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The Ulema-State Alliance: A Barrier to Democracy and Development in the Muslim World

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Executive Summary

Structural barriers with deep historical roots are impeding progress in the world's 50 Muslim-majority countries. These countries tend to score below the global average on key criteria used to evaluate democracy and socioeconomic development, such as literacy rates and life expectancy. Islam and Western colonialism are commonly cited as the sources of these issues, but such explanations are problematic and serve to propagate Islamophobia, anti-Westernism and the misdirection of blame.

Instead, and as this report will argue, the main cause of authoritarianism and underdevelopment in many Muslim-majority countries is the alliance between Islamic scholars (the ulema) and state authorities. Between the eighth and 11th centuries – an era known as the Muslim Golden Age – the scholarly and mercantile classes were the engines driving scientific and economic progress. In the mid-11th century, however, the ulema-state alliance began to take hold. This alliance gradually marginalised independent scholars and merchants, leading to centuries of intellectual and economic stagnation in the Muslim world.

Grounded in a re-examination of this history, we propose a new vision for the future of the Muslim world and recommend fundamental reforms in both religion-state relations and the economy.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, reformist and secularist rulers weakened their alliances with the ulema. Rather than encouraging the emergence of dynamic intellectual and economic classes to fill the power vacuum left as a result, these rulers instead expanded the role of the military and civilian bureaucrats who embraced authoritarian ideologies and imposed state control over the economy.

Since the 1970s, several leading Muslim countries, such as Iran, Egypt and Pakistan, have experienced Islamisation, which has revived ulema-state alliances and given sharia constitutional status. Furthermore, following the 1973 oil crisis, many Muslim countries, particularly in the Gulf, became “rentier states”, using oil rents to fund the ulema-state alliance at home and Islamist agendas abroad.

Today, most Muslim countries are under the influence of ulema-state alliances and rentier economies. The dismantling of these alliances and the restructuring of economies will be important for these countries' ability to achieve democracy and development.

This report has four main recommendations for policymakers and analysts who want to promote democracy and development in Muslim countries.

First, it is important to **acknowledge the problem** of authoritarianism and underdevelopment that plagues most Muslim countries. It is counterproductive to deny it by hiding behind cultural relativism or other discourses and excuses.

Second, it is necessary to **cease solely blaming either Islam or Western colonialism**. Accusations of Islam as an impediment to development are unfounded; Islam was perfectly compatible with progress in its early history, and the Muslim world continued to produce brilliant thinkers even in later periods. Moreover, the contemporary Muslim world is not an authoritarian and underdeveloped block; it includes some cases of democratisation and development. And while Western colonialism was undoubtedly detrimental to Muslim countries, it did not start their problems. Solely blaming Western imperialism detracts from the domestic problems of Muslim countries.

Third, it is crucial to **understand how the ulema-state alliance has marginalised intellectuals and economic entrepreneurs** in the Muslim world. This does not mean calling for an anti-ulema witch-hunt or seeking stateless anarchy. Instead, it is a call to create open, meritocratic and competitive systems where the political, religious, intellectual and economic classes are able to operate autonomously, and none is able to dominate. Such a reform requires the expansion of freedom of thought, by abolishing apostasy and blasphemy laws, and a deeper protection of private properties by preventing the state's seizure of them. The reform also necessitates an institutionalisation of separation between religion and the state. Islam is not inherently opposed to that. There was a certain level of separation between religious and political authorities in early Islamic history.

The fourth and final recommendation relates to the economy. Oil rents have funded ulema-state alliances for the past five decades. Soon, these rents may lose their importance with the depletion of reserves, rise of domestic consumption, and/or innovation of alternative energy technologies. Many Muslim countries will need **economic restructuring and innovations to be prepared for the challenges of the post-oil era**. To maintain long-term stability and prosperity, these countries need to build productive systems that encourage entrepreneurship. Such a reform requires that the ulema-state alliance ceases to control sociopolitical life.

A transition towards more open socioeconomic and intellectual systems will create many opportunities for Muslim countries and their Western counterparts, in terms of investment and production.

Following failed military and political engagements, some Western countries have tended to disengage from most parts of the Muslim world. Instead, a newly defined partnership between Muslim and Western countries may help reform processes towards democratisation and development. Furthermore, these reforms may provide stronger intellectual and socioeconomic bases for any new engagement between the two.

Introduction

On 6 January 2020, Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation, which collects intelligence on both Turkish citizens and foreigners, opened its new headquarters. The president of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet), an institution that controls mosques and pays the salaries of the imams, recited a five-minute-long prayer to bless the opening. The high-profile inclusion of the Diyanet's president and his prayer into the state protocol contradicted Turkey's century-old image as the most assertively secular state in the Muslim world. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a dozen other top politicians and chief judges of high courts, as well as commanders of the army, navy and air force, came to the podium to stand shoulder to shoulder facing the audience. They opened their hands to say "amen" together. The prayer referred to God by specific names, including "Semi" (the all-hearing), "Alim" (the all-knowing) and "Habir" (the all-aware) – the subtext being that intelligence-gathering is a godly thing.¹ This ceremony placed a long-lasting alliance of the Muslim world in the spotlight: the relationship between the ulema and the state.

Turkey is one of the 50 Muslim-majority countries that constitute a quarter of all countries in the world.² According to the key criteria used to evaluate a country's degree of democratisation and socioeconomic development, Muslim countries score lower than the world average. Although 60 per cent of all countries in the world are electoral democracies, only 14 per cent of Muslim countries are.³ The average gross national income per capita of Muslim countries, despite their substantial oil revenues, is \$9,100; the global average is \$13,200.⁴ The average life expectancy in Muslim countries is 66 years, compared to the world average of 69 years, and Muslim countries also have a higher average child mortality rate (49) than the global average (34).⁵ And while the average literacy rate worldwide is 84 per cent, with an average of 7.5 years of schooling, Muslim countries have an average literacy rate of 73 per cent and an average of 5.8 years of schooling.⁶

What is at the root of this widespread authoritarianism and underdevelopment in the Muslim world? Two well-known – but flawed – explanations are commonly cited.

The first one singles out Islam, branding the religion as a barrier to progress. This argument has three main flaws. First, the scientific and economic progress achieved by Muslim countries was superior to that of Western Europe from the eighth to the 12th centuries, proving that Islam and progress coexisted for many centuries. Second, even after the 12th century, Muslim societies continued to produce cutting-edge scholars, such as Ibn Khaldun, and to support thriving cities, such as Istanbul, despite experiencing a relative stagnation overall compared to the centuries prior. Finally, there is variation within the Muslim world in terms of democracy and development today; it cannot be defined as a totally authoritarian and underdeveloped region.

The second explanation points to Western colonialism, but this argument is also misleading for three main reasons. The first is chronological: the Muslim world's scientific and economic stagnation had already begun long before widespread Western colonisation began in the 18th century. In comparison, several post-colonial non-Muslim countries in Asia and Latin America have achieved development and/or democratisation in a way that Muslim countries have not, indicating that failure to succeed on these fronts due to a colonial past is not inevitable. Finally, focusing on Western colonialism as a primary cause of underdevelopment prevents Muslim countries from addressing their own ideological and institutional problems.

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From the 19th century to the present day, these two explanations have served as fuel for both anti-Islamic secularism and anti-Western sentiment in Muslim countries. These explanations have also had negative effects in Western countries, either encouraging Islamophobia or enabling any critical analysis of Muslim societies to be labelled “Orientalist” – having a colonialist bias against non-Western people.

This report offers an alternative explanation for the continued pervasiveness of authoritarianism and underdevelopment in the Muslim world, based on the changing relations between religious, political, intellectual and economic classes. It argues that the alliance between the Islamic scholars (ulema) and the ruling class has marginalised the intellectuals and merchants of these countries, and that this alliance should be held responsible for the scientific and socioeconomic stagnation, as well as the authoritarianism, witnessed in most Muslim-majority countries today. ⁷

In order, the report outlines the historical origins of the ulema-state alliance, explores the current political and economic regimes in the Muslim world (particularly analysing the impact of “rentierism” – seeking unproductively earned revenues), and categorises the 50 Muslim countries according to the intensity and influence of their ulema-state alliances. Finally, it provides recommendations for dealing with this problematic alliance in the future.

Part I examines the historical origins of the ulema-state alliance in key stages. The first concerns the early primacy and subsequent marginalisation of the scholarly and mercantile classes, who were the engines of scientific and economic progress between the eighth and 11th centuries. During this period,

there was a certain degree of separation between religious and political authorities. In the mid-11th century, however, the ulema-state alliance began to take root institutionally and gradually marginalised independent scholars and merchants, leading to centuries of intellectual and economic stagnation in the Muslim world.

