

# Using Border Countries to Understand the Impact of Islam on Democracy

## Idea for Future Research

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One of the ongoing debates in foreign policy circles asks whether Islam is fundamentally incompatible with democratic institutions. The easiest way to approach the problem is to compare the level of democratization in Islamic countries and compare it to other regions around the world, but this is misleading because it compares countries different in many ways besides which religion they follow. One way to improve on this approach would not compare all Islamic countries to other un-Islamic countries around the world, but specifically only compare countries that border one another where one country is majority Muslim and the other is not. The idea is that countries that border each other are going to be less different from one another than countries simply selected from all across the world, and that in theory, you can see each border country pair as relatively similar countries, coming from a relatively small geographic area in most cases, where a line has been drawn down the middle and one side has ended up Islamic and one side has un-Islamic. This is designed to be a test similar to the natural experiment where Germany and Korea were divided in half into communist and non-communist countries and we could see how well each of those ideological systems performed over time.

I have already performed this analysis by documenting every border country pair across the world and then used data to determine if they are majority Muslim or not. This results in about 76 pairs of Muslim and non-Muslim majority countries that border one another, and the analysis shows that Muslim countries are about twice as likely to be less democratic than more democratic based on the freedom score as calculated by Freedom House. In particular, among these 76 border country pairs, the Muslim country was more democratic 18 times, less democratic 37 times, and equally democratic 21 times. If you compare the freedom score for each Muslim and non-Muslim border country pair (which is a 7 point scale), the Muslim country scores about 0.9 points less democratic on average, but this is significantly smaller than the difference you get comparing all Muslim countries to all Protestant countries or all Catholic countries, where the average differences are 2.9 points and 2.6 points respectively. One interesting observation to note is that Islamic countries are not the least democratic of all the religions when making border country comparisons, where Islamic countries do better than Buddhist countries in direct head to head comparisons.

Since the analysis has already been done, there is not much left to do to complete and write up an actual paper. A literature review should be done on the overall debate whether Islam really is incompatible with democratic institutions and the results from this paper need to be placed within the context of that debate, but the results created by the analysis are interesting and do shed light on this important problem in foreign policy.