the problem is not clear. Besides, before discrediting Islam, the arguments about the compliance between the two must be developed. The conclusion this study tries to reach is that the role of faith (Islam) is exaggerated in Middle Eastern politics, and to this end, it compares the first four factors with the Islam factor. In order to realize this goal, the influence of the first four factors will be analyzed in a single section while an Islam versus democracy comparison will follow in a separate section. A third section will be dedicated to Islam's political practice and its influence in Middle Eastern politics.

2. Basic Factors for the Lack of Democracy in the Middle East

The Middle East has witnessed many political crises, conflicts, and wars that led to an insecure environment, which this study suggests as the first factor/obstacle impeding democracy. Particularly from the 1980s onwards, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988, the Gulf War of 1991, the invasion of Iraq by Anglo-American forces in 2003, the Israeli-Lebanese War of 2006, armed conflicts in Sudan, Somalia and Lebanon, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Arab Spring further jeopardized the political, economic and social situation in the region.⁴ Therefore, securing the state and upholding sovereignty were priorities among all other issues. Moreover, the foundation of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict caused further impetus for an authoritarian Pan-Arab nationalism and political radicalism.⁵ Thinking of a democratic transition

⁴ Ibrahim El Badawi and Samir Makdisi, "Explaining The democracy Deficit in The Arab World," *The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance*, no. 46 (2007): 827; Ahmet Hüsrev Çelik, "Buazizi'den Rabia'ya, Trablus'tan Şam'a Arap Baharının Sonuçları Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme," *Akademik Yaklaşımlar Dergisi* 6, no. 2 (2015): 36; Munoz, "Democracy and the Arab World," 23.

⁵ Bican Şahin. "Is Islam an Obstacle to Democratization in the Muslim World? The Debate of the Compatibility of Islam and Democracy Revisited," *Bilig Türk Dünyası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 37, Spring (2006): 199.

was considered a “luxury” under these circumstances.⁶ Turmoil was also an excuse for leaders to postpone political reforms as political demands had to wait given internal and external threats. Hence, for example, Gulf countries have preferred to focus on the Iranian threat instead of enacting a constitution ensuring more freedom at a time of Shiite expansionism.

In addition, when salient conflicts are examined, apart from the contention between regional states, the role of a foreign country or group of countries that support at least one side must be taken into consideration. For example, US support to the Pahlavi regime of Iran encouraged the oppression of Islamic groups for years, eventually paving the way for the Iranian Revolution. Likewise, Saddam Hussain’s decision to declare war on the new Iranian regime might not have been implemented, had the Western bloc not granted him a blank check.⁷ It is correct that there was a threat of Shiite expansionism led by the Iranian regime. However, this expansionism has been contained by US interests and the fear of Sunni Arabs. Furthermore, two years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq invaded Kuwait claiming that the small state was stealing its oil and that it was previously an Iraqi province. While the US-led coalition rescued Kuwait from Saddam’s regime, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which opposed the Gulf War, incurred to the pressure of authoritarian Arab regimes. Since then, the MB has been attacked not only by Egypt but by many other Arab states except for Qatar. In other words, the Gulf War gave birth to the MB question, which is currently at the top of the agenda in the region. In addition, such factors like (1) American support to Israel in the Palestinian issue, (2) toppling down Saddam Hussain with unproved claims, and (3) siding with dictators against opposition groups during the Arab Spring weakened the possibility of a democratic transition.

According to Şahin and Sowers, the competing foreign powers ignored democracy and supported military and dictatorial regimes for the sake of their interests.⁸ The criterion for the support was not the political system

⁶ Shadi Hamid, “The Struggle For Middle East Democracy,” *Cairo Review*, no.1 (2011): 23.

⁷ Seymour Hersh, “U.S. Secretly Gave Aid to Iraq Early in Its War Against Iran,” *The New York Times*, accessed December 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/26/world/us-secretly-gave-aid-to-iraq-early-in-its-war-against-iran.html>.

⁸ Şahin, “Is Islam an Obstacle to Democratization in the Muslim World?,” 199; Jeannie Sowers, “Why is democracy elusive in the Middle East?,” *Researchgate*, accessed May

but authoritarian regimes' relations with foreign powers. For example, the US supported both the secular Pahlavi regime and Islamist Saudi regime at the same time. On the other hand, the Soviet Union sided with Baathist Arab nationalists in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Besides the political partition of the region, super powers tried to control the natural resources of regional countries. Not only did they extract oil together with the home country, but also controlled market prices and oil sales on international markets. To secure their alliances, super powers also sold enormous amounts of weapons to Middle East countries.