This historical section goes on to examine the 19th-century reformist rulers who weakened their alliance with the ulema, and the early-20th-century state-builders in the Muslim world, most of whom were secularists. These reformist rulers and state-builders had a shared problem: both groups were state-centric. Instead of encouraging the emergence of dynamic intellectual and economic classes, they expanded the role of military and civilian bureaucrats. Moreover, they embraced the authoritarian ideologies of Europe and imposed state control over the economy.

Part I concludes by focusing on the sociopolitical and legal aspects of Islamisation that have affected most Muslim countries in the past four decades. It explores how three main actors – the ulema, Islamist politicians and Sufi sheikhs – succeeded in promoting Islamisation as a social, political and legislative project.

Part II of the report examines current political and economic regimes in the Muslim world. It explains how oil rents – revenues from oil and natural gas resources – have hindered democratisation and created rentier states. Rentier states do not need people's taxation: instead, they distribute oil revenues to the people and perpetuate authoritarian state-society relations.

This part points to the combination of the ulema-state alliance and rentierism as the main cause of authoritarianism and underdevelopment in Muslim countries. It defines apostasy laws as an instrument of this alliance to penalise the expression of dissenting views. It also stresses that state seizure of private properties is a way for this alliance to exert control over the economy: rent-seeking by confiscating citizens' private assets.

Part II ends by categorising 50 Muslim countries into three groups. The first group comprises the countries that experience the highest intensity of ulema-state alliances – as evidenced by their constitutions, which are based on Islamic law (sharia) – and the most intense rentier economies, as measured in their oil revenues.

The countries in the second group experience a lesser degree of intensity regarding the ulema-state alliance and rentierism than those in the first group. The third group includes countries that are least affected by an ulema-state alliance (most of these countries have secular constitutions) and rentierism (most of them are oil-poor).

The report concludes with recommendations for achieving democracy and encouraging development in the Muslim world. It emphasises the necessity of replacing ulema-state alliances and rentier economies

with more open, meritocratic and productive systems that may also become the basis for a new relationship between Muslim and Western countries.

Part I: Historical Origins

Great Reversal: From Progress to Stagnation

Between the eighth and 11th centuries, Muslim societies had dynamic intellectual and economic classes who facilitated their philosophical and commercial Golden Age.⁸ During this period, Muslims experienced significant agricultural growth and cultivated various new crops, many of which spread to Europe and whose English names (artichoke, cotton, lemon, orange and spinach) originally come from Arabic.⁹ Scholars have emphasised that modern capitalism owes much to early Muslims' financial innovations, such as the cheque and the bill of exchange.¹⁰ In the words of Fernand Braudel: "Anything in western capitalism of imported origin undoubtedly came from Islam."¹¹ It was also Muslims who taught Western Europeans how to produce paper. In Baghdad and many other cities, Muslim polymaths such as Ibn Sina (often regarded as the father of early modern medicine) made groundbreaking scholarly contributions to mathematics, optics and medicine.¹²

A major characteristic of the Muslim Golden Age was a certain degree of separation between the ulema (who represented Islamic knowledge, education and law) and political rulers. This separation began with the establishment of the first Muslim dynasty, the Umayyads (661–750). The founders of the Umayyad Empire came to power by murdering some of Prophet Muhammad's family members, including his grandson Hussein. This led many Sunni and all Shia ulema to regard the Umayyad rulers and their successors as despotic and generally unethical. Hence, most ulema principally rejected close relations with the ruling class. From that time to the mid-11th century, the overwhelming majority of the ulema and their families were working in non-governmental jobs, particularly in commerce.¹³ Those who held such positions as *qadi* (judge) were a minority among the ulema.¹⁴ This historical reality refutes the modern cliché that Islam inherently rejects separation of religion and state.¹⁵

As was the case in Northern Italy during the Renaissance centuries later, merchants were patrons of arts and scholarship in early Islamic history.¹⁶ Philosophers, who studied the sciences of ancient Greece, Persia, India and more, also received substantial patronage from the ruling class. But, unlike the political patronage of the ulema after the 11th century, the political patronage of philosophers before the 11th century did not stifle intellectual creativity because philosophers neither defended an "orthodoxy", nor denounced dissenting groups as "apostates", nor provided religious legitimacy to the rulers. The complexity of these philosophers' work meant that ultimately their impact on the masses was limited, thus rendering significant political influence extremely difficult.

Given the ulema's distance from the ruling class and the philosophers' complex views, early Muslim societies were religiously and philosophically diverse. Muslims – who belonged to various schools of theology and law – as well as Christians, Jews, agnostics and others contributed to economic and scientific development during that period. Relative tolerance and open-mindedness were markers of the age; hospitals and various other institutions ruled by Muslims allowed non-Muslims to professionally flourish.¹⁷

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During the same time period, Western Christian societies had almost the opposite characteristics. There was a strong alliance between the Catholic church and royal authorities, while the philosophical and merchant classes were either non-existent or very weak. Western Christian countries were places of religious orthodoxy and intolerance in comparison to their Muslim counterparts. These aspects of Western Europe are considered to be directly related to its scientific and socioeconomic backwardness between the eighth and 11th centuries. Western Europe had neither a philosopher like Ibn Sina, nor a city like Baghdad, nor its own gold coin.¹⁸

After the mid-11th century, however, the gradual reversal of fortunes began with the transformation of class relations in both regions. Western Europe experienced the institutionalisation of church-state separation, the opening of universities and the rise of commercial city-states, which led to the emergence of dynamic intellectual and economic classes. The gradual progress of Western Europeans was stimulated by what they learned and acquired from Muslims, including crops, banking tools, paper production, philosophy and sciences.¹⁹

The Muslim world, meanwhile, experienced an opposite transformation. Starting in the mid-11th century, the ulema-state alliance began to emerge in today's Central Asia, Iran and Iraq.²⁰ This was a multilevel transformation. Economically, there was a shift from the monetary economy to the semi-feudal *iqta* system, in which rulers distributed land revenues to officials instead of paying their salaries in money. Structural change was taking place in religious circles, too. In the early 11th century, the Abbasid caliph Qadir declared a creed to unify the newly forming Sunnis against Ismaili Shias, a group of rationalist theologians known as Mutazilis and non-practising Muslims.²¹ In politics, the Seljuks (1040–1194) established an empire with an emphasis on military conquests in alliance with the Abbasid caliph and Sunni ulema.²²

The increasing militarisation of the state and expanding state control over the economy led to the relative marginalisation of private landowners and merchants. This weakened the commercial funding of the ulema class, as the mercantile class could no longer provide the ulema with considerable patronage. The famous Seljuk grand vizier Nizam al-Mulk filled the gap by establishing a chain of madrasas (Islamic colleges) named the Nizamiyyas, whose funding came from politically motivated endowments. Gradually this madrasa system established a monopoly over Sunni Islamic education. The ulema class that the Nizamiyya madrasas began to produce tended to ally with the ruling class.²³ The most famous product of that madrasa system was Ghazali, a genius scholar who wrote books attacking Ismaili Shias and philosophers, two main targets of the emerging ulema-state alliance based on the Sunni orthodoxy. Although Ghazali's life included inconsistencies regarding his relationships with rulers, his books have always been considered essential to the main theoretical framework of the ulema-state alliance.²⁴

Between the 12th and 14th centuries, the ulema-state alliance – strengthened by its madrasas and the *iqta* system – spread to Syria, Palestine and Egypt under the Ayyubids and then Mamluks.²⁵ During this period, Crusader and Mongol invasions unintentionally strengthened the ulema-state alliance because the Muslim masses, facing the invaders and their massacres, sought help from military heroes such as Saladin, who defeated the Crusaders in Jerusalem and established the Ayyubid dynasty. Later, the Mamluks replaced the Ayyubids, halted the Mongols around Jerusalem and gained the appreciation of the Muslim masses.

Over the following three centuries, Muslim rulers established three powerful empires: the Sunni-majority Ottoman Empire, Shia-majority Safavid, and Hindu-majority Mughal.²⁶ These empires serve as proof that, despite centuries of Crusader and Mongol invasions, Muslim military and geopolitical power endured – but the same cannot be said for Muslim scientific productivity or economic dynamism. The decline in these two areas was mostly due to the dominance of the ulema-state alliance and its marginalisation of the intellectual and economic classes.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Western Europe experienced multiple developmental revolutions by primarily employing three main instruments – the printing press, the nautical compass and gunpowder. Muslim empires, however, used only gunpowder effectively out of these instruments because of their military focus. It took three centuries for them to embrace printing technology, because Muslim empires had neither an intellectual class to appreciate the scholarly significance of the printing press, nor a merchant class to understand financial opportunities of print-capitalism. The military commanders in Muslim empires did not see the value of the printing press and the ulema regarded it as a threat to their monopoly over education.

