

Article

Partial Practical Secularization from Below as a Soft Yet Unhappy Process

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Abstract

This article challenges conventional understandings of secularization in the Arab world by arguing that significant forms of secularization can emerge even in the absence of institutional secularism. Drawing on data from the Religion in Public Life survey, conducted in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Tunisia with approximately 5400 respondents, the study develops the concept of partial practical secularization from below. Rather than focusing on state-led separation between religion and politics, the article examines how ordinary citizens negotiate the boundaries between religious and secular spheres in everyday life. The findings reveal widespread religiosity across the four countries, yet also demonstrate growing differentiation between religion and other domains of social life. This differentiation is reflected in five areas, as follows: the prioritization of moral reasoning over ritual observance in social relations, critical engagement with inherited jurisprudential traditions, increasing tolerance toward religious diversity, distinctions between civil affairs and religious authority, and the rise of individualized forms of religiosity. The article identifies four ideal types of religiosity—institutional/traditional, revivalist, post-Islamist, and popular religiosity—each associated with distinct orientations toward pluralism, democracy, and public life. Building on these findings, the article proposes the concept of religious congruence, understood as the relationship between religious beliefs, practices, ethical dispositions, and their interaction with political, social, and economic spheres. The Arab world, it argues, is experiencing a form of “soft yet unhappy” secularization characterized by a pragmatic coexistence between religious moral frameworks and civil institutions. This process neither privatizes religion nor eliminates its public significance, but instead reconfigures its role within increasingly pluralistic post-secular societies.

Keywords: secularization; secularism; religiosity; Arab world



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In the academic milieu, we often hear the question “Why is religion at the core of global contentions in the 21st century?”. There is so much misunderstanding between the religious and the secular in our scholarship and media, and misunderstandings of religion in its relationship to politics, economy, culture, or simply to society. Religiosity is increasing in most regions, and secularism has become in many places a sort of a civic religion against the other religions. Historically, the social sciences and humanities put too much emphasis on the negative aspects of religion. An important research program titled *International Panel on Social Progress*¹ suggests that religion and religiosity may play a role in social progress and resistance to colonialism and tyranny, but can also generate forces of violence, conservatism, sectarianism, and social and political subjugation. The same religion can play different roles in different contexts. In Brazil, the followers of the Pentecostal church who

had voted for left-wing leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva also voted in 2019 for right-wing leader Jair Bolsonaro.

Religion is often understood as a separate social sphere. In the line of Gauthier (2021), I belong to anti-utilitarian sociology that refuses to see society as differentiated into separate compartments, one of them being religion. The spheres of religion, culture, politics, social and economy are traversed by common logics that allow a given society to be encompassed in its *totality*, exactly as Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi saw it. Due to this differentiation approach, there is so much misunderstanding between the secular versus the religious, and the religious and the other spheres. Drawing on the results of a large-scale survey entitled *Religion in Public Life* (2019), based on face-to-face interviews with 5400 respondents in four Arab countries—Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Tunisia—², this article argues that there are strong indicators of **secularization in the absence of a state system of secularism**. Rather than institutional secularism, the findings point to processes of differentiation between politics and religion emerging “from below,” which I conceptualize as **partial practical secularization from below**. The term *practical* emphasizes that this process is rooted in people’s evolving understandings of religion and everyday life, rather than in fixed doctrinal or creedal transformations.

This article will select some of the outcomes of the survey to provide evidence of the partial separation between the religious sphere and the secular one, demonstrating how this is established not through the policies of the aforementioned four countries, but rather through their citizens’ attitudes towards the matter.

The survey shows that distinction and partial separation are not only evident among individuals with a low level of religiosity, but also among all degrees and patterns of religiosity.³ We will see that the new trends in religiosity relate to the plurality of its forms, as regards institutional/traditional Islam, revivalist Islam, post-Islamist, and popular Islam, which evoke individual rather than collective/institutional models. Let us first measure religiosity beyond the simple subjective dimension.

This article distinguishes between secularism as a political doctrine regulating state–religion relations and secularization as a sociological process affecting religious practices and social attitudes. Following Yavuz (2021), these dimensions should not be conflated. States may adopt strong secular institutions without experiencing extensive social secularization, while highly religious societies may nevertheless develop pluralistic political arrangements. The present article focuses primarily on grassroots secularization rather than constitutional secularism.

Al-Massiri’s (2002) distinction between partial and comprehensive secularism is particularly useful here. Whereas comprehensive secularism seeks to exclude religion from the public sphere altogether, partial secularism allows differentiation between religious and political institutions while preserving religion as a moral and cultural resource. Although al-Massiri developed this distinction normatively, the present article employs it sociologically to explain why Arab societies may simultaneously remain religious while undergoing selective forms of practical secularization.

1. Religiosity Measure

Given the importance of the subject of religiosity in our hypotheses, it was necessary to construct an index of religiosity in the “Religion in Public Life” survey that was conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan (referred to hereon as the survey) in order to go beyond the subjective question an individual is asked about their own assessment of religiosity, using the following classifications: “very religious,” “moderately religious,” “not religious,” and “nonbeliever.” In addition to this subjective question, the religiosity index included six indicators, some of which are subjective and

some are objective, as follows: voluntary work in a religious association; participation in the activities of a religious organization/institution; accepting neighbors from other religions; accepting or opposing a son/brother marrying someone who does not perform religious duties and acts of worship (i.e., praying and fasting); accepting or opposing a son/brother marrying a person from another religion; and accepting or opposing a son/brother marrying a person from another sect. We used the Likert Quadrilateral Scale of “very religious”, “religious”, “moderately religious”, and “not religious”. The religiosity index consists of standard indicators of religious commitment that have been widely used in previous survey research. The Cronbach’s alpha is 0.73, which is very satisfactory. All these questions have the same weight in the construction of the index.

The results show that around 80% of the sample are religious or very religious (see Table 1).

Table 1. Religiosity.

	Number	%	Cumulative Number
Very religious	888	18.4	18.4
Religious	2951	61.1	79.5
Moderate Religiosity	915	18.9	98.4
Non-religious	77	1.6	100.0
Total	4831	100.0	

Breaking down the numbers for each country, one third of the sample in Jordan was found to be very religious, compared to a quarter in Egypt, while the percentage was found to be small in Tunisia and Lebanon (12% and 2%, respectively). Meanwhile, we found a stunning convergence in the percentage of religious people in these four countries (up to 60%), which diverged again when it came to moderate religiosity, namely, around one third of the sample in Lebanon, a quarter in Tunisia, and small percentages this time in Jordan and Egypt (3% and 13%, respectively). While no one in the sample in Jordan defined themselves as non-religious, the percentage was around 2–3% in the other three countries. (See Table 2).