Moreover, US efforts to protect Israel, a specific reason for American intervention in the region, must be elucidated. American governments have always defended the Israeli state through military aid, economic, political and diplomatic support, to which the contribution of Jewish and Christian Evangelical lobbies in the US are crucial.⁹ The US stayed committed to Israeli interests also in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict despite pressure from its Arab allies. What is more, it recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and tried to force Palestinians to accept the one-state solution to end the conflict permanently. On the other hand, although Arab countries condemn Israel's uncompromising policies and US-Israeli alliance, they rarely unite to form a bloc against Israel and the US. Therefore, accusing Israel and the US as the only perpetrators of the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict appears to be one-sided when considered that Arabs did not stand firm to solve the problem. Some Arab states are even in the race of improving their ties with Israel and ignorant to the Palestinian cause. The US support to Israel creates the bizarre situation that that while Israel feels safe thanks to the support, the remaining region does not feel so since the support is Israel-specific.

On the other hand, Americans have always denied the priority of their interests and responded that they want stability, which they think can be upheld through supporting authoritarian regimes. Nonetheless, what is

1, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254721714_Why_is_democracy_elusive_in_the_Middle_East/references.

⁹ Nina Mast, *The Israel Lobby and US Policy in the Middle East: The Iraq War, The Egyptian Arab Spring, and Iran's Nuclear Program* (Honor Thesis, Carnegie Mellon University, 2014); John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: John F. Kennedy School of Government Faculty Research Working Paper Series, 2006), 1.

missing in their responses is why they turn a blind eye on killings and tortures of people by dictators for the sake of stability. It is correct that dictators ensure stability but they do it sacrificing basic rights of their people, including the right to live. Hence, countries can be stable at the cost of personal lives. Moreover, allying with authoritarian regimes is contradictory for Americans, who claim to be the defenders and spreaders of democracy. It is the contrast between discourse and practice of the US that causes anti-Americanism and hatred to Western values. As Girdner asserts, “while lip service was often paid to ‘democratization’, in actual practice, democratic regimes were supported only in cases in which it was clear that it would protect capital and serve the US corporate class.”¹⁰ For example, the Bush administration invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussain and allegedly bring democracy to the country in 2003. Although Hussain was defeated and sentenced to death eventually, Iraq could not obtain pre-invasion stability. On the other hand, the Iraqi invasion is an example of how the US uses political terms for its interests. For instance, if the US had wanted stability in Iraq, then keeping Saddam Hussain was a better choice. However, Americans opted for democracy rather than stability. Nonetheless, neither democracy could be implemented nor stability ensured. The only benefit of the Iraq war was that it frightened other Arab regimes since it made them think that President Bush was serious about a democratic transition in the region.¹¹ On the other hand, the American administration did not complain much about Mubarak (Egypt), Assad (Syria), Abdullah (Jordan), Abdullah-Salman (Saudi Arabia), Al Nahyan (UAE) and others since they did not disrupt US regional policies. Furthermore, when the Arab Spring erupted, it was expected that the US administration would support popular protests for a democratic transition. However, American silence at the beginning turned into pro-autocracy support, which they based on the claim that democracy allows anti-American Islamists to come to power. Islamists have been considered able to mobilize society in any direction including radical lines.¹² According to Munoz, “In reality, the vast majority of Islamist groups fulfill two important

¹⁰ Eddie J. Girdner, “The Greater Middle East Initiative: Regime Change, Neoliberalism and US Global Economy,” *The Turkish Yearbook*, no. 36 (2005): 41.

¹¹ Hamid, “The Struggle For Middle East Democracy,” 23.

¹² Deniz Güvercin, *Why Autocracies in the Middle East and North Africa are Persistent: A Game Theoretic Approach* (PhD diss., Istanbul Bilgi University, 2015), 15.

conditions: non-violence and a commitment to the democratic process.”¹³ In addition, ex-CIA chief Fuller contends for the MB that it is a non-violent and progressive group preferring a modern variant of Islam and accepting principles of democracy.¹⁴ However, such characteristics could not help the Morsi government to escape from military coup.