The result was the emergence of a literacy gap between Western Europe and the Muslim world. Between the eighth and 12th centuries, the biggest libraries in Muslim societies had hundreds of thousands of books, while the biggest libraries in Western Europe had less than a thousand. With the printing

revolution, however, the two regions' positions were reversed, as European societies quickly adopted this technology while Muslim societies failed to do so. Over the entire 18th century, for instance, Ottoman printing presses printed around 50,000 copies of books while European presses printed 1 billion.²⁷ It is clear, therefore, that by the time widespread European colonisation of Muslim lands began in the 18th century, the Muslim world's scientific and economic stagnation was already well underway.²⁸

In the 19th century, some reformist Muslim rulers attempted to retaliate against both European colonisation and the ulema-state alliance, which stifled scientific and economic progress for a long time. The next section examines these attempts.

The 19th Century: The Ulema-State Alliance in Crisis

In the 19th century, the Mughal Empire was dissolved by British colonial rule while Iran began to be ruled by the weak and decentralised Qajar dynasty, which was open to the colonial influences of Britain and Russia. The Ottoman Empire remained as the only major Muslim power while most Muslim lands faced colonisation by European powers.

The Ottoman Sultan Selim III, who reigned from 1789 to 1807, was aware of the need to reform institutions to catch up with European levels of military and economic development. Yet the Janissaries, his elite military force, were so opposed to military reform that they revolted, and Selim III was deposed and assassinated. The new sultan, Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839), waited until more favourable conditions were in place before implementing reform. In 1826, he ordered other army units to attack the Janissaries' barracks with artillery. Thousands of them were killed, and Mahmud abolished the institution of the Janissaries completely. As a result, the ulema, "who had so effectively opposed earlier reforming sultans through their coalition with the janissaries, had now lost their strong arm".²⁹

By abolishing the Janissaries and sidelining the ulema, Mahmud and his court bureaucrats gained the control they needed to modernise the Ottoman state. They opened Western-style military colleges, thus effectively breaking the traditional links between the military and religious institutions.³⁰ In 1839, the Ottoman sultan and bureaucrats issued the Tanzimat Edict, which guaranteed the protection of all Ottoman subjects' "life, honor, and property".³¹ The edict set in motion a series of restoration policies known as the Tanzimat reforms. In 1844, a legal change repealed capital punishment for those who renounced their Islamic beliefs. In 1856, the Islahat Edict promised full equality and religious liberty to non-Muslim citizens.³²

During this reform process, bureaucrats took over certain public positions previously held by the ulema. Developments in the education sector clearly reflected the downgrading of the religious class. The madrasas were deemed so educationally outdated, and so limited by their remit of religious studies, that

Ottoman reformers had to establish entirely new colleges and schools based on Western models to educate students on military practice, governance, diplomacy, medicine and engineering. The ulema were still in charge of madrasas and some neighbourhood schools, but they lost their monopoly on education. With the emergence of Western-style commercial courts and laws, the ulema's judicial and legislative functions were restricted as well.

Egypt pursued its own Westernisation reforms. Mehmed (Muhammad) Ali Pasha, an Ottoman officer of Albanian origin, was sent to Egypt soon after Napoleon's invasion in 1798. A few years later, in 1805, he became governor of Egypt. In 1811, Mehmed Ali invited Mamluk commanders to a celebration in his citadel in Cairo and had them killed, before sending his troops out across Egypt to eliminate the remainder of the Mamluk forces, thus ending centuries of Mamluk rule. Mehmed Ali also undermined the ulema by confiscating certain assets of the pious foundations, which provided funding to madrasas, including Al-Azhar, the famous centre of Sunni learning. Having eliminated old power-holders, Mehmed Ali pursued Westernisation of the military, bureaucracy, taxation, medicine and schooling. He sent students to Western European countries for education.³³ Initially, Mehmed Ali was loyal to the Ottoman sultan. With the sultan's order, his army destroyed the first Wahhabi/Saudi state in the Arabian Peninsula in 1818. Later, however, he turned against the sultan, defeating the Ottoman army and establishing a semi-independent dynasty in Egypt that would survive until 1953.

The Ottoman Empire's and Mehmed Ali's reforms led to the emergence of a class of Western-educated intellectuals in both the Empire and Egypt. In the former, these intellectuals, namely the Young Ottomans, sought to establish a constitutional monarchy. Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909) ascended the throne with their support in exchange for political promises. He constituted the first Ottoman parliament as promised, which also became the first truly multi-religious parliament of a major country. Just a year-and-a-half into his reign, however, Abdulhamid dissolved the parliament and ruled as an absolute monarch for more than three decades.³⁴

To sum up, in the 19th century, certain Muslim countries experienced state-led Westernisation reforms and produced some intellectuals. The traditional ulema-state alliance was substantially weakened. The reforms achieved some progress in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt in terms of modernisation of the military, the taxation system, medical conditions and schooling. Yet these reformist efforts during the 19th century ultimately failed to help Muslims "catch up with the West" in terms of political and socioeconomic development.

Reformist efforts during the 19th century ultimately failed to help Muslims “catch up with the West” in terms of political and socioeconomic development.

The main reasons for the failure of the 19th-century reforms were threefold. First, although the ulema were largely sidelined and an independent intellectual class emerged, the class-based problems of the Muslim world mostly persisted. Rulers and their bureaucrats filled the vacuum left by the ulema. The Ottoman sultan Mahmud, Egypt's Mehmed Ali and most of their successors were absolutist rulers who refused to share power with other institutions or classes, while pursuing reforms in a top-down manner.

Second, these reformist Muslim rulers controlled the economy without sufficiently encouraging the accumulation of private capital or the rise of a native bourgeoisie. In the Ottoman Empire, certain legal reforms promised to protect private property³⁵ but in practice the state violation of property rights continued.³⁶ A bourgeoisie class did flourish, but it was almost exclusively a product of European powers' support for non-Muslim merchants. This led to deep mistrust between the Ottoman ruling class and the non-Muslim merchants, many of whom were dual citizens of the Empire and European countries.

Third and finally, efforts at Westernisation encountered political and religious resistance. In the Ottoman Empire, political resistance to Westernisation was strongest under the rule of Abdulhamid, who pursued a policy of “Islamic modernisation”. On the one hand, Abdulhamid dissolved parliament, attacked many intellectuals and employed ulema and Sufi sheikhs in domestic and international political positions. On the other hand, he opened many Western-style schools and established railroads. The main religious resistance against reforms came from the ulema.³⁷ In the late Ottoman era, the ulema were still part of the government and had the power of veto on certain issues, such as the publication of a Turkish translation of the Quran.³⁸

The Early 20th Century: Secularist State-Builders

The aftermath of the first world war consolidated British and French colonialism in the Middle East. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey emerged as the first secular republic with a Muslim-majority society. The founders of Turkey – Mustafa Kemal Paşa, later Atatürk (r. 1923–1938), and his cadre (subsequently called Kemalists) – considered the Ottoman Westernisation reforms to have

failed because of the coexistence of secular and Islamic schools, laws and courts. The new republic, in their view, should eliminate this duality.

The Law on the Unification of Education, which the Turkish parliament passed in 1924, closed 479 madrasas and created a unified secular school system. The Kemalists became increasingly exclusionary towards Islamic education by eliminating religious instruction from the school curricula in 1927, removing Arabic and Persian courses in 1929, closing all recently opened, modern-style Islamic high schools in 1930 and shutting down the only department of theology at Darülfünun (now Istanbul University) in 1933. From that time until 1949, almost any form of Islamic education became illegal. Meanwhile, the entire legal system became secularised, and the roles of the ulema in law-making and the courts were abolished.³⁹

On 3 March 1924, the Turkish parliament established the Diyanet under the prime minister's office to replace the old Ministry of Religious Affairs. On the same day, parliament also abolished the caliphate. A year later, a new law shut down the *türbes* (tombs of Muslim saints) and closed all Sufi lodges. This law made all Muslim religious organisations and positions illegal, except the mosques controlled by the Diyanet and imams who were civil servants. Moreover, the Arabic *ezan* (call to prayer) was banned and replaced by the Turkified version in 1933. In short, the Kemalists embraced “French-type” assertive secularism, where the state plays an assertive role in excluding religion from the public sphere. This was very different from “American-type” passive secularism, which requires the state to play a passive role by tolerating public visibility of religion.⁴⁰

The Kemalists' secularisation reforms inspired several other state-builders in the Muslim world, including Reza Shah of Iran (r. 1925–1941) and President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia (r. 1956–1987). Shah, like Atatürk, forced men to wear Western hats, and went beyond Atatürk by imposing a widely enforced ban on women's veils.⁴¹ Other state-builders influenced by Atatürk's pursuit of modernisation policies include Amanullah Shah of Afghanistan (r. 1919–1929) and President Sukarno of Indonesia (r. 1945–1967).⁴² Regardless of Atatürk's role, a secular reformist trend clearly took hold among the leaders of newly emerging Muslim countries between the 1920s and the 1970s, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah of Pakistan (r. 1947–1948), Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt (r. 1956–1970) and the Ba'ath regimes in Iraq (1968–2003) and Syria (1963–present). Nationalism and socialism, particularly in Arab countries, were important components of this secularist trend.