Table 2. Religiosity by country.

		Country				Total
		Jordan	Lebanon	Egypt	Tunisia	
Religiosity measure	Very religious	35	2	24	12	18
	Religious	62	58	61	63	61
	Moderate religiosity	3	36	13	23	19
	Non-religious		3	2	2	2
	Total	100	100	100	100	100

It was possible to add other questions to measure religiosity, but we were satisfied with seven. As we can see, the answers to the indicator “listening to religious programs on radio and television” correspond to the measure of religiosity; the results show that 22% of the study sample always listened to religious broadcasts on radio and television, compared to 12% who never did, with the highest percentage of regular listeners to religious programs recorded in Jordan, at 31%, followed by Tunisia, at 27%, while the lowest percentage was recorded among the Lebanese, at a mere 11%.

All of these findings are consistent with a global trend towards “resurgent religion” (Berger 1999), of which the Arab world is a part, if not leading the trend. The resurgence

of religion has been placed between two dualities because it is not a linear resurgence; there is the coexistence of the secular with the religious in light of multiple modernities and within the paradigm of pluralism (Berger 2014), or a more realistic understanding of the process of separation between religion and the state or the differentiation between religion and politics, which gave rise to the hypotheses put forward by many researchers about the decline of the role of religion in question, especially with regard to the automatic link between the rise in the indicators of education, industrialization, urbanization and the entrance of women to the job market on the one hand, and the decline in religiosity on the other (Acquaviva and Pace 2011; Jarmouni 2016).

Recent studies have shown that the process is not “linear” and does not always result in the same outputs, due to the spread of popular religiosity that affects and is affected by social, economic and political choices.

2. Partial Practical Secularization from Below

The questionnaire shows that there are strong aspects of partial practical secularization from below, which can be summed up in five aspects: the importance of moral reasonings in human relations, reflection on jurisprudential heritage and tolerance towards other religions, the distinction between civil affairs and personal status, and finally the multiplicity of forms of religiosity and the increase in the rate of individual religiosity. For each aspect there are some indicators.

With regard to the first aspect, **“the importance of moral reasoning in human relations,”** moral reasoning derives its sources from religion or traditional and modernist ideals. This aspect has several indicators, as despite controversy relating to limiting “what makes a person religious” to one condition, only a third of the respondents considered “performing religious obligations and acts of worship” as the basic condition, with an important variance between the very religious (50%) and the non-religious (14%). As for the remaining two-thirds, they chose one of the following answers: “being honest and trustworthy,” “treating others well,” “affinity towards relatives and caring for them,” and “helping the poor and those in need.” The percentages of the responses, in order, were 29.0%, 18.1%, 8.7%, and 7.5% respectively. We note that this importance of morality in religion is increasing in Tunisia and Lebanon and decreasing in Jordan and Egypt (reaching 42% for those relating it to rituals).

In response to the question “Do you prefer to deal with religious or non-religious people, or does it make no difference to you?”, more than 71% answered that “it makes no difference,” compared to 21% who would rather deal with religious people, which indicates that the respondents’ source of moral judgments surpasses religion. The percentage of “it makes no difference” in Tunisia rises to 84%, compared to 15% for those who would rather deal with religious people, noting that religiosity only plays a role when the subject is very religious (57% vs. 39%).

The second aspect is to **“reflect on the jurisprudential heritage”** and the fact that a part of the respondents considered it necessary to revisit some of the prevailing fatwas, especially the ones concerning women’s rights. Some examples are as follows. The results of the survey show that more than half of the surveyed sample (53%) agreed, to varying extents, that the law should not allow polygamy, compared to 44% of the pool who opposed this notion. When comparing the countries included in the study, it was found that Lebanon had demonstrated the most agreeability to this notion (70%), followed by Tunisia (65%) and Egypt (51%), while Jordan had the lowest percentage, at 27%.

Meanwhile, the results of the study show that respondents were split regarding the right of women to travel abroad alone, as 56% reported their approval to varying extents, while 41% of the sample population opposed this to varying extents. By looking at the

results of each country separately, it was found that Jordan was the least supportive of this notion (28%), compared to (72%) who opposed it, while Lebanon had the highest percentage of agreement to varying extents (76%), followed by Tunisia (61%) and Egypt (60%).

As for the right of women to equal inheritance, the results of the study show that 40% of the surveyed sample agreed to varying extents, compared to 57% who opposed it. Again, Jordan recorded the lowest agreement percentage (25%), followed by Tunisia (29%)⁴ and Egypt (39%), while Lebanon was the most in agreement (68%).

The results also show that 39% of the study sample strongly agree that a married woman has the right to work outside the household, and 44% agreed to the notion, while only 10% opposed it and 5% strongly disagreed. When comparing the results between countries, we find that there are no fundamental differences between the surveyed communities, with the exception of Egypt, where 26% strongly agreed and 51% agreed.

The results also show that 58% agree to varying extents that men are better suited to assuming political leadership than women, while 38% of the sample disagreed, to varying extents. Breaking down the results for each of the surveyed populations, it was found that Jordan (68%) and Egypt (61%) were the most in agreement to varying extents, followed by Lebanon (55%) and Tunisia (50%).

As for the acceptance of women's right to hold judicial positions, the results of the study show that 76% agreed, to varying extents, while 21% were opposed to the notion. The results also show a slight variability among the countries included in the study, as Lebanon (84%) and Egypt (81%) were the most in agreement to varying extents, while the results show that Jordan (71%) and Egypt (71%) agreed to varying extents.

The third aspect is **"tolerance towards other religions."** Tolerance is a prerequisite for accepting pluralism, yet it is not sufficient on its own. One indication is that more than half of the sample (55%) did not agree to the notion that "our children should not be allowed to learn about other religions."⁵ Evidently, the percentage of disapproval increases in a country with more diversity, such as Lebanon (64%). The degree of religiosity also seems to affect the rate of agreement with the statement; for example, in Jordan, the percentage drops from 74% for those with moderate religiosity to 54% for those with strong religiosity.

Regarding agreement with the statement "those who belong to other religions should not have the same rights as me," a majority of 64% rejected the notion, compared to 30% who agreed with it. Thus, there is a minority who violate the principle of citizenship, calling for religion-based discrimination. It is noted that religiosity had an effect that led to a lower rate of rejection of the notion in Jordan; on the other hand, the religiosity factor had no effect in other countries (Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon).

As for the question of agreement with the statement "criticism to my religion should not be tolerated," the percentage of those who accepted criticism of their own religion was around one third of the surveyed population. Religiosity negatively affects the acceptance of the statement (from 32% of the very religious to 45% of the non-religious). We noted in Tunisia, however, that religiosity has nothing to do with the acceptance or rejection of the statement.