In fact, the American administration launched some democratization projects after the September 11 attacks. Some neo-conservatives in the Bush administration thought that the policy of appeasement toward authoritarian regimes did not work, and that the US must remove them and establish democracy.¹⁵ Therefore, the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) was developed by the State Department in order to combat Islamist extremism and “bring democracy” to the Middle East. In addition, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) was introduced as another program on the US democratization agenda.¹⁶ The aim was to promote democracy and reform the political, economic and social spheres of Arab countries.¹⁷ To further the MEPI, the Broader Middle East and North Africa Partnership Initiative (BMENA) was introduced at the G8 Summit in June 2004. While such attempts culminated in some reforms in some Arab nations, other Arab leaders refused them and took precautions to lessen their influence. When he was a Brigade General, current Egyptian leader Abdelfattah al-Sisi argued that democracy must reflect Middle Eastern interests, not American interests.¹⁸ Furthermore, he argued, there is no guarantee that military and police forces will align with ruling parties unless democracy evolves with local constituencies. He also prefers a gradual transition to democracy as it will take time for people to adapt to the new system. However, it was al-Sisi who toppled Egypt’s first president coming to power with free elections, Mohamad Morsi. On the other hand, Girdner goes as far as to argue that

¹³ Munoz, “Democracy and the Arab World,” 25.

¹⁴ Graham Fuller, “Qatar’s “Maverick” Foreign Policies,” Graham Fuller’s personal website, accessed March, 12, 2018, <http://grahamefuller.com/qatars-maverick-foreign-policy/>.

¹⁵ Girdner, “The Greater Middle East Initiative.” 41.

¹⁶ Lorne Craner, “Democracy in the Middle East: Will US Democratization Policy Work?,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer (2006): 3.

¹⁷ Perlini, *Democracy in the Middle East*, 16.

¹⁸ Abdelfattah Al Sisi, *Democracy in The Middle East* (Carlisle: US Army Was College, 2006), 2.

“GMEI is not about increasing freedom and democracy for people in the region but about increasing freedom for Western capital and ensuring continued US political control of the region.”¹⁹ As for MEPI, it was less effective than expected due to its limited budget. More importantly, the US government gave up on sustaining the democratization process in the Middle East for various reasons. For instance, the Bush administration backed off from its democratic posture since Islamists grew stronger in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Palestine.²⁰ The Obama administration also introduced some pro-democracy projects but the fear of the rise of Islamist groups made his cabinet step back. Regarding the Trump administration, it staunchly supports authoritarian regimes and does not mind the political system of Arab states.

Could everything have been different, had foreign powers not intervened? In fact, some wars would have still taken place. For instance, the Iran-Iraq war or a Sunni-Shiite war might have been inevitable. Yet, as even American people argue, perhaps the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be solved peacefully if the US had remained neutral and forced Israel to a permanent solution.²¹ On the other hand, if Saddam Hussain had not been toppled, Iraq might not have turned into a failed state. This does not mean that the Saddam regime should have continued to rule Iraq. But it is obvious that the current situation is worse than during the Saddam era. On the other hand, there is no 100-years old country in the region, except for Iran and Turkey. Other Middle Eastern countries either did not exist prior to World War I or were colonies until the 1930s. Therefore, leave aside state or political system, one could not find even the state one century ago. Since all countries are young and a democratization process takes decades, had they switched to democracy as soon as they gained their independence, some of them would still not have finished the transition by now. However, the transition might still have been halted by foreign powers (both regional and global), had those countries with newly formed democratic governments not been aligning with them. Therefore one basic problem for the establishment of democratic governments in the Middle

¹⁹ Girdner, “The Greater Middle East Initiative.”

²⁰ Hamid, “The Struggle For Middle East Democracy,” 23.

²¹ Robert Blackwill and Gordon Philip, *Repairing the U.S.-Israel Relationship*. Report No: 76. (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), 19.

East is the reluctance of foreign powers to remain neutral. In other words, people can bring democracy by fighting against undemocratic regimes but the perpetuity of the democratic system also depends on not being subject to external intervention.

The second factor for the undemocratic environment is the control of hydrocarbon revenues that strengthened authoritarian regimes and let them maintain undemocratic governance. The Middle East is rich of oil and natural gas. While countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq and Iran generate most of their revenues from hydrocarbon resources, other regional countries also partly count on oil and gas. Since oil-rich countries rely on natural resources instead of tax income, they disregard the will of people and bribe them through wealth.²² Thus, tax independence enables regimes to ignore democratic representation.²³ Complementary to the denial of representation, authoritarianism prevails in rent-seeking states. While in the West people had rejected taxation without representation, in the Middle East, states refused representation without taxation justifying Huntington's argument.²⁴ Since Arab governments think that people do not pay a price for the welfare of the country, they think people do not deserve to govern. On the other hand, when people complained about political rights, Arab states provided welfare through subventions. For example, late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia spent \$130 billion for job creation, salary increases and development projects.²⁵

Many scholars argue that there is a correlation between rich oil revenues and corruption. Surveys also show that if rulers are authoritarian, it is likely that corruption increases as a single person or a small group controls most of the wealth.²⁶ This is the case for Middle Eastern governments as well.²⁷

²² Bo Rothstein and Broms Rasmus, *Why No Democracy in the Arab-Muslim World? The Importance of Temple Financing and Tax Farming*, (Göteborg: University of Gothenburg Press, 2010), 5.