Founded in 1932, Saudi Arabia, which was based on the alliance between the Wahhabi ulema and the Saudi royal authority, was a major exception during this secularist period. The Saudi impact on other Muslim countries was marginal: its ideological appeal was dwarfed by Nasserism in the Arab world and its military power was weaker than such neighbours as Turkey and Iran. It was not until the 1973 oil crisis that Saudi Arabia began to earn a sufficient amount of oil revenues to expand its regional influence.

In sum, the secularist trend, which was dominant between the 1920s and the 1970s, marginalised the ulema in many Muslim countries. But if this was the case, why, then, did the problems of authoritarianism and underdevelopment continue in countries where there was no longer an ulema-state alliance? The answer is twofold.

The secularist trend dominant between the 1920s and the 1970s marginalised the ulema in many Muslim countries – but the problems of authoritarianism and underdevelopment continued.

First, most 20th-century secularist leaders in the Muslim world were former military officers. By the nature of their training and socialisation, they were unlikely to truly appreciate the importance of intellectuals and economic entrepreneurs for the development of their countries. Moreover, these secularist leaders were generally under the influence of socialist and fascist ideologies that shaped their modernist projects. They imposed ideological views upon society and established state control over the economy. Consequently, these leaders saw intellectuals and an independent economic class as impediments to their state-centric policies. Their secularist regimes were not sharply different from the old ulema-state alliances in terms of being both anti-intellectual and anti-bourgeois.

Second, most secularist regimes eventually produced various types of ulema-state alliances. The motivation of such transformations was top-down (with the autocrats aiming to use Islam to legitimise their regimes and prove that they were as Muslim as the Islamist opposition), bottom-up (based on the ulema and Islamists' popularity), or both.

In Turkey, the Kemalists created the Diyanet to keep Islam under state control; thus, Kemalist assertive secularism never aimed a true religion-state separation. After 1950, Turkey moved to multiparty democracy, although military coups have occurred in almost every decade since. Conservative and Islamist politicians used Islamic discourse to expand and mobilise their constituencies in the second half of the twentieth century. After the 1980 coup, even military generals supported a certain level of Islamic education to contain the “communist threat”. As a result of this process, the Diyanet, which controls over 80,000 mosques, gradually became a central player in Turkish sociopolitical life.

Egypt also faced a gradual process of Islamisation. Nasser – like his Turkish counterparts – aimed to place Islamic institutions, particularly Al-Azhar, administratively and financially under state control. Subsequent presidents, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, continued to expand governmental supervision of Islamic institutions. The proportion of state-controlled mosques increased from less than one-fifth in 1962 to more than three-fifths in 1994, while the total number of mosques also increased from fewer than 20,000 to around 70,000.⁴³ A bureaucratic council was established to decide the Friday sermon topics that would be covered in these state-controlled mosques. All three of these Egyptian presidents benefitted from state control over mosques, as well as their “dominance over Al-Azhar by securing fatwas legitimating their policies”.⁴⁴ Though Egyptian presidents did use Islamic institutions for their own political purposes, the institutions themselves benefitted from this relationship because it expanded their sociopolitical and legal influence in Egypt.⁴⁵ Indeed, the relationship between the political class and the religious class has generally been a mutually beneficial one, as the next section will reveal in more detail.

The Late 20th Century: Sociopolitical and Legal Islamisation

In the past four decades, most Muslim countries have experienced social and political Islamisation – reflected in their governments, opposition and public discourses – and legal Islamisation, seen in their constitutions, other legal codes and courts. This transformation has been part of a global trend; the rise of religious movements has been evident in many countries worldwide, encouraged by different groups including evangelicals in the United States, religious politicians in Israel and Hindu nationalist politicians in India.

In Muslim countries, the politically oppressive and socioeconomically ineffective policies of secularist regimes were a major reason for this transformation. Three groups of Islamic actors have used the secularists’ policy failures to promote their Islamisation agendas. One group is the ulema (sing. *alim*), who are trained in Islamic disciplines including jurisprudence, the *hadith* and Quranic exegesis, and in madrasas or their more modernised equivalents. The second group is the Islamists, who engage in electoral or other types of politics through parties and movements. The third group is the Sufi sheikhs, who are mystical and social leaders of Sufi orders (*tariqas*). Certain individuals show the blurry boundaries between these groups – Iranian leader Ruhollah Khomeini was a Shia *alim* and Islamist, while Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi is a Sunni *alim* and Islamist.⁴⁶

These three groups have used their resources (the ulema’s mosques and madrasas, Islamists’ parties, and Sufi sheikhs’ lodges) to challenge not only the secular state, but also Western notions of rationalism, gender equality and liberal democracy. These three groups have promoted traditionalist education, opposed gender equality, and supported blasphemy and apostasy laws. The promotion of sharia in their countries’ legal systems has also been a shared agenda. These groups need state power to pursue that

agenda – hence they have supported modern versions of the ulema-state alliance by employing post-11th-century interpretations of Islam.

The most radical Islamisation and ulema-state alliance materialised in Iran as a result of the revolution of 1979.⁴⁷ Before the revolution, Khomeini (r. 1979-1989) had already articulated his vision of Iran in his “guardianship of the jurist” (*velayat-e faqih*) theory, according to which the ulema would hold not only legislative and judicial but also executive power. Consequently, Iran became an exception as the ulema-state alliance developed into a semi-theocratic regime in which the ulema are supreme.⁴⁸

According to Khomeini, God vested in the ulema – particularly the jurists – the authority to implement sharia. Governance, as Khomeini understood it, was limited simply to the implementation of sharia, particularly in criminal law. From his perspective, human agents had no authority to make the law. Khomeini argued that even if the Prophet Muhammad and (Imam) Ali were alive in modern times, they would have had no more agency than a regular jurist in governance. He explained this assertion with an example: “Now the penalty for the fornicator is one hundred lashes. If the Prophet applies the penalty, is he to inflict one hundred fifty lashes, [Imam Ali] ... one hundred, and the *faqih* [jurist] fifty?”⁴⁹ Nonetheless, after becoming the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khomeini contradicted his earlier view by asserting that the needs of the Islamic Republic of Iran should have absolute priority, even if this may involve abrogating “prayer, fasting and pilgrimage”.⁵⁰

The year of 1979 was a turning point for Pakistan, too. In that year, General Zia-ul-Haq (r. 1978–1988), who had come to power with a military coup, took important steps towards promulgating a series of Islamic criminal laws and Islamicising the education system and economy.⁵¹ Zia’s short-term alliance with the Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami reflected a tradition with deep historical roots. The alliance “embodied the classic formulation of Islamic polity: a good and pious Muslim who was committed to the enforcement of the Shari’*a* in consultation with the ulama and the Jamaat-i-Islami.”⁵²

Zia empowered the ulema by establishing a Federal Shariat Court that had the power to review Pakistani legislation and determine its compliance with sharia. Unsurprisingly, he did not allow this court to take progressive steps. In 1981, when the court declared stoning to be un-Islamic in a case of adultery, Zia packed the court with new judges who overruled the decision.⁵³ From Zia’s era to the present, certain Islamic actors in Pakistan have consistently promoted authoritarianism and restricted the religious freedom of non-Sunni Muslims and non-Muslim minorities, as well as limiting women’s rights.⁵⁴

Obviously, not all Islamic actors are the same. Certain Islamic actors, who have not focused on establishing a sharia-based state, have contributed to democratisation of their countries. The examples include certain ulema in Indonesia, many Sufi groups in Senegal and some Islamists in Tunisia.⁵⁵ This variation is reflected in Part II’s analysis of contemporary Muslim countries.