On the question "Freedom of expression must be protected even if it contradicts your religion", we noticed that the majority were not in favor (56%), with the religiosity factor playing an important role, especially in Jordan, where the very religious rejected this statement, compared to the moderately religious (63% and 26%, respectively). Of course, the issue of tolerance has to do with the legal framework in the country, which pushes for tolerance or a lack thereof.

As for the fourth aspect, **"the distinction between civil affairs and personal status,"** the questionnaire posed a problematic question, due to how it was formulated, seeking to measure agreement with the statement "With the presence of the Qur'an/Bible, there

is no need for manmade laws.” The wording of the statement has made it difficult to consider this notion due to the sanctity of the Qur’an/Bible, so only a quarter of the sample responded that we need manmade laws, with the degree of religiosity playing a role in reducing this percentage (see V83).

Regarding the question about whether the state can intervene through the people’s representatives in personal status (marriage and divorce), the majority of respondents (67%) agreed that the government and parliament should enact personal civil laws (marriage, divorce) according to Islamic law, while 28% of respondents opposed the state’s intervention. The highest approval rate was among respondents in Jordan (94%), while the lowest approval rate was in Lebanon (39%), and the approval rates in Egypt stood at 71% and in Tunisia at 64%.

The last aspect is **“the multiplicity of forms of religiosity and the increasing rate of individual religiosity.”** The religious scene is characterized by the existence of religious expressions of various forms of presence in the social sphere, in a rather fragmented manner, as it has developed arbitrarily under weak states on some occasions, or under states’ despotic power on others. This has led to the shift of many from the collective space into individual religiosity that is influenced by globalization; some of the people representing this phenomenon do so in plain sight, while some thrive underground.

This local interpretation of internal and external cultural issues related to globalization and universal values reveals “the erosion of national borders, the hybridization of cultural distinctions, and the fine-tuning of forms of socio-cultural existence” (Saidani 2018, p. 40), and the consequences of this are forms of tension and irregularity. When the margins of freedom are wide—as in the case of Tunisia, Algeria and Lebanon—pluralism increases, which characterizes the religious space with features of continuous change that is open to various possibilities, ambiguity, and confusion, in a way that necessarily reflects social restlessness that is influenced by cultural differences between the global and the local, inevitably reflecting the correlation between cultural, social and political relationships.

We will also see later on that there are different types of religiosity in the Arab world, which have consequences that go beyond the issue of partial practical secularization from below. What concerns us here is the transition from monotheistic religiosity linked to a traditional religious institution to other forms, the most important of which is individual religiosity.

According to the survey, “trust in religious institutions” has weakened. Half of the respondents have medium to high trust (50%) in Imams and religious scholars, while 12% of the respondents do not trust them at all, and a third of the respondents trust them to a moderate extent (33%). The highest trust in Imams and religious scholars was shown among respondents in Jordan (64%), followed by Egypt (56%), and Lebanon (39%) and Tunisia (38%).

Half of the respondents in Lebanon reported having little trust in religious scholars and imams, 52% trust the General Iftaa Department (22% to a large extent, 30% to a moderate extent), while 27% trust it to a small extent, and it is not trusted at all by 13% of the respondents.

The highest trust in the General Iftaa Department was shown among respondents in Jordan (78%), followed by Egypt (65%), Lebanon (37%) and Tunisia (31%), where the trust was at its lowest (30% do not trust it at all), and 48% trust it a little in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, 53% of the respondents said they trust the Imam/sheikh of their local mosque to large and medium extents, while 30% of the respondents said they trust them to a small extent, and 10% said they do not trust them at all. The highest percentage of trust in Imams of mosques was again among respondents in Jordan (64%), followed by in Egypt (59%), Tunisia (51%), and Lebanon (37%).

Respondents in Lebanon had the lowest trust in the local Imams of mosques (49%), while in Tunisia, 14% did not trust the Imams of mosques at all. A study on the content of Friday sermons in Lebanon explains the lack of trust in imams of mosques (Hanafi 2019b).

After presenting these five aspects of partial practical secularization from below, I must clarify that this secularization cannot be understood by linking it only to the degree of religiosity or non-religiosity. The subject of secularization (in general, on grassroots and policymaking levels), while considered as a necessary practice and attitude, is insufficient to achieve the liberalization (represented in the basic values of equality and freedom, and finally pluralism) and democratization of the state and society, as there are other factors that affect these stances.

Thus, there are incidents of questions regarding freedoms and democracy that were not affected by the degree of religiosity, meaning that objective conditions linked to the absence of social justice and to authoritarianism play a more important role than religiosity in shaping social, economic and political attitudes or opinions.

For example, as it pertains to the question “Freedom of expression must be protected, even if it contradicts my country’s government,” we find in Jordan and Lebanon that there is no difference between the answers of very religious and moderately religious respondents, while in Egypt, opposition to this principle increases among moderately religious respondents (38%), compared to the very religious (9%), which is lower than the percentage among non-religious respondents (15%).

Likewise, on the question “To what extent do you think that freedom of religion is guaranteed in (name of the country)?” the differences between extents of religiosity do not express attitudes towards freedom. It is clear that the controversial hard secularization policy in Tunisia has exacerbated the feeling of the absence of this freedom in the country (31%).

The absence of religiosity’s influence also appears in the question “to what extent do you think freedom of expression is guaranteed in (name of the country)?”, although it is paradoxical that Jordanians feel that such freedom is more guaranteed in their country than the Lebanese do. It also appears in the two questions: “To what extent do you think that the freedom to criticize the government and its institutions is guaranteed in (name of the country)” and “To what extent do you think that respect for the principle of rotation of power (respect for the right of election winners to form the government) is guaranteed in (name of the country)”, as well as other similar questions, with consistency of the same paradox between Jordan and Lebanon.

But on the questions “To what extent do you think freedom to join political parties is guaranteed in (name of country)” or “to what extent do you think freedom to join civil society organizations (associations, forums, etc.) is guaranteed in (name of country)?”, Jordan and Egypt showed that they were the least convinced of the guarantee of these freedoms, compared to Tunisia and Lebanon, with no significant differences based on the extent of religiosity.

After analyzing some of the results of this survey, I will take the initiative to interpret what this process means in the four countries more broadly, beyond mere analysis of the answers and using other surveys and the results of some previous studies.

3. Multiple Types of Religiosity

The CSS-Jordan survey, as well as other surveys, shows a multiplicity of patterns of religiosity and fieldwork, similar to that which I have done in the last 30 years, around the sociology of Islam, which can be summed up in four types, each with specific ideological models, as follows: institutional/traditional, revivalist, post-Islamist, and popular.