²³ Cristina Barrios, *Promoting Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa Region*, (Paris: Notre Europe, 2005), 19.

²⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 65.

²⁵ Ana Echagüe, "Saudi Arabia: Emboldened Yet Vulnerable" in *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Kristina Kausch (Madrid: Fride, 2011), 85.

²⁶ CPI, "Middle East And North Africa Transparency," *Transparency International*, accessed November 17, 2019, https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/cpi_2019_Middle_East_North_Africa.

²⁷ Kate Gillespie, "The Middle East's Corruption Conundrum," *Current History Magazine* 105, no. 687 (2006).

While some revenues are spent for the welfare of the population, quite a lot of it is accumulated in the hands of ruling elites. When the amount rises to incalculable numbers, authoritarian regimes take measures to maintain their power and enable the flow of money to themselves through subversive ways. While beneficiaries of the wealth waste it relentlessly, the poor feel furious against the unfair distribution of mutual income. In fact, the share of power and income are technically possible in rent-seeking states but there is no example of them, where democracy is functioning well.

The third factor is tribalism. Regional countries are ruled either by tribes with high population or junta leaders. Tribal politics are very influential in public affairs, and voters take into account the kinship of candidates.²⁸ For people, voting for a candidate from the same tribe can enable them to access state facilities easier than party members. Given that parties are organized according to tribal, ethnic or sectarian lines, this makes kinship a key factor for not only ruling families but also ordinary people. However, such patriarchal and tribal mentality hinders the development of adopting pluralist values.²⁹ On the other hand, those leaders and their close aides coming to power with coups exploit state assets and embezzle them as monarchical regime leaders do. More precisely, power and revenue are concentrated in the hands of small groups tied with each other through kinship or personal interests. However, due to the rapid globalization process, tribalism is gradually replaced by citizenship. Thanks to improvements in communication, particularly the internet, the young generations are more willing to get involved in politics. Considering the Arab Spring, how the internet mobilized the youth should surely be alarming for authoritarian regimes. Marginalized groups found a forum to shape their identity and participate in public spheres through the internet.³⁰ Therefore, the internet is prone to change not only traditions and society but the political structure as well. Autocratic regimes banned internet access in order to prevent popular unrest but they may not be able to permanently restrict people through prohibitions. Another utility of the

²⁸ Daniel Corstange, "Kinship, Partisanship, and Patronage in Arab Elections," *Electoral Studies*, no. 52 (2018): 58.

²⁹ Perlini, *Democracy in the Middle East*, 22.

³⁰ David M. Faris, "New Media and Democracy in the Arab World," *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 16 (2015): 777.

internet is to allow diaspora communities to take action against oppressive governments. Many dissidents living abroad participated in uprisings via the internet or through other media channels, and helped protesters at home to organize themselves. For example, MB members escaping from Egypt's Sisi regime have their own television channel in Istanbul, and they are quite influential in social media. As a result, even if the revolution fails at home, it can continue abroad through media.

The fourth factor, civil society, is actually historically absent. The only civil society-like institutions in the Middle East were religious foundations, which were exempted from taxes during the Ottoman era. When the Middle East was colonized, neither the British nor the French helped building civil society. Instead, after independence, they supported kings or junta leaders, who did not allow civil institutions to operate as they were considered threats to their regimes. The transition from closed and authoritarian systems is a process that lasts decades and the main actor that bears the process is supposed to be the civil society of a country.³¹ As witnessed in European history, it was the growing bourgeoisie and the intellectual power that challenged the one-man rule and forced kings to share power with people. The price that civilian groups paid was high since many of them lost their lives for challenging the system. When the Middle East is compared with Europe, it can be argued that the former, politically, reminds the Europe of the 18th century. What is worse is that Arab states will not experience an industrial revolution since own production is low, thus popular riots will lack the basic rationale for challenging governments. In addition, regimes will not press people for more taxes. Therefore, a democratization process in the region may occur without the same reasons Europeans had due to the lack of civil society, which come into being as a consequence of the emergence of the industry-based economy in a state that is not rent-seeking.

Indeed, the Middle East lacks both civil society and civil culture that can be a source of democratic transition. As Bayat points out, some scholars, particularly Western ones, attribute weak civil societies to Islam.³² They

³¹ Amin Saikal and Albrecht Schnabel, *Democratization in the Middle East* (Tokyo: The United Nations University, 2003), 2.