Part I of this report has explained the historical origins of the ulema-state alliance and noted that this alliance was constructed after the mid-11th century; it was based on neither Islam's sacred texts nor early Islamic history. Instead, there was a certain level of separation between the ulema and the rulers between the eighth and mid-11th centuries, during which time people of Muslim countries achieved impressive levels of philosophical and economic development. This historical context gives hope for the future. It shows that reform to dissolve the ulema-state alliance and to establish religion-state separation is possible in the Muslim world; furthermore, Islam does not reject such reform.

It has been explained how the ulema-state alliance marginalised the philosopher and merchant classes, thus leading to the Muslim world's intellectual and economic stagnation between the 12th and 18th centuries. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, reformist rulers and secularist state-builders tried to pursue modernisation reforms by sidelining the ulema. Yet these reform attempts mostly failed because these rulers and state-builders were state-centric, and they did not sufficiently appreciate the importance of the intellectuals or the economic entrepreneurs.

In the late 20th century, the ulema, Islamists and Sufi sheikhs effectively used the secularist regimes' policy failures to promote their own agenda of sociopolitical and legal Islamisation. As the next part explains, contemporary Muslim countries' constitutions and political regimes today show a variation as a result of the mixed legacies of the old secularisation period and the new Islamisation process.

Part II: Contemporary Regimes

Causes of Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment

Authoritarianism and socioeconomic underdevelopment are two separate but interconnected problems. In many countries, the two jointly constitute a vicious circle. Although in some exceptional cases, such as in China, authoritarianism coexists with development, it is too soon to know whether this coexistence will be long-lasting.⁵⁶

Both authoritarianism and underdevelopment are complex problems that have multiple causes. Although this report cites the ulema-state alliance as a primary cause of the two in the Muslim world, it does not deny this complexity; indeed, the alliance itself is so sophisticated that it has ideological, institutional and economic dimensions.

Ideologically, the ulema-state alliance has hindered the emergence of religious and political dissent in many countries. The religious ideas promoted by this alliance are based on the jurisprudential methodology of Imam Shafi'i (767–820). This methodology prioritises the Quran, *hadiths* (the records of the Prophet's words and actions), *ijma* (consensus of the ulema) and *qiyas* (analogical reasoning). Since the consensus of the ulema is emphasised as one of the four sources of Islamic knowledge, it is very difficult to challenge the monopoly of the ulema in interpreting Islam.

The ulema-state alliance has hindered the emergence of religious and political dissent in many countries.

It is also difficult to challenge political ideas promoted by the ulema-state alliance because they have been presented to the masses as the sacred commandments of Islam. For example, many ulema have interpreted the phrase in the Quran about authority, “*uli'l-amr*” (4:59), as if it were asking Muslims to obey the ulema and rulers (though the verse mentions neither ulema nor rulers). By claiming divine status, the ulema and their political partners have promoted illiberal political views about gender relations, citizenship and authority.

The ulema-state alliance has also employed massive institutions, such as madrasas and other educational institutions, including Egypt's Al-Azhar, and governmental agencies that control mosques, including Turkey's Diyanet. These institutions incur substantial costs and thus require financial support. Since the 1970s, oil rents have funded the ulema-state alliance and its institutions in many countries. The next section will elaborate on the relationship between oil rents, the ulema-state alliance and authoritarianism in the Muslim world.

Rentier Economies

The ulema-state alliance requires external funding because neither the ulema nor the state rulers are an economically productive class. Historically, as noted above, the alliance used agricultural revenues through the *iqta* system. Over the past half-century, oil rents have been the alliance's primary source of revenue.

Oil and other natural resources that act as sources of rent are gifts of nature: they do not require labour-intensive production. A state is defined as "rentier" if rents from oil or other resources constitute more than 40 per cent of its revenues. ⁵⁷

Over the past half-century, oil rents have been the alliance's primary source of revenue.

Rulers of rentier states do not financially depend on taxation; therefore, the people cannot use taxation as leverage to hold rulers accountable. In a non-rentier system of extraction, taxpayers constitute a very large number of citizens who are relatively mobile in terms of their capital and production. If the government loses legitimacy, it becomes very hard for it to monitor and coerce its taxpayers. If citizens demand political participation, they can use taxation as leverage; they can say, "no taxation without representation." Oil production, however, is geographically static and controlled by a small number of elites. Its rents are much easier to monitor and extract by a government than income from other types of production. Moreover, rentier states distribute oil revenues to the people in the form of money, jobs and social services, and make the people dependent on governmental allocations.

In this regard, it is difficult to see a democratic relationship between state and society, based on the idea of a "social contract", taking place in a rentier state when this relationship depends on the state's political and economic supremacy rather than a mutual agreement with reciprocal duties. Rentier economies create a patron-client relationship between the rulers and the people, as well as fostering a lack of

independence in political, economic and civil society. Creating a democracy becomes impossible without independent political parties, an economically entrepreneurial class and civic associations.⁵⁸

Out of 28 rentier states in the world, 20 are Muslim-majority.⁵⁹ There are three reasons for this high percentage. First, about 60 per cent of the world's oil reserves are situated in Muslim-majority countries.⁶⁰

Second, the impact of oil on political regimes is not absolute but relative to the size of a country's economy. As noted above, contemporary Muslim countries inherited a legacy of economic underdevelopment with centuries-old historical roots. That is why oil rents easily dominated many Muslim countries and made their states rentier. In other words, if Muslim economies had been larger, then oil rents would not have dominated them so overwhelmingly.

Finally, the authoritarian rulers of Muslim countries are generally rent-seekers. In some cases, even if the country is oil-poor, the rulers pursue other sources of rents by selling land, imposing canal fees or demanding international aid based on their countries' geopolitical importance.

The problem of rulers seeking rents from oil and other sources is coupled with insufficient protection of private property in many Muslim countries. In some cases, states consider the confiscation of citizens' assets to be a source of revenue. In major Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, rulers have long regarded the seizure of private properties as a way of both increasing government revenues and punishing political opponents.

In January 2018, the Saudi government declared that it had seized more than \$100 billion through financial settlements with dozens of businessmen and officials who were detained during the crackdown on corruption.⁶¹ In September 2018, the Egyptian government announced that assets it confiscated from Muslim Brotherhood supporters were worth \$3.4 billion.⁶² In September 2020, a report estimated that the Turkish government confiscated \$32 billion in properties⁶³ from the institutions and individuals affiliated with the Gülen movement.⁶⁴

These examples show how fragile and politicised the protection of private property is in certain Muslim countries. Without such protection, the emergence of economic entrepreneurs independent of the government is unthinkable. As scholars of neo-institutionalism stress,⁶⁵ without the protection of private property, neither systematic innovations nor long-lasting economic development is likely to occur. The combination of the insufficient protection of private properties and rentierism is particularly problematic for economic development.

Rentierism and state seizure of private properties are also characteristics of authoritarianism in the Muslim world. Most authoritarian states in the region show a high density of the ulema-state alliance as reflected in their sharia-based constitutions.

Sharia-Based Constitutions

A sharia-based constitution indicates a deep institutionalisation of the ulema-state alliance. It provides the ulema, who define what sharia is, with legislative and judicial powers. The constitutional designation of legal status to sharia means that the law is at least partially defined as something to be formed by the ulema.

This arrangement is almost the opposite of the democratic notion of law-making by parliamentarians based on changing conditions and public opinion. The ulema's production of Islamic law excludes the people's participation in the legal process, therefore inherently contradicting democratic processes and ideals. Besides this theoretical concern, the experience of the past few decades has indicated that the expansion of the ulema's legal role is associated with further authoritarianism in many Muslim countries.

In many countries where sharia has become a basis of legislation, new laws have been passed to punish blasphemy and apostasy. These laws not only restrict religious freedom and freedom of expression but also punish dissenting religious and political voices. ⁶⁶

Across the world's 50 Muslim countries, there is obviously variation regarding the role of sharia in their legal systems – some have sharia-based constitutions, while others have secular or mixed constitutions. Similarly, Muslim countries show variation regarding their economic systems – some are rentier while others are not. The next section will analyse these variations.

Constitutional and Economic Variation in the Muslim World

Sharia is assigned different roles in the constitutions of the 50 Muslim-majority countries. Table 1 divides this constitutional variation into three categories: 1) sharia-based constitutions (using sharia as one of, or the only, source of legislation, or requiring laws to be compatible with sharia); 2) mixed constitutions (establishing Islam as an official religion without referring to sharia); and 3) secular constitutions (explicitly or implicitly defining the state or republic as secular).