The distinction developed here between institutional/traditional Islam and popular religiosity echoes, while also moving beyond, Ernest Gellner's influential distinction between "High Islam" and "Folk Islam". Gellner (2000) argued that Muslim societies historically oscillated between scriptural, urban Islam and localized popular forms of religiosity. While this dichotomy remains illuminating, contemporary Arab societies exhibit a more differentiated religious field that includes revivalist Islam, post-Islamism, and individualized forms of religiosity. Thus, the present typology extends Gellner by accounting for transformations produced by democratization, globalization, and post-secular public spheres.

The first type of religiosity stems from formal institutional or traditional Islam, often traditional with a dearth of *ijtihad* (innovation, independent reasoning or original interpretation). An example of this is the Al-Azhar institution, which historically played a major role in Egypt and abroad by spreading moderate Islamic thought and jurisprudence, despite the weakness in *ijtihad*, political conservatism, and limited independence from political authority.

The second type is revivalist religiosity, which rose as a protest against Westernization, colonialism, and the Islamic tradition nurtured by deep-rooted religious institutions since the beginning of the twentieth century. Two types of this Islamic revivalism were famous. The Muslim Brotherhood revivalism linked the religious with the political, and built a militant structure closer to social movements that struggle against tyranny and corruption. There is also the Salafist revivalism, especially the Wahhabi, which depended on the establishment of the Saudi state with its King Abdul Aziz Al Saud and those who came after him, and adopted a literalist interpretation of Islam, rendering it very conservative.

Revivalists are very different from reformists, and include individuals such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Khair Al-Din Al-Tunisi, Muhammad Abdo, and Ali Abd Al-Raziq, who saw in the Ottoman organizations legal procedures conducted by a legitimate authority, including the principle of citizenship, parliament and government, and the restriction of the ruler's powers by the constitution. These reformists welcomed the Ottoman Code of Judicial Laws, and introduced it into the era of the nation state, as principles and branches of jurisprudence within civil laws.

Since the fifties of the last century, many revivalists have established a categorical distinction between Sharia (and the jurisprudence based on it) and manmade laws. An exception can be made in the Brotherhood's Syrian branch, as Mustafa Al-Sibai founded the College of Sharia at the time, merging Sharia and jurisprudence with civil laws.

The third type is the religiosity of the new Islamic movements, or what Bayat (2013) calls "post-Islamism". These movements greatly exceeded some of the specifications of revivalist movements, called for replacing Sharia with the people as a basis for legitimacy, and warned of the dangers of making religion unbearable. Some of them also questioned the social sciences, deeming them an antithesis to faith and trying to Islamize them. During the Arab uprisings, they even embraced both the concept of a civil state—avoiding the term "secularism"—and democracy.

The difference does not lie in the organizational aspect of the movement; some political parties have moved from revivalism to post-Islamism (e.g., Al-Nahda Movement in Tunisia or the Justice and Development Party in Morocco). The difference, therefore, lies in how the social actors who believe in Islam as a moral code enter the political battle through participation, not conquest (Brown 2012), as well as in how discussions and debates are conducted in the public sphere, using arguments inspired by Islamic values. I think that this movement can be considered a kind of neo-Islamism, if it fulfills the following four conditions:

- Belief in cultural, legal and religious pluralisms that guarantee the protection of groups and social segments that constitute minorities of all kinds;

- The political–religious actor should differentiate between the sanctity of the religious message in which they believe, and the defilement of political actions that require tact in governance and law making, which is accomplished by separating the preacher from the political aspect—this is an important point, as the Islamic preacher (and the jurist) would convince the public of the prohibition of alcohol, but the politician and legalist may not prevent its sale, because it is the right of the Christian and the non-religious to consume it;
- Adopting citizenship policies for a national state, not policies for the benefit of the community of believers only. Perhaps it is required to transcend these policies beyond the citizens, that is, for the benefit of humanity⁶;
- Solving the root causes of tensions between social groups in their understanding of transactions and the application of the constitution and jurisprudence on the ground, through adopting an objective approach, and by maturing them in a dialogue in the public sphere before resorting to the voice of the majority, whether it is decided through a vote in parliament or a referendum.

Therefore, some revivalist movements turned into new Islamic movements, because politics has tamed their solid ideology, and regimes have worked to dismantle it. However, this is not automatic. *Al-Anani (2020)* pointed out the intellectual and structural obstacles to the Muslim Brotherhood crisis in Egypt, the difficulty of distinguishing between preaching and politics, prior to the events of 3 July 2013, and the dismissal of President Mohamed Morsi. In light of all of the above, the use of the term “Political Islam” loses its meaning, because it does not differentiate between revivalism and neo-Islamism.

This generalizing stereotype does not recognize that there is a plural and diverse Islamic–political thought, including moderate and extremist, carried by individuals, Islamic movements, or official Islam alike. The classification of political Islam has often been used as an insult to certain groups, and to suggest that the direction they are heading towards can only be the one taken by Sayyid Qutb’s followers from the Muslim Brotherhood to Al-Qaeda.

This epithet is often used by carriers of official Islam who do not consider their Islam to be political. In the Gulf region, for example, any opposition is stigmatized as Brotherhood led.⁷ Therefore, a Muslim Brotherhood supporter becomes synonymous with an antagonist. There is thus simply a slippage in meaning, as their calls for the illegitimacy of “political Islam” are in fact a call to the illegitimacy of the right to protest.

Sadek (2012) has studied the means of understanding the liberalization of politics of Rashid Ghannouchi—in his capacity as an Islamist thinker and activist, but one that differs from the Islamist revivalists—using Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition. What Ghannouchi is asking for is a recognition of Islamic identity in the public sphere, and the recognition of the importance of the religious text interpreted through personal judgement and the concept of interest. Among the most important pioneers of revivalism/post-Islamists in the Arab world today are the “activists” Sheikh Ahmed Al-Raissouni and Dr. Saad Al-Din Al-Othmani.

The fourth type of religiosity is popular Islam-based religiosity, which includes individual or Sufi religiosity that is often found in small groups. Contrary to what is shown by the generalized stereotype that sees Sufis as immunizing the individual and the small group from the act of protest or religious or political radicalism, religiosity can be politicized. Therefore, it is necessary to restore consideration to popular religiosity.

In Latin America, for example, popular religiosity is still institutionalized and present in people’s mindsets in their rituals and other rites, which is what appears in carnivals. In the Arab region, among these is the phenomenon of Sufi lodges (Zawiyas) that indicate that the ways of the Sufis were not only ways of special rituals such as the Haḍra, but were also

productive of certain knowledge; for example, Ibn Arabi linked philosophy with Islamic sciences, and Jalal Al-Din Al-Rumi linked religious knowledge with literary knowledge.