³² Asef Bayat, *Islam and Democracy: What is The Real Question?* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 8.

claim that Islam, which is allegedly patriarchal and against citizenship and freedom as it gives sovereignty to God, is at the root of authoritarianism.³³ On the other hand, the existing associations, foundations or other types of NGOs are either pro-status quo or apolitical.³⁴ Even if there are attempts to enhance civil culture, the lack of economic strength prevents it to grow and leads to dependence on the state. Moreover, governmental monitoring and restrictions do not allow groups to organize civic activities. As in Turkey of the 1970s and the 1980s, the gathering of even a few people for any reasons (particularly religious meetings) was forbidden. On the other hand, Kedourie argues that Arab societies are traditionally accustomed to authoritarianism and obedience and thereby incapable of igniting a democratization process and upholding democratic culture.³⁵ However, such an argument cannot explain why the Arab Spring happened. Besides, it also legitimizes the dictators' oppression over their societies. What is obvious about the lack of civil society is that it provides a fertile ground for terrorists.³⁶

3. Islam versus Democracy?

In almost all debates about the political system(s) effective in the Middle East, a comparison between Islam and democracy is inevitably made. In the same vein, the role of Islam and its impact on state structures and administration are examined. A number of scholars like Huntington, Fukuyama, Kedourie and Pipes claim that Islam is incompatible with democracy arguing that democracy requires pluralism, openness, tolerance of diversity, individualism, liberalism, popular suffrage, elections and parliamentary assembly, whereas Islam encourages absolute acceptance of authority.³⁷ Furthermore, Islam is seen as the opposite of democracy,

³³ Nathan J. Brown et al, *Islamist Movements and The Democratic Process in The Arab World Exploring The Gray Zones* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Publications, 2006), 15.

³⁴ Hawthorne, *Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society The Answer?*, 3.

³⁵ Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 103.

³⁶ USIP, *Islam and Democracy*. Special Report (Washington: The United States Institute of Peace, 2002), 1.

³⁷ Huntington, *The Third Wave*; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*;

alien and hostile. Those refusing the compatibility of Islam and democracy further argue that both cannot be effective at the same time. For example, there is a view that if Islam adapts to democracy, its holy scripture will have to change. In addition, since the separation of law and state is not allowed in Islam, there is no way for democratic values to take root in state and society. Islam is a religion that is not related only to faith and worshipping but also shapes individuals' private lives and social life. It has rules about every aspect of life from marriage to capital punishment. In other words, Islam is not only a religion of belief but also practice. Therefore, a secular state is indeed incompatible with Islam. Moreover, while democracy requires the notion of popular sovereignty, Islam demands the sovereignty of God. This means that democracy is the rule of humans while Islam is the rule of God. In this context, replacing human sovereignty with God's sovereignty is deemed a challenge to God. Thus, some scholars blame Islam for the lack of democracy in the Middle East. In this sense, as they argue, as long as Islam is influential in the region, democracy will not prevail there.

There are also those scholars arguing that Islam and democracy are compatible. According to Islam and Islam, Islam's basic concepts, such as *tawhid* (monotheism), *khilafah* (vicegerency), and *akhirah* (hereafter), do not contradict with democracy. In addition, principles like *shura* (consultation), *ijma* (consensus), *adl* (justice), equality, tolerance, and accountability can be attributed to democracy.³⁸ While the Qur'an is concerned with morality, democracy is a form of polity and has no relations with faith. Bhutto claims that the sharia (Islamic rule) was developed after Prophet Muhammad's death and it prevented autocrats from abusing their people.³⁹ Based on her arguments, she contends that sharia and democracy are compatible with each other. Like Bhutto, Tunisian politician Rashid Al-Ghannoushi claims that sharia rule is democratic by nature.⁴⁰ Al-Ghannoushi and other optimists base their claim on the Qur'anic notion of

Daniel Daniel, "There Are No Moderates: Dealing with Fundamentalist Islam," *The National Interest*, no. 41 (1995); Nazrul Islam and Saidul Islam, "Islam and Democracy: Conflicts and Congruence," *Religions* 8, no. 104 (2017): 3.

³⁸ Islam and Islam, "Islam and Democracy: Conflicts and Congruence," 9.

³⁹ Benazir Bhutto, *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy, and the West* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 64.