The table also classifies economic regimes in the 50 Muslim countries as either rentier or non-rentier. The table defines these countries as either democratic or authoritarian. The following sub-sections will explain the three groups of countries in Table 1 and examine them by focusing on some representative cases.

Group I: Sharia-Based Constitutions and Rentier Economies

Out of 50 Muslim countries, 18 have sharia-based constitutions: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Brunei, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Maldives, Mauritania, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen. These 18 countries have sharia courts with jurisdiction over family-law matters, including marriage, divorce and inheritance. Moreover, in many of these cases, sharia courts also deal with criminal-law matters. All of these countries have laws punishing apostasy and blasphemy, in some cases involving the death penalty.⁶⁷ About two-thirds of these countries have rentier states.

In this group, two cases will be specifically examined: oil-poor Afghanistan and oil-rich Saudi Arabia. Following the Soviet invasion in 1979, Afghanistan endured a civil war, the Taliban regime and then the US invasion in 2001. These conditions, as well as disrupting any possibility of democracy and development, also brought many jihadis into Afghanistan, particularly from the Middle East.⁶⁸ Under the Taliban regime, the ulema dominated not only the legislative and the judicial power, but also the executive. Following the American invasion, the Taliban regime ended but the new constitution, ratified in 2004, perpetuated certain aspects of the Islamist regime.⁶⁹ After the 2021 withdrawal process of US and NATO troops began, the Taliban again took power in Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia has the longest history of a sharia-based legal system. Despite their criticisms of the traditionalist ulema, the Wahhabis created their own ulema class.⁷⁰ They also revived the classical notion of an alliance between the ulema and the royal authority. Currently, ulema who criticise the Saudi state have faced imprisonment and even death sentences.⁷¹ Since the 1970s, Saudi Arabia has used its oil rents not only for funding its ulema-state alliance but also for spreading Salafi ideas globally.⁷²

In short, countries in this group largely combine sharia-based constitutions and rentierism, which are jointly associated with authoritarianism.

Group II: Mixed Constitutions, Rentier Economies and Non-Rentier Economies

The number of Muslim countries in the second group, which have “mixed” constitutions that recognise Islam as the official religion without referring to sharia, is ten: Algeria, Bangladesh, Comoros, Djibouti, Gambia, Jordan, Malaysia, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia. In these countries, sharia is only used for family law and interpreted with varying degrees of severity, unlike the countries in the first group. All countries in the second group have blasphemy laws, but only half of them have apostasy laws; none of these laws involve the death penalty.

Three countries from this group will be explored in detail: Sudan (the only case that recently moved from the first to the second group) and two North African neighbours – Algeria (which is a rentier state and a

robust autocracy) and Tunisia (which is not a rentier state and recently became the only Arab democracy).

Sudan has been a rentier state. In 1989, Omar al-Bashir came to power by a military coup and established an alliance with Hassan al-Turabi, a famous Islamist ideologue and politician. Bashir made a constitutional change by making sharia a source of legislation, in addition to enforcing sharia even in criminal law. Later, Bashir got Turabi imprisoned and solidified his personal rule. In 2019, following popular protests, the military ousted Bashir. The transition government's constitutional declaration no longer refers to sharia. The government also cancelled the law banning apostasy, which had required the death penalty.⁷³

Rentierism and authoritarianism have been stable characteristics of the Algerian state. Algeria's 17,000 mosques are under state control. Imams of the mosques, Quran teachers, preachers and the staff of pious foundations are all public servants. This is not simply one-sided state control; in exchange, the ulema gain funding, legitimacy, status (as with the Grand Mufti), and official organisations (such as the High Islamic Council). In partnership with the state, the ulema apply sharia as family code.⁷⁴

Tunisia has never been a rentier state. It is the only democracy in this group. A major dimension of Tunisia's relatively successful democratisation is the balance of power between Islamist and secularist political parties. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the main Islamist party in Tunisia, Ennahda, did not propose to include sharia in the post-revolutionary constitution.⁷⁵ At the time of writing this report, the future of the only democracy produced by the Arab Spring (2010–2012) has become uncertain because the Tunisian president dismissed the prime minister and suspended parliament, while Ennahda accused him staging a coup.

Group III: Secular Constitutions and Non-Rentier Economies

The third group consists of 22 Muslim countries with secular constitutions. Of these countries, 13 have constitutions that define the state (or republic) as "secular": Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Senegal, Tajikistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan. Constitutions of the remaining nine countries – Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Eritrea, Indonesia, Lebanon, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Uzbekistan – do not use the term "secular," but they do not recognise Islam as the official religion either. Thus, they implicitly define their states as secular.⁷⁶

In sub-Saharan Africa, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone and particularly Senegal have shown the combination of secular states, the absence of blasphemy and apostasy laws and non-rentier economies, and they have achieved electoral democracy despite the unfavourable economic conditions of their region.⁷⁷ In the Balkans, Albania and Kosovo reflect similar combination and achievement, notwithstanding political and military instability in their region.⁷⁸

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population. It was a rentier state in the late 20th century, while today it is a net oil importer. Indonesia is an electoral democracy with certain contradictory features. Its federal constitution is secular, but some of its provinces implement sharia even on selected issues of criminal law. Its capital and largest city, Jakarta, had a Christian governor, but then he was imprisoned for 20 months for a blasphemy charge.⁷⁹ Indonesia's ulema-state relations are also very complex. On the one hand, there have existed many examples of partnership between certain ulema and the state from history to the present. On the other hand, the ulema in Indonesia have been much more decentralised and diversified than the ulema in Middle Eastern countries.⁸⁰ Indonesia's two biggest Islamic groups, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, have tens of millions of members. Despite certain engagements with the state, these two groups have preserved their organisational autonomy.⁸¹

Among the six post-Soviet Muslim-majority republics, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are rentier, while Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are non-rentier. These assertively secular states, with the possible exception of Kyrgyzstan, neither truly practise religion-state separation nor sufficiently maintain religious freedom. Instead, they have imposed heavy state control over religious institutions, generally by employing the ulema as civil servants.⁸²

Turkey has the longest history of a multiparty democracy in the Muslim world. But since 2017, Freedom House has consistently categorised Turkey as an authoritarian country.⁸³ Although Turkey still has a secular constitution, it is now ruled by Erdoğan's populist Islamist regime.⁸⁴ Diyanet, which represents the alliance between the ulema and Erdoğan, coordinates Friday sermons in mosques and other religious activities to serve the regime.⁸⁵ Turkey is an oil-poor country and thus non-rentier. But Erdoğan is a rent-seeker; he has recently made many announcements about Turkey's natural gas discoveries.⁸⁶ Erdoğan has also sought non-oil rents by turning public land into construction projects. The popular reaction to Erdoğan's projects seeking to turn Istanbul's green spaces into malls and residences led to the Gezi protests in summer 2013. Erdoğan is now getting a canal built parallel to the Bosphorous with the aim of receiving canal fees and selling land on both its sides.

Overall, several Muslim countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans and South-East Asia show that a lower degree of ulema-state alliance and a lower degree of rentierism are associated with a higher likelihood of democratisation. Post-Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus, however, reveal that secularism is not sufficient for democratisation; instead, assertively secular states, which aim to control religions, are likely to be authoritarian, especially if they have rentier economies. The final case examined, Turkey, has recently experienced the breakdown of democracy, which coincided with the rise of populist Islamism and rentierism. Turkey's future re-democratisation seems to be connected to the decline of Islamism and rentierism.

Analysis of all three groups of countries indicates that the ulema-state alliance is the most institutionalised in countries where the constitution refers to sharia as a source of legislation. The ulema

have official legislative and judiciary roles in these cases. In several Muslim countries this highly institutionalised ulema-state alliance is combined with rentier economies. This has made their authoritarian regimes very robust.

In the future, various factors (the depletion of oil reserves, increasing domestic consumption and the innovation of new energy technologies) may cause oil rents to sharply decline. In this scenario, the ulema-state alliance could lose its financial basis. This does not mean that this alliance will automatically be dissolved: its dissolution requires the deliberate action of reformist individuals. But it could mean that Muslim countries ruled by ulema-state alliances cannot retain the status quo; economic changes may force them to restructure their economies and to reconsider their religion-state relations. This will be discussed in the following section's recommendations.