Historically, Sufism—in its three forms of the popular, the philosophical, and the elite mysticism—was a very important phenomenon, and it turned into a form of popular religiosity in which myths were mixed, poverty and despotism were subdued, and the Arab self was withdrawn in any space where you find spiritualities that protect it from a greedy, oppressive and tyrannical society.

The phenomenon of Sufism multiplies in its various forms, some of which are rational, and others are close to colloquial Islam, or ritual folklore. In this context, the report on the religious situation in Tunisia devoted an important chapter to Sufism (Issa 2018), which emphasized the role of social Sufism and its therapeutic functions, especially among marginalized groups.

Methodical Sufism—especially during the era of President Ben Ali, who encouraged the transformation of Zawiyas into annual festivals—established a basis for resisting remonstrative Islam. However, after the revolution, the Sufi orders found themselves vulnerable to the Salafists’ apostasy of their masters, because of their accusation of polytheism and heresy, so they attacked the Zawiyas. Nevertheless, what the report notes is the miserable physical and symbolic situation of the Zawiyas and Sufism, and the dominance of superstitious representations of them. Abu Rumman (2023) shows how the new Sufism in Jordan contributed to the phenomenon of individual religiosity when it moved from “methodical” to “network-based”, which attracted many young people.

We will summarize this with a preliminary diagram about the roles played by these four types of religiosity (Figure 1), which can only be understood by a dialectical relationship between religiosity and social and political action. Four characteristics can be indicated in these patterns, as follows:

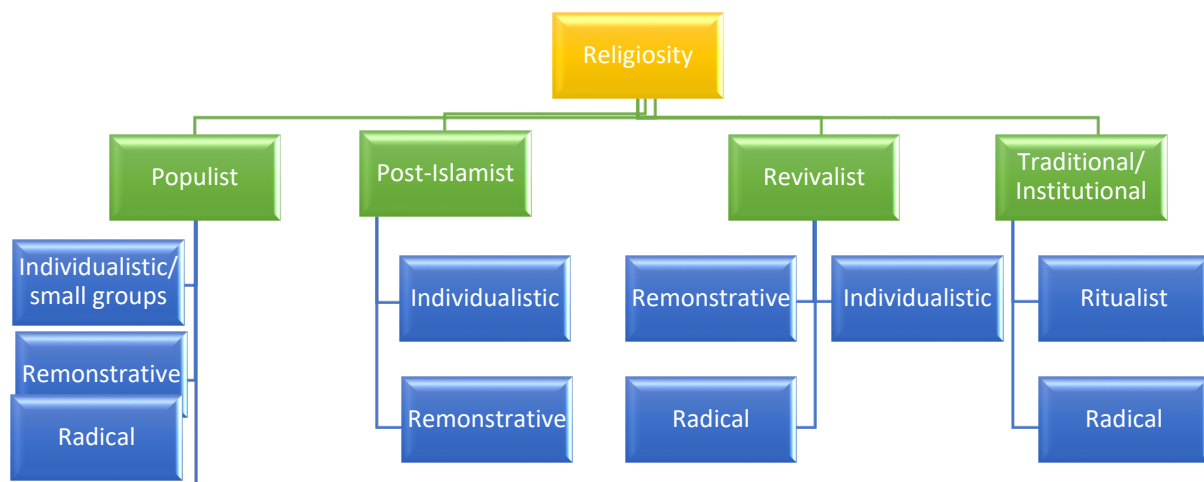


Figure 1. Types of religiosities and the roles they perform.

First—While institutional/traditional religiosity favors the collective ritual function of religion, and although religious institutions have become ossified to the point where some of their followers abandoned them, protests and opposition to the authorities—whether religious or political—have historically come out of their cloak;

Second—While neo-Islamists/post-Islamists often prevented their followers from turning to extremism, this was not the case for other forms of religiosity. Interestingly, traditional religious institutions in Syria did not prevent many of their followers from joining the opposition guerrilla war (Jabhat Al-Nusra, Ahrar Al-Sham, some factions of the Free Syrian Army, etc.). Jihadi Salafism—from Abdullah Azzam to the rise of ISIS—was

not only a product of Islamic movements, but also institutional/traditional religiosity (particularly the Saudis);

Third—Popular Islam and some of the new preachers (often referred to then by laypersons as modernist) have pushed many of the devotees to tendencies of individual religiosity. While the revivalists were not able to convert their supporters into a mass movement, these contemporaries (such as Adnan Ibrahim, Muhammad Shahrour, Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki, Amr Khaled, and others) are no longer a marginal phenomenon, although the discourse of some of them may rise quickly and descend just as quickly. These figures gained prominence after the Arab Spring, and generated much controversy in the public sphere. For example, Adnan Ibrahim has become a mass phenomenon, and he has his own TV show in the Gulf region, regardless of the existence of institutions that might employ his discourse;

Fourth—While the important data presented by Muhammad Al-Sharqawi confirms the increase in the ritualistic side of religiosity in the Arab world, the level of rituals did not enter into the privatization of religion. Religious practices have increasingly become community-based, to the extent that the accelerated construction of mosques was in some cases no longer sufficient to meet demand. In Morocco, for example, the number of mosques constructed over the past twenty years has followed an upward curve, as if in a geometric progression (Cherkaoui 2020, p. 97). Hence, there is never purely individual religiosity; rather it is always accompanied by communal religiosity.

Finally, these different functions can only be understood through the dialectical relationship between religiosity and secularism, where religiosity influences social and political actions, including the distinction/separation between religion and politics, and the latter influences religiosity by enabling it to interact in the private and public spheres, defining religious pluralism within religion itself. However, there are different forms of secularism as well, which I have detailed in a previous study of mine (Hanafi 2019a).

Since the start of the Arab revolutions, we are now in a post-secular society. “Post” here does not mean progressing beyond secularism, rather a progression of the concept rendering it amiable, according to Louay Safi’s expression. The concept of separating religion from the state is not a basic value, yet transforming the state along the lines of citizenship, equality, and respect for individual and collective freedoms as basic values. In a post-secular society, reactions to secularism vary according to patterns of religiosity, its interaction with politics in the public and private spheres, and its relationship with pluralism and recognition of the other versus conservatism.⁸ This shows the complexities that would go beyond simple questions, such as whether Islam can adapt to democracy, as this kind of questions still preoccupies the minds of many radical secularists.