⁴⁰ Bayat, *Islam and Democracy*, 8.

shura (consultation) and present it as the evidence of compatibility between the two. On the other hand, Kubicek says that there is no single Islam in the Muslim world.⁴¹ Since all countries interpret it differently due to the sects they follow and the impact of the *ulama* in politics, Islam's role in politics changes from state to state. For example, while Turkey adopted secularism successfully, Malaysia has a political system that is a mixture of Islam and democracy. On the other hand, while both Saudi Arabia and Iran claim to implement sharia law, they are quite different in details. Another wrong view in the comparison of Islam with democracy is that democratization process does not happen immediately and totally. It is a matter of time and requires patience. In association with this, it should be remembered that while democracy and Christianity were also claimed to be incompatible in the past, such discussions no longer exist today.⁴² Said Nursi, one of the most influential Islamic scholars in Turkey in the 20th century, is known for his support of Republicanism against absolute monarchy. He wrote articles in newspapers and called on Sultan Abdulhamid II to reinstate the constitutional monarchy. Nursi supported a democratic system in spite of believing that it was not fully compliant with sharia. He believed that the will of people can prevent the despotism of a single tyrant or oligarchs.⁴³ However, when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk proclaimed the Turkish Republic in 1923, Nursi opposed the secularist republic claiming that what Ataturk introduced was not the separation of state and religion but the control of religion by the state. Moroccan scholar Al-Jabri also points out that democracy is a remedy to despotism in the Arab-Islamic world, which deemed one-man rule the only political system for centuries. He declines the idea that democracy and Islam are incompatible with each other. Conversely, he argues that there is only one God but all other things can be plural. Thus, for him, seeing all other ruling systems as legitimate but demonizing democracy is preposterous.⁴⁴ Moreover, Shadi Hamid argues that democracy might not produce a liberal society but it may increase the influence of Islam in public life.⁴⁵ In other words, he sees democracy as a beneficial tool for further introducing Islam to society.

⁴¹ Paul Kubicek, *Political Islam and Democracy in the Muslim World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2015), 8-13.

⁴² Bayat, *Islam and Democracy*, 10.

⁴³ Said Nursi, *Münazarat* (Istanbul: Altınbaşak Neşriyat, 2015).

⁴⁴ Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, *Democracy, Human Rights and Law Islamic Thought* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009).

⁴⁵ Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2016).

On the other hand, some Islamic scholars staunchly deny the compatibility of Islam and democracy. For instance, Sayyid Qutb opposes democracy and argues that the *shura* council only advises the caliph but does not elect him.⁴⁶ Moreover, Maududi of Pakistan argues that Islam and democracy are irreconcilable since democracy favors popular sovereignty to God's sovereignty.⁴⁷ Özdenören goes as far as to say that Islam and democracy cannot be compared.⁴⁸ He argues that the West introduced concepts like democracy, secularism and human rights during its clash with the church. Furthermore, Islam promises more to people than democracy does, he argues. He says if democracy means political participation, pluralism, respect to basic rights, etc., Islam already provides them. The difference in Islam is that while the democratic system enables people to ask their rights, an Islamic system worries about what it did not give to people. In other words, Özdenören claims that democracy is worried about 'we' while Islam is concerned about 'you'.⁴⁹

In fact, the Qur'an does not propose any system of rule.⁵⁰ From Prophet Muhammad to date, various types of political systems have been adopted by Muslim countries. Therefore, there is no single political system in Islamic history. On the other hand, the Qur'an identifies several criteria that qualify a ruler.⁵¹ It also mentions duties of citizens, and values to consider in governance such as justice and granting basic rights.⁵² In addition, economically, Islam seems to rather tend toward liberal economy.⁵³ While it bans state intervention in economy, thus advocating free market, it orders Muslims to take care of disadvantaged people through relief, e.g. *zakat*. In terms of legislation, Prophet Muhammad enacted, for instance,

⁴⁶ Abdulkadir Mubarak, "Democracy from Islamic Law Perspective", *Kom*, no. 3 (2016): 12.

⁴⁷ Şahin, "Is Islam an Obstacle to Democratization in the Muslim World? The Debate of the Compatibility of Islam and Democracy Revisited," 191.

⁴⁸ Rasim Özdenören, "İslam ve Demokrasi". *Yeni Şafak*, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/rasimozdenoren/islam-ve-demokrasi-36141>

⁴⁹ Özdenören, "İslam ve Demokrasi".

⁵⁰ Hamza Ateş, "İslam ve Demokrasi Üzerine". *Turkish Journal of TESAM Academy* 14, no. 1 (2017): 217.

⁵¹ Surah Ma'idah: 42; Surah Nisa: 58; Surah Sad: 38; Surah Yunus: 83.