Table 1: The Muslim World: Constitution, Economy, Political Regime

	Constitution: Sharia-based, secular or mixed	Economy: Rentier or not	Government: Authoritarian or Democratic
1. Afghanistan	Sharia	Not	Authoritarian
2. Bahrain	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
3. Brunei	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
4. Egypt	Sharia	Not	Authoritarian
5. Iran	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
6. Iraq	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
7. Kuwait	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
8. Libya	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
9. Maldives	Sharia	Not	Authoritarian
10. Mauritania	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
11. Oman	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
12. Pakistan	Sharia	Not	Authoritarian
13. Qatar	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
14. Saudi Arabia	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
15. Somalia	Sharia	Not	Authoritarian
16. Syria	Sharia	Not	Authoritarian
17. UAE	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian
18. Yemen	Sharia	Rentier	Authoritarian

	Constitution: Sharia-based, secular or mixed	Economy: Rentier or not	Government: Authoritarian or Democratic
19. Algeria	Mixed	Rentier	Authoritarian
20. Bangladesh	Mixed	Not	Authoritarian
21. Comoros	Mixed	Not	Authoritarian
22. Djibouti	Mixed	Not	Authoritarian
23. Gambia	Mixed	Not	Authoritarian
24. Jordan	Mixed	Not	Authoritarian
25. Malaysia	Mixed*	Rentier	Authoritarian
26. Morocco	Mixed	Not	Authoritarian
27. Sudan	Mixed	Rentier	Authoritarian
28. Tunisia	Mixed	Not	Democratic
29. Albania	Secular	Not	Democratic
30. Azerbaijan	Secular	Rentier	Authoritarian
31. Bosnia- Herzegovina	Secular	Not	Authoritarian
32. Burkina Faso	Secular	Not	Democratic
33. Chad	Secular	Rentier	Authoritarian
34. Eritrea	Secular	Not	Authoritarian
35. Guinea	Secular	Not	Authoritarian
36. Guinea- Bissau	Secular	Not	Authoritarian

	Constitution: Sharia-based, secular or mixed	Economy: Rentier or not	Government: Authoritarian or Democratic
37. Indonesia	Secular*	Not	Democratic
38. Kazakhstan	Secular	Rentier	Authoritarian
39. Kosovo	Secular	Not	Democratic
40. Kyrgyzstan	Secular	Not	Authoritarian
41. Lebanon	Secular	Not	Authoritarian
42. Mali	Secular	Not	Authoritarian
43. Niger	Secular	Not	Authoritarian
44. Nigeria	Secular*	Rentier	Authoritarian
45. Senegal	Secular	Not	Democratic
46. Sierra Leone	Secular	Not	Democratic
47. Tajikistan	Secular	Not	Authoritarian
48. Turkey	Secular	Not	Authoritarian
49. Turkmenistan	Secular	Rentier	Authoritarian
50. Uzbekistan	Secular	Not	Authoritarian

* Federal systems where some provinces implement sharia in criminal law. Bold indicates electoral democracies.

Sources: Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, pp. 37–52; *Constitutions of 50 Muslim countries*; International Monetary Fund, “Country Information: Article IV Staff Reports”, 2007–2011, www.imf.org/external/country/index.htm; Freedom House, “List of Electoral Democracies”, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>.

Conclusion

The structural barriers that have hindered progress in the Muslim world, particularly the ulema-state alliance and its rentierism, have deep historical roots. This report reveals, however, that Islamic history also includes paradigmatic experiences that may inspire future reforms in state-religion relations and the economy.

Historically, the overall failures of reformist and secularist rulers in the 19th and early 20th centuries were associated with their state-centrism. Today, the Muslim world needs reforms that will encourage the rise of dynamic classes of intellectuals and economic entrepreneurs, who can balance the power of the ulema and state authorities.

What are the steps towards such structural reforms? This report has four main recommendations about these steps for those who care about the promotion of democracy and development in the Muslim world.

First, it is crucial to **acknowledge the problem of authoritarianism and underdevelopment in the Muslim world**. It is counterproductive to deny it by using postmodernism, cultural relativism or other discourses as an excuse and by asking such questions as “How do we know that democracy is good?” or “Isn’t development a Western concept?” Labelling those who seek to analyse these problems as “Orientalist” is not helpful, either.

Second, it is necessary to **avoid blaming either Islam or Western colonialism**. Otherwise, there is the risk of contributing to the already existing problems of Islamophobia in the West and anti-Westernism in the Muslim world. In fact, Islam was perfectly compatible with progress in its early history, and the Muslim world continued to produce brilliance even at later periods. Moreover, the Muslim world is not an authoritarian and underdeveloped block: its 50 countries show variation today. Western colonialism was detrimental to Muslim countries, but it did not start these countries’ problems. Muslim societies should look inward and focus on solving their problems rather than continuing to blame Western colonialism.

Third, it is important to **realise the damage the ulema-state alliance has made, particularly by marginalising the intellectuals and the economic entrepreneurs** in the Muslim world. This recommendation means neither an attack on the ulema, nor a call for a stateless anarchy. Instead, it asks Muslim countries to create open, meritocratic and competitive systems. This type of reform also requires the expansion of freedom of thought, by abolishing apostasy and blasphemy laws, and deeper protection of private properties by preventing their seizure by the state. Moreover, to maintain universal citizenship and political participation, Muslim countries need a true separation between religion and state.⁸⁷ Despite the claims of both Islamists and Islamophobes, Islam is not inherently opposed to such a

separation: historical analysis shows that there was a certain level of separation between religious and political authorities in the Muslim world until the mid-11th century.

The fourth and final recommendation involves economic reform. Oil rents have fuelled the ulema-state alliances and authoritarianism in many Muslim countries. In the near future, these rents may decline as a result of the depletion of oil reserves, rise of domestic consumption and innovation of new energy technologies. To adapt to post-oil conditions, Muslim countries will need **economic restructuring based on productive systems that encourage entrepreneurship**. Such reform will require socioeconomic creativity and thus the end of the ulema-state alliance's control over sociopolitical life.

These recommendations are important for not only Muslim countries' domestic politics but also their relations with the West. Following failed military and political engagements, some Western policymakers now tend to support disengagement from the Muslim world.⁸⁸ There is a growing risk of negative influence from China in the region, which requires further explication.⁸⁹ Alternatively, a newly defined partnership between Muslim and Western countries may help reform processes towards democratisation and development. Moreover, such reforms in Muslim countries may provide stronger intellectual and socioeconomic dimensions to their engagement with Western countries.

About the Author

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Footnotes

1. ^ “Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı Yeni Hizmet Binası Dualarla Açıldı”, January 6, 2020 (in Turkish), <https://diyanet.gov.tr/tr-TR/Kurumsal/Detay/26236/milli-istihbarat-teskilati-yeni-hizmet-binasi-dualarla-acildi>.
2. ^ From now on, I will simply call them “Muslim countries”.
3. ^ Freedom House, “List of Electoral Democracies”, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>. Analysing Freedom House’s democracy scores for earlier years (1973–2017) also reflects a long-lasting disparity between Muslim countries and the rest of the world. Freedom House, “Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses, 1973–2018”, <https://freedomhouse.org/content/freedom-world-data-and-resources>.
4. ^ World Bank, “World Development Indicators: GNI per Capita (PPP)”, 2010, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.PP.CD>. Qatar is excluded in this calculation since it is a major outlier.
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 28. ^ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Vol. III, translated by Frantz Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967 [1377]), p. 315; Katip Çelebi, *Kitapların ve İlimlerin İsimlerinden Şüphelerin Giderilmesi* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2007 [c. 1653]) (in Turkish), p. 567–568; Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
 29. ^ Eric J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), p. 41.
 30. ^ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 1998 [1964]), p. 111.
 31. ^ Instead of "liberty" in Locke's phrase ("life, liberty, estate [property]"), the Edict used the word "honour". "The Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane", translated from Ottoman Turkish by J. C. Hurewitz, in *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: A Documentary Record*. Vol 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975 [1839]).
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 33. ^ Carter Vaughn Findley, "Knowledge and Education", in Cyril E. Black and L. Carl Brown, eds., *Modernisation in the Middle East: The Ottoman Empire and its Afro-Asian Successors* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), p. 125.
 34. ^ Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernisation of*
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Turkish Political Ideas (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000 [1962]).