The relationship is summarized in Figure 2, some of the elements of which were inspired by Ciftci et al. (2019), as this graph clearly shows that post-Islamism is the closest to democratic practice. Post-Islamism advocates for a pluralistic discourse armed with a practical, non-authoritarian reasoning (see Cooke 2005), and exists in the public sphere, while some forms of individual or popular religiosity are based on faith in democracy without playing a role in its making. Meanwhile, revivalist Islam—especially in its Salafi form—appears to be far from accepting of the philosophy of democracy, although it sometimes accepts its practice as a procedural process. As for populist religiosity, it can be conservative or liberal, as it depends on many political and social factors, yet it is mostly liberal. In contrast, institutional/traditional religiosity can also be liberal or conservative, but is more often conservative.

One of the major issues that threaten the modern age is how to narrate and analyze modernity with a secularism that is not defined by the rejection of religion—one that does not privatize religion, but acts more as a human space that allows multiple forms of faith

and religiosity to coexist. This secularism would not weaken religion, but would rather preserve its human tendencies by transforming them into spiritual and moral values.

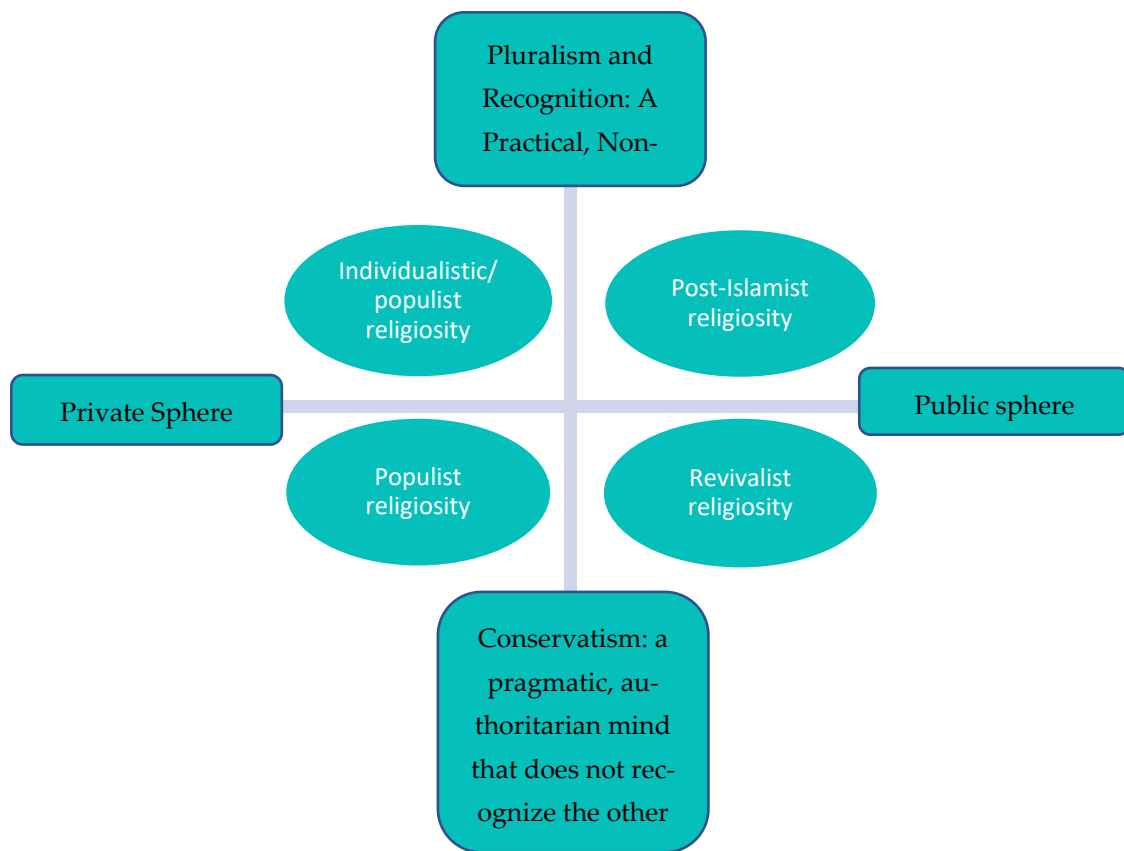


Figure 2. The relationship between types of religiosity and their dimensions.

The Islamic world has begun to pay attention to social and humanistic spheres. For example, the Iranian scholar Abdolkarim Soroush presented two important epistemological foundations for the principle of religious pluralism: the first is the concept of the straight paths (Soroush 2009) rather than a sole path, and the second is the separation between sacred religion and human religious knowledge (Soroush 2002). It also approaches the religious and social categories by using reason to address religion from the outside.

In the processes of revolution and counterrevolution in the Arab world, and the debate over the nature of democratic forces, the authoritarian or democratic arguments used by the elites are seldom concerned, and the secular elite is by definition democratic, unlike political Islamic movements that are automatically considered authoritarian. Of course, this ideological flatness and lack of political liberal ideals require further analysis, as authoritarian tendencies can be found in each of these two elite formations.

The clash of law, religion, politics and society has become a realistic process that we see in our post-secular societies, but there are tensions and pathologies—such as sectarianism and racism—that result from this, especially in the context of the sharp division within elites, and the gap between the positions of the elite and the public. In conflict-ridden regions, such as the Middle East, sectarianism is one of the dynamics of these conflicts, as well as a mechanism for the formation of local identity through what Bishara (2016) called “imagined sects”.

4. Conclusions: Soft Yet Unhappy Secularization

In this article I have argued that many Arab countries are moving towards this kind of very partial and uncomfortable secularism on the top, as well as a partial and alienating secularization at the grassroots level. I will qualify these processes as unhappy ones. I use “unhappy” in a sociological sense to describe an incomplete and tension-ridden *modus vivendi* between religious conceptions of the good and differentiated political and legal institutions. *Modus vivendi* in Rawlsian liberal thought is an inherently unstable arrangement. In many Arab societies, practical forms of secularization coexist with strong religious commitments and contested public understandings of the role of religion in politics. This coexistence produces a fragile and often uncomfortable equilibrium rather than a settled secular order. The significant changes taking place in the religious field and the transformation of some Islamic movements have pushed, to varying degrees, towards religious reform and the call for a civil state, and towards demands for social justice and individual and communitarian freedoms (public morality). There are indications for this that are consistent with the results of the survey, and concur with other surveys in the Arab world.

For instance, one such poll showed that people are eager for more than just religiosity in their political leadership. In response to a question asking to rank the qualities of a successful political leader, only 5% of Tunisians responded with religiosity, which indicates that the majority that voted for the Al-Nahda Party did not do so because its candidates were religious. This percentage is higher in Jordan and Palestine, but remains less than a quarter of the respondents to the survey.⁹ However, this trend is less present in the Arabian Gulf¹⁰.