⁵² Surah Nisa: 59.

⁵³ Osman Eskicioğlu, "Kuran ve Serbest Piyasa Ekonomisi," *Eskiyeni*, no. 18 (Summer 2010): 77-91.

the Medina Charter, which regulated relations between Muslims and Jews and guaranteed basic rights. Hence, the Muslim world is familiar with the constitution since the emergence of Islam. Regarding loyalty to the leader, it is true that the Qur'an orders Muslims to obey authority but expects the ruler to govern with justice and uphold equality and objectivity.⁵⁴ However, the Qur'an also allows disobedience if authority turns into tyranny. Hence, obedience is not absolute but conditional. Caliph Omar said "if someone elects himself or someone else as the president without consultation, you must kill him."⁵⁵

4. Islam versus Politics in the Middle East

While five factors have been analyzed above that obstruct the development of a healthy political environment in the Middle East, it should be noted that determinants are not limited to them. Yet, examining all factors will less likely change this study's argument, which is that Islamic rule is the most blamed for democracy deficit and is inaccurately seen as the main source of political woes in the region. From intra-state conflicts to inter-state contentions, there is always a focus on the role of religion in the oldest region of the world. For example, the lack of democracy is attributed to the nature of Islam. Terrorism is also assumed to stem from Islam by a large number of analysts. Even anti-Western and anti-American sentiments are tied with Islamic creed. Therefore, Islam, which means 'peace', is associated with 'war'. Since non-regional countries partly or entirely base their policies toward the region on these controversial facts, the political situation in the Middle East gets more complicated. Logically, if the reasons for a problem are clear, so is the solution. Yet, no attempt has become the remedy of woes in the region. Therefore, reasons must be rechecked.

This research contends that since the sources of political problems in the Middle East are wrongly identified, the turmoil in the region may not cease and even worsen in the course of time. Particularly, blaming Islam and

⁵⁴ Rahel Schomaker, "Sharia Law and The Transition Towards More Democracy and a Market Economy –Restrictions and opportunities," *Topics in Middle Eastern and African Economies* 18, no. 1 (2016): 163.

⁵⁵ Muhammed Kal'aci, *Mevsû'atü Fıkhî 'Abdillâh b. 'Ömer* (Istanbul: İrşad Yayınları, 2009), 47.

its practice is wrong and unfair since Islam does not shape state policies in many countries. In countries with *sharia* rule, rulers determine what to make of *sharia* law, which reduces it to human-made legislation.⁵⁶ Just looking at Saudi and Iranian types of *sharia* will give a clear verification. Despite that both *sharias* are generated from the same sources (Qur'an and *hadiths*), they are quite dissimilar due to different interpretations, which also spark hostility between the two countries. What is more, both interpretations are highly likely to be wrong since practices are not compliant with basic Islamic principles. For instance, Islam does not order the prohibition that prevents women from driving as it was the case in Saudi Arabia until recently. Another example is that women cannot be veiled by force as the Iranian regime implements it.

Second, in terms of democracy deficit, it “is far more a product of political and economic dynamics than anything innately cultural, or, more pointedly, Islamic.”⁵⁷ Broadly speaking, two main actors are fighting to take power; local families (military elites in some states) and foreign countries. Blaming Islam for no democracy in Middle Eastern countries is thus unfair. Democracy suggests sharing power and resources with people, which means for the rulers of the Middle East that they would lose their thrones. Therefore, democracy is mostly unwanted by dictators rather than people. That is so to the extent that rulers order juristic opinions (*fatwas*) that help legitimate their stay in power. Autocrats are so scared of democracy that when there is a request for pluralism in another regional country, they race for helping the undemocratic regime of that country, a case witnessed during the Arab Spring. As can be recalled, Gulf countries, except for Qatar, had formed an authoritarian brotherhood against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya. In addition, these regimes keep their relations warm with the United States, the EU, Russia and other countries in order to stay in power. Since great powers, particularly the US, have interests in the oil-rich region, they welcome the request for help from Arab states. Apart from economic gains, the US is

⁵⁶ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, “Is Islamic Family Law Today Really Based On Shari’a? Why It Is Important To Know,” *Muslims For Progressive Values*, accessed September 9, 2019, <https://www.mpvusa.org/sharia-law>.