35. ^ The Tanzimat Edict promised to abolish confiscation: “[T]he innocent heirs of a criminal shall not be deprived of their hereditary rights as a result of the confiscation of the property of such a criminal.” “The Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane”, p. 270.
36. ^ Kemal Karpat, “The Land Regime, Social Structure, and Modernisation in the Ottoman Empire”, in William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers, eds., *Beginnings of Modernisation in the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 74, 81.
37. ^ In Egypt, the leading ulema rejected Muhammad Abduh’s proposal to reform Al-Azhar. The shaykh of Al-Azhar accused Abduh of wanting to “destroy the clear paths of religious instruction and to convert this great mosque into a school of philosophy and literature.” The shaykh adds, “As for the worldly affairs and modern learning, they have nothing to do with Al-Azhar.” Quoted in Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 68. Similarly, in Central Asia and other Muslim lands under Russian rule, the ulema resisted the reform project of the Jadidists.
38. ^ Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, p. 207–211.
39. ^ Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 7.
40. ^ *Ibid.*
41. ^ Touraj Atabaki and Erik Jan Zürcher, eds., *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernisation under Atatürk and Reza Shah* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004).
42. ^ Sukarno was “more influenced by Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] than any other reformer” particularly on the issue of state-religion relations. Ibnu Anshori, “Mustafa Kemal and Sukarno: A Comparison of Views Regarding Relations between State and Religion”, MA Thesis, McGill University, 1994, p. 8, 110.
43. ^ Tamir Moustafa, “Conflict and Cooperation between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, 1 (2000), p. 8.
44. ^ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
45. ^ Under Sadat, in 1971, the reference to sharia as a source of legislation was added to the Egyptian Constitution. Later, in 1980, that constitutional article was revised by defining sharia as the source of legislation. Tamir Moustafa, *The Struggle for Constitutional Power: Law, Politics, and Economic Development in Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 107, 110.

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46. ^ Despite the misperception of Islamists as always opposing the ulema, the Egyptian Islamist organisation the Muslim Brotherhood, who led the drafting of a new constitution in November 2012, empowered Al-Azhar's senior ulema with a consultative authority in matters relating to sharia in the new draft (article 4).
 47. ^ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
 48. ^ For some of the Iranian ulema's criticism of the "guardianship of the jurist", see Mohsen Kadivar, "Routinizing the Iranian Revolution" in Jeffrey T. Kenney and Ebrahim Moosa, eds., *Islam in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2013), and Naser Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
 49. ^ Ruhollah Khomeini, "Islamic Government", translated from Persian by Hamid Algar, in *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981 [1970]), p. 63.
 50. ^ Nader Hashemi, "How Iran Justifies Its Violence", *New York Times*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/18/opinion/iran-protests.html>.
 51. ^ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Pakistan: Shari'a and the State", in Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Shari'a Politics: Islamic Law and Society in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 216.
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 53. ^ Sadakat Kadri, *Heaven on Earth: A Journey through Shari'a Law from the Deserts of Ancient Arabia to the Streets of the Modern Muslim World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 229.
 54. ^ Farahnaz Ispahani, *Purifying the Land of the Pure: A History of Pakistan's Religious Minorities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Sadia Saeed, *Politics of Desecularisation: Law and the Minority Question in Pakistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
 55. ^ Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratisation in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Mamadou Diouf, *Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Monica Marks, "Cross-Ideological
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Coalition Building in Tunisia’s Democratic Transition”, in Alfred Stepan, ed., *Democratic Transition in the Muslim World: A Global Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

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57. ^ Giacomo Luciani. “Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework”, in Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State* (London: CroomHelm, 1987).
58. ^ Michael L. Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?” *World Politics* 53, 3 (2001), p. 325–61.
59. ^ Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, p. 48–52.
60. ^ British Oil, “Statistical Review of World Energy 2011”, June 2011, www.bp.com/statisticalreview.
61. ^ Reuters, “Saudi Arabia Says It Has Seized over \$100 Billion in Corruption Purge”, 30 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arrests-corruption/saudi-arabia-says-it-has-seized-over-100-billion-in-corruption-purge-idUSKBN1FJ28E>.
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63. ^ These properties included a bank, a dozen universities, hundreds of schools, various media outlets and several hospitals, as well as private properties of individuals. “Can Dündar Case Is a New Episode of Turkey’s Tradition of Violating Property Rights”, *Ahval*, 20 September 2020, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-justice/can-dundar-case-new-episode-turkeys-tradition-violating-property-rights>.
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 69. ^ See Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 53–64.
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 73. ^ U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sudan”, 12 May 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sudan/>.
 74. ^ Dalia Ghanem, “State-Owned Islam in Algeria Faces Stiff Competition”, *Carnegie Middle*
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- East Center, 13 March 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/03/13/state-owned-islam-in-algeria-faces-stiff-competition-pub-75770>. For the bureaucratic control over Islam in another North African case, Morocco, see Ann Marie Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco and the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
75. ^ During the authoritarian secular era, the Islamist Ennahda was critical of the government's control over mosques. After the revolution, Ennahda became the leading party. Meanwhile, the Tunisian state lost control over many of Tunisia's 5,000 mosques, of which hundreds fell under Salafi influence. Salafi radicalism and the secularist reaction to it led Ennahda to change its position and expand government control over mosques. Mehdi Lahlou and Georges Fahmi, "Radicalisation and Resilience Case Study: Tunisia", *Grease: Religion, Diversity and Radicalisation*, September 2020, http://grease.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2020/10/WP4-Report_Tunisia-1.pdf.
 76. ^ Among these nine countries, the legal systems of four cases (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Niger and Uzbekistan) are fully secular. In one case (Sierra Leone), Islamic family law is considered as customary law and is under the jurisdiction of local courts. In two cases (Eritrea and Lebanon) there are sharia courts for family law matters. In the remaining two cases (Indonesia and especially Nigeria), some provinces' legal systems, including both family and criminal law, are based on sharia.
 77. ^ See Ahmet T. Kuru and Alfred Stepan, "Laïcité as an 'Ideal Type' and a Continuum: Comparing Turkey, France, and Senegal" in Ahmet T. Kuru and Alfred Stepan, eds. *Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
 78. ^ Freedom House, "Countries and Territories: Albania and Kosovo" 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.
 79. ^ Robert W. Hefner, "Islam and Institutional Religious Freedom in Indonesia", *Religions* 12: 415 (2021), p. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060415>.
 80. ^ Alexander R. Arifianto, "The Changing Landscape of Political Islam in Indonesia: A Backgrounder", *Siyasa*, 26 April 2021, <https://siyasa.us/2021/04/26/the-changing-landscape-of-political-islam-in-indonesia-a-backgrounder/>.
 81. ^ Since 2014, Nahdlatul Ulama's General Secretary Yahya Cholil Staquf has led a reform movement, "Humanitarian Islam", which aims to promote universal citizenship in Indonesia, by criticizing the Islamist efforts to categorize non-Muslim citizens as "infidels", impose sharia, and build an international caliphate. In its global activities, this movement established a partnership with World Evangelical Alliance. Thomas K. Johnson and C. Holland Taylor, eds., *God Needs No*
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Defense: Reimagining Muslim-Christian Relations in the 21st Century (Hamburg: Institute for Humanitarian Islam, 2021). Muhammadiyah has also generally promoted moderation in Indonesia. Ahmad Syafi'i Maarif, who was its leader from 1998 to 2005, has been a prominent intellectual. See the webpage of his institute, <https://maarifinstitute.org>.

82. ^ Adeb Khalid, *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), p. 204–210.
83. ^ Freedom House, “Countries and Territories: Turkey”, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2021>.
84. ^ As a recent indication of its populist Islamism, the Erdoğan administration withdrew from “Istanbul Convention” that protects women from domestic violence. This withdrawal aims to appeal the patriarchal demands of Islamic conservatives. “Domestic Violence: Turkey Pulls Out of Istanbul Convention”, BBC News, 20 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56467689>.
85. ^ Many ultranationalist secularists have also supported the Erdoğan regime. One reason is their similarly hostile attitudes against Kurdish activists, while another reason is their shared anti-Westernism. Ultranationalist secularists have particularly supported the Erdoğan regime’s deepening relations with Russia and China. Ahmet T. Kuru, “Why Is Turkey Torn Between the United States and Russia?” 11 June 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/why-turkey-torn-between-united-states-and-russia/>.
86. ^ Reuters, “Gas ‘News’ No Saving Grace for Turkish Lira”, 4 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/breakingviews/gas-news-no-saving-grace-turkish-lira-2021-06-04/>.
87. ^ Ahmet T. Kuru, “Why Muslim-Majority Countries Need Secular Citizenship and Law-Making”, openDemocracy, 2 February 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/global-extremes/why-muslim-majority-countries-need-secular-citizenship-and-law-making/>.
88. ^ See Emman El-Badawy, “Reframing the Middle East’s Future, 20 Years on From 9/11”, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 11 January 2021, <https://institute.global/policy/reframing-middle-east-future-20-years-911>.
89. ^ China’s authoritarianism has recently reached to the level of even conducting an ethno-religious cleansing, by putting over a million Muslim Uyghurs into concentration camps. “‘Their Goal Is to Destroy Everyone’: Uighur Camp Detainees Allege Systematic Rape”, BBC News, 2 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55794071>.

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