Based on the above, the issue of the extent of the impact of religion on human life requires the introduction of a new concept, which is religious congruence. This concept, according to Chaves (2010), encompasses three dimensions. First, religious ideas hang together; second, religious beliefs and actions hang together; third, religious beliefs and values indicate stable and chronically accessible dispositions in people. It is not possible to understand the extent of religious congruence without factoring in other spheres of life (political, economic, social, and other sources of morality than a religious one), i.e., the practical partial secularization shown by the survey (see Figure 3).

The possibilities of complex religious congruence require us to understand religion as encompassing spirituality, knowledge, ethics, and power. Sociologically, this can be apprehended through the concept of religiosity. This concept differentiates between a few types of indicators, namely, thin indicators (e.g., religious habits and practices), thick indicators (e.g., food practices, dress codes, and other visible markers of identity), and ethical formation through rituals (e.g., reflecting on the poor through fasting, supporting them through zakat, cultivating humility through prayer, and fostering community through pilgrimage). These three dimensions contribute to religious congruence with varying degrees of significance, in ascending order—thin indicators, thick indicators, and ethical formation through ritual practice. It also requires the overcoming of the simplifications to which both opposing camps often resort; the first camp is often derived from some Islamists who advocate the slogan “Islam is the solution,” meaning that increasing religiosity will automatically lead to congruence and the spread of the good and justice in society. As for the other camp, they do the opposite, considering that religiosity not only has a minor impact on the conception of justice and political affairs, but that when it has an effect, it generates political violence.

Therefore, it is necessary to read the results of the many studies that have surveyed opinions on how religiosity does have an influence, but also to acknowledge that the social, political and economic spheres, and the other sources of ethics, do also influence these

views. In addition to the survey of the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, two other surveys largely concur with its results. The first is the fourth Arab Barometer, which clearly shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents do not consider that there is a contradiction between the democratic system and Islam. The second is the Arab Index, whereby 65% of Arab respondents emphasize the importance of morals and values as important conditions for a person to be religious, and the majority of public opinion rejects the statement that every non-religious person is a bad person (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies 2018).

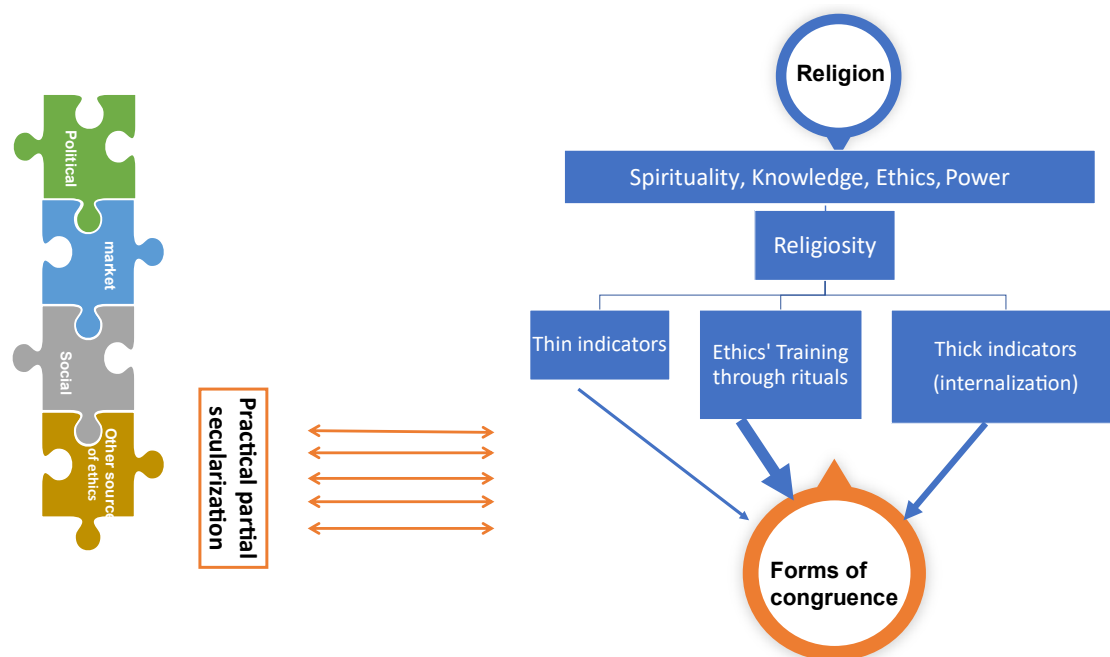


Figure 3. The possible congruence.

Religious ethics may be expressed in different ways, including adherence to Islamic principles in general. To a question about the importance of this commitment to Islamic principles for the progress of the Arab world, 70.8% of surveyed Palestinians answered that it is important or very important¹¹. The Arab world is going through—to varying degrees—a process of practical secularization from below, and the normalization of religion in the public sphere does not impede this process.

The (CSS-Jordan) survey shows that respondents separate the moral interference of religion in politics from interference with political techniques, such as support for a party. For example, with regard to the extent of approval and opposition to the use of mosques and churches for electoral campaigning, the majority (83%) of the respondents stated that such facilities must not be used for this purpose to varying degrees, compared to 14% of respondents who stated their approval to varying degrees that mosques and churches can be used for electoral campaigning purposes. The results show a Jordanian–Lebanese consensus that mosques and churches should not be used for electoral campaigns, with a percentage of 92% for each, while Egypt recorded 75% and Tunisia 72%.

Thus, the process of partial grassroots secularization shows a certain (unhappy) *modus vivendi* between a religious conception of the good and current civil codes, and between that conception and other sources organizing social life, particularly local tradition and customs. When Qasim Amin called for the liberation of women in 1899 and was accused of heresy, he responded that he was guilty only of challenging tradition, not of opposing religion (Bamyeh 2019).

Mohamad Bamyeh has rightly criticized those who have demanded that the state should “enforce” Sharia, as this would change the main purpose of Sharia from being an art of self-discipline to a request for the discipline of others by the state. Bamyeh has interpreted various surveys regarding people’s understanding of what “Sharia” was. For him, the call for imposing Sharia law often reflected the unwillingness to impose any specific laws upon society, but a general will to add moral content to the rule itself.

This is evident in a 2013 Pew Research Center survey conducted in 39 Muslim countries, where 70% of Muslims preferred to include Sharia law in legislation, although other questions revealed that they are committed to religiosity only as a general guide to morality, but have no detailed knowledge of Sharia law itself (Bamyeh 2019, p. 157). This is also somewhat in line with the results of the survey and a conclusion I drew earlier about the understanding of Sharia as a moral code (Hanafi 2024, Conclusion).