⁵⁷ Mehran Kamrava, “The Middle East’s Democracy Deficit in Comparative Perspective,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 6, no.1-3 (2007): 190; Steven Fish, “Islam and Authoritarianism,” *World Politics* 55, no. 1 (2002): 10.

in the region in order to protect its best ally, Israel. The bizarre point here is that the US is protecting and preferring Israel at the expense of its Arab allies. Although Americans always factor in Israel, most Arab states seem satisfied with the current situation as opposing the sole superpower will not be helpful in upholding their power. Again, this power struggle has nothing to do with Islam. On the contrary, the US does not mind to have good relations with so-called Islamic regimes, e.g. Saudi Arabia, on the condition that their interests do not clash with each other.

Third, concerning the power struggle in the region, Islamism is a political movement but whether this is bad for the political development of the Middle East must be questioned. As Munoz states, the majority of Islamic groups are non-violent and committed to democracy.⁵⁸ It is less likely that there will be democracy without Islamists in the Arab World since they are the dominant actors struggling for a democratic system. “In many cases even Islamist groups known for their use of violence have been transformed into peaceful political parties successfully contesting municipal and national elections.⁵⁹ However, the exclusionary approach of regimes and foreign powers, and depicting them as criminal groups with stigmas like ‘Islamist’, ‘radical’ and ‘obstructionist’ did not only deprive them of political rights but also radicalized them. The anger does not stem from faith (Islam) but oppression. Yet, despite so much injustice and victimization, most of these groups did not use violence. On the other hand, the US, EU members, and other democratic countries are reluctant to support pro-democracy groups, which causes distrust among Arab peoples because of their hypocrisy and support of dictators. Indeed, the West’s discourse and actions are sometimes contradictory. While they claim to promote democracy, they did not support the democratization process in the Middle East. One vivid reason, as American officials confess, is that they think if Islamists take power, they will abuse the democratic system, and eventually declare *sharia* and be anti-Western. Therefore, the West seems to act based on prejudgments. Regarding anti-Westernism, experiences have shown that an Islamist government can be expected to be anti-Western at the beginning but it may eventually learn that isolating the country will make it lose power. In

⁵⁸ Munoz, “Democracy and the Arab World,” 25.

⁵⁹ Are Knudsen, *Political Islam in the Middle East*, Report 3 (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2003), 7.

addition, if the West does not side with dictators, the hatred will probably vanish quickly. Yet, there has been no chance to verify this. On the other hand, except for Iran, all anti-Western countries such as North Korea, Venezuela, Syria, previously Iraq, are not ruled by Islamist governments and some of them are not even Muslim countries. As for Iran, the regime uses Islam to maintain loyalty of its people to itself. Mullahs know well that good relations with the West will lead to integration with the external world. Another aspect proving that what matters is not Islam(ism) is that Arab dictators will not accept to share power with non-Islamists as well, e.g. seculars. In the same vein, Western powers appear to not care about the ruling system may it be Islamic or otherwise. This can easily be verified by looking at their relations with non-Muslim countries such as Venezuela and Cuba, which are still incurred to American embargoes.

To sum up, Islam should not be blamed for the political system in Middle Eastern countries since it does not suggest a specific or unique political system. It cannot be denied that the *sharia*'s source is the Qur'an and the *hadiths* but due to various interpretations, the responsibility lies with its interpreters. On the other hand, there were successful implementations of *sharia* in history, e.g. partially implemented in the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, not analyzing the subject in a historical context will be misleading. Moreover, since only few countries adopt the *sharia* now, a general conclusion about political Islam would be wrong. The reasons for deficiencies in the Middle East must be inquired by the above-examined factors (tribalism, continuous wars, power struggle, foreign intervention, etc.) rather than questioning tenets of Islam.

5. Conclusion

The Middle East is known for its hydrocarbon resources and conflicts. There is a power struggle between people and authoritarian regimes oppressing their populations with the help of external powers. While traditional governance, unequal distribution of revenues, kinship relations in politics, personal and group clashes for taking power, Arab-Israeli conflicts, foreign intervention, and so many other factors have led to the current brawl, it has been Islam and its legislative form, *sharia*, that were accused most. Religion seems to be used as an excuse to cover real reasons and perpetrators behind

the contention. Since only two countries (Iran and Saudi Arabia) ostensibly implement absolute sharia and others have also civil law or no Islamic law at all, portraying Islam as the source of all disputes and ignoring other structural reasons is an inaccurate approach. On the other hand, despite that (non-violent) Islamic groups are more progressive adhering to democracy and distancing themselves from violence, as discourse mostly dominates reality, they are seen as “evil criminals”. Thus, the roots of basic problems are skipped for the sake of controlling state power. In association with this, comparing Islam, a religion, with democracy, a polity, is a sign that the base of the debate is flawed, and so is the conclusion. Arab States (or the Middle East with some exceptions) might still be far from stability in the future unless they identify the actual roots of their political problems.

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