This process of partial secularization indicates different repertoires of arguments that people have used to formulate their moral judgment about issues related to mainstream fiqh. Let us take the issue of women’s share in the inheritance system; for Islamic jurists, there is a verse in the Qur’an about the distribution of human inheritance. For others, there is a form of contradiction with values dear to Islam (and all religions) and liberalism such as equality and justice. In Tunisia, there has been an important debate on this subject, and those who support preserving the dominant interpretation of the Qur’anic text and their counterparts, who are in support of gender equality in the distribution of inheritance, ended up using arguments that have the same epistemological and justifying structure (the use of textual, legal and sociological arguments). Peaceful debate has resulted in pluralist actions from both sides of the debate. This act reflects the controversy of the moral dilemma and the eventual search for reasonable accommodations (and not just the rational, as sentiments can have a substantial effect as well) between virtue and fair consequences. What is meant here by pluralism is the diversity in audiences, including citizens and believers. The arguments (justifications) that are presented to citizens who belong to non-religious groups are often different from what is presented to the believers. In the latter case, they can be satisfied with eliciting and interpreting a sacred text. Then comes the act, which is a peaceful debate in the public sphere, leading to a rapprochement in viewpoints through the acceptance of the two parties that no matter how much civil legislation is preferable to a method of distributing the inheritance, the other party can choose the other method. Further, if there were other democratic mechanisms for making choices related to what the majority chooses (often in the form of civil legislation), then the preacher can always advocate their religious choice for the believers and document it in the form of jurisprudence. It is possible to go further than that, and adopt legal pluralism, which is what we find in many countries around the world, democratic and otherwise, whether they have a Muslim majority or not.

Partial secularization means restoring the moral aspect in Sharia and science. It is a continuation of the Rahmani school (Rahman 2009), exploring the goals and values behind the laws and placing Islam in its moral context, as well as reading the Qur’an in this light.

With the exception of the fixed constants of religion (*qatiyyat*) in terms of creed and worship, timid attempts have begun to overturn the priorities in our understanding of religion: establishing morals (as the spirit of religion) and moving jurisprudence and legislation to suit morals.

That is, if we consider that theft is morally reprehensible at all times and places (and that the act itself does not acquire its moral character from the benefit and harm that results from it, but from its nature as a violation of some aspect of rights and justice, and the fact that one desires justice as much as they desire pleasure), then the punishment of the thief is proportionate with the spatiotemporal context and the size of theft and its motives, and thus it is not fixed.

Instead of considering the Sharia (juristic rulings) as the main source of laws, whether they are personal and legal statuses or manmade laws, and the rivalry over the boundaries separating them, it would be recognized that human relations are governed by a common logic that goes beyond codification, some of which is simply linked to inherited customs and traditions, while others are personal statuses and legal rulings, and some are political (citizenship, governance techniques, taxes, etc.).

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Notes

- ¹ See report in <https://www.ipsp.org/> (accessed on 23 July 2026).
- ² The field implementation of this survey was carried out during the period from April 2019 to August 2019. It was carried out by research teams affiliated with research centers and institutions in the aforementioned countries, under the supervision of the teams of the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. The poll was implemented by the Centre for Strategic Studies in Jordan, the 1 2 1 Institute for Studies and Surveys in Tunisia, and Statistics Lebanon in Lebanon and Egypt. Regular, self-weighted, and proportional to size, stratified (tiered), multistage sampling was adopted in all surveys carried out in the surveyed countries, using the population statistical frameworks available in these countries. The following levels were taken into consideration when designing the sample: urban and rural, as well as the main administrative divisions in each country whose citizens' opinions were surveyed, according to the relative weight of each level of all the country's population, where each individual in a given surveyed country has an equal probability of being one of the sample members, with a margin of error of $4 \pm 3\%$ in all countries where the survey was conducted. For missing data and survey weights, missing responses were handled using listwise exclusion for the relevant analyses. Since the study focuses on broad comparative patterns rather than precise population estimates, and because the comparisons are based on harmonized national surveys with similar sampling procedures, no additional weighting adjustments were introduced in the analyses. As I am relaying only on results provided by the survey administrator, I unfortunately cannot add some statistical indicator about confidence intervals or the strength of association. Finally, I would like to thank the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan for providing me the data, particularly its director in that time, Zaid Eyadat.
- ³ This article is not intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire survey, but to examine those survey items that are theoretically relevant to our concept of "partial practical secularization." The selection of variables was therefore theory-driven rather than data-driven. Questions that were excluded were omitted because they did not directly address the dimensions of secularization under investigation or, in a few cases, because their wording did not allow a valid interpretation of the concept being measured (questions that stem from sharp binaries and stereotypes with weak analytical ability if they are to be taken without adequate explanation of what they mean to the person questioned). For example, we explicitly discuss the limitations of the question concerning the Qur'an/Bible and manmade laws.
- ⁴ See our detailed study on the Tunisian case in (Hanafi and Tomeh 2019).
- ⁵ The questionnaire was based on the four-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree), in addition to "I don't know" or "refused to answer". In this article, I have often reduced the analysis to two positions—agreement with its two extents and disagreement with its two extents—to facilitate the identification of general trends.
- ⁶ Here I agree with Taha Abd Al-Rahman that despite the importance of the concept of citizenship, this concept should not turn into a new exclusionary sect (what is subordinate to the nation or humanity) as in the systems of religious sects. See Abdurrahman (2018).
- ⁷ This is how Jamal Khashoggi was described, for example, according to some political statements and popular tweets in Saudi Arabia.
- ⁸ For more about the concept of "post-secular" society, see (Hanafi 2019a).
- ⁹ For Jordan, according to Jordan's second Arab Barometer in 2011, the figure was 25%. The percentages in Palestine vary according to the surveys, ranging from 8.8%, according to the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center (JMCC), survey number 73. 2011. (in Arabic), to 13% according to the Arab World Center for Development and Research in Ramallah, Palestinian Public

Opinion Poll: Arab Revolutions, Freedoms and Democracy in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Local and Presidential Elections, Negotiations, 2011, and 20%, according to a survey of Palestinian university students in the West Bank: Participation in elections, students' priorities and needs, general political trends, and electoral propaganda, 2002.

¹⁰ In Qatar, for example, the majority considers religiosity the main characteristic of the leader (43.0% strongly agree and 39.0% somewhat agree). The Social Harmony Study: Summary Report September 2015.

¹¹ The Palestinian public opinion poll on the repercussions of the decision to postpone the local elections and the evaluation of Palestinian leaders, 2016.

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