MIDDLE EAST: Islam and Democracy
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Is Islam compatible with democracy?
It can be. Millions of the world's 1.4 billion Muslims live in democracies, ample proof that there is no inherent discord between the two ideas, most scholars say. But Islam, like almost all religious traditions, can be interpreted in different ways, and some interpretations--such as those favored by al Qaeda and radical Islamists--conflict with democratic ideals. The validity of the different interpretations is a complex question debated by religious scholars.

Is Islam the reason many Muslim countries are not democratic?
Most scholars say no, and point to a mix of historical, cultural, economic, and political factors--and not Islam as a religion--to explain why democracy has failed to take root in many Muslim countries, especially in the Arab world. Recent Pew Global Attitudes surveys, in fact, show that majorities in the Arab world favor democracy as a form of government.

Which Muslim nations are considered democracies?
Most experts cite Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mali, and Senegal as democracies. (Indonesia, with 196 million people, is the world's largest Muslim nation). Other countries, such as Malaysia, Nigeria, and Iran, are nominally democratic, but to a greater or lesser extent lack many of the attributes of fully functioning democracies, such as protections for civil liberties and legitimate opposition parties. Most of the world's 47 Muslim-majority nations conduct elections; some are relatively free and fair, some are not. In any case, elections alone do not make a country a democracy, according to most scholars.

Which countries in the Arab world are democratic?
The Arab world, home to 18 percent of the world's Muslims, is a democracy-free zone, according to many scholars. Syria, Libya, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia are the least democratic nations in the Arab world, according to a study by Daniel Brumberg of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Other Arab nations fall somewhere between autocracy and democracy: they may have legislatures, labor unions, and political parties, but their ruling party, president, or king exercises final control. On a spectrum from most to least democratic, these countries are: Morocco, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, Algeria, Qatar, and Yemen. Lebanon was a fully functioning democracy in the early 1970's, but years of civil war and conflict have transformed it into a more repressive nation.

How does the record of democracy in Muslim countries compare to that of other regions of the developing world?
Poorly. According to Freedom House, a nonprofit organization that tracks democracy worldwide, "the last 30 years have seen a trend diametrically opposite to the global trend toward political liberalization" in Muslim nations. This is particularly true for nations in the Arab world, many of which have taken steps backward in terms of political liberties and electoral democracy in the last 10 years. However, some scholars argue that the "democracy

gap" that appears to separate Muslim nations from the rest of the world applies only to the Arab world. In other regions, argues Alfred Stepan in the July 2003 issue of *Journal of Democracy*, Muslim nations are on par with--or outpace--comparable non-Muslim developing nations in terms of civil liberties and free and fair elections.

What are the main reasons so few Muslim nations are democratic?
There are many, says Marc Plattner, the co-director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy. In the Arab world, for example, oil has been a factor, entrenching elites and slowing the development of market economies and the political freedoms that can accompany them. Tribalism and patriarchal social systems also play a role. Political manipulation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, in which Muslim leaders channel domestic unrest into criticism of Israel and the West, is also a factor. Other scholars point to additional issues: repression by monarchies and military governments; the lack of independent secular political parties; traditional mindsets that consider Western-style democracy a foreign, non-Islamic invention; an ideological obsession with unity; and a long-standing policy of U.S. and Western support for many autocrats in the Arab world.

Why have Western nations supported Arab autocrats?
Because they are friendly to Western interests, which mainly have to do with oil and other national security concerns. Another key reason has been the fear that, if autocrats fell, they would be replaced by radical regimes. The most powerful opposition to entrenched leaders in many Arab nations are Islamists, groups that embrace a political view of Islam and reject secular forms of government. In many cases, these groups are anti-Western in outlook; some advocate the use of violence to bring about change.

What are the religious ideals within Islam that could favor democracy?
The Koran, the holy book of Islam, contains a number of ideas that some Islamic scholars say support democratic ideals. One is *shura*, or consultative decision making. The other is *ijma*, or the principle of consensus. However, Muslim scholars disagree about whether these terms have political applications. Is *shura* obligatory or merely desirable? Binding or non-binding? Another powerful argument for democracy emerges from the principles in the *Constitution of Medina*, which was written by the prophet Mohammed in 622 A.D, according to Muqtedar Khan, the director of international studies at Adrian College in Michigan. The document sets down the rules of the community of Medina, as agreed to by Muslims and Jews of the city-- and grants equal rights to Jews and Muslims who follow its laws.

What are the religious ideals within Islam that may oppose democracy?
At core is the fact that in Islam, God is the giver of laws, and men have only limited autonomy to implement and enforce God's laws. These laws, known as *sharia*, apply to all aspects of religious, political, social, and private life. Interpreted literally, they can clash with Western democratic ideals. An Islamic democracy has to navigate tensions created by Islam's traditional rules, such as those that give lesser weight to women's testimony in Islamic courts and those that dictate corporal punishment, such as death by stoning for female adulterers. Modern Islamic democracies have reinterpreted or chosen not to enforce some or all of these laws.

Some Muslim scholars argue against democracy because they see it as a system in which the whim of the majority is the source of law. The counterargument to this, says John O. Voll, professor of Islamic history at Georgetown University, is that all nations create laws--whether they are monarchies, dictatorships, or democracies. And in a democracy, more checks exist on man's whim than in an autocracy.

Are these tensions delaying the acceptance of democracy?
In some countries, yes. But scholars differ about whether democracy for the Muslim world can wait until these theological questions are better resolved. "There's an interesting argument happening among Muslims about sequencing," Plattner says. "Some say you first have to reinterpret Islam, then you can build a democracy. There are others who say that if you establish a democracy first, that's the best way to get a reformation in Islam. It's kind of a 'chicken and egg' problem."

Are democratic interpretations of Islam gaining ground in the Muslim world?
So far, it's difficult to know for sure. Among Muslim intellectuals, they are certainly having an impact, but "it's not a political trend," Brumberg says. Liberal Islamists have had problems building an organized political base in the Muslim world, he adds--in part because they are often restricted from participating in politics by the same laws that ban more radical Islamist political parties. "Clearly, they haven't been winning the population as a whole over," Plattner says.

Is the desire for democracy gaining ground?
It appears so, but at the same time support for organized Islamist parties with inherently anti-democratic views is also strong, Brumberg says. The complexity of the political situation in the Muslim world is reflected in the recent Pew survey, which found both that majorities in the nine predominately Muslim nations surveyed believe that democracy can work in their countries--and that Osama bin Laden is one of their three "most trusted" world leaders.

Respondents also favored a prominent--in many cases an expanded role for Islam and religious leaders in national politics, but majorities in most countries also said they valued ideals associated with democracy, such as freedom of the press.

In many Arab nations, Brumberg says, Islamist parties command the support of between 35 percent and 40 percent of the population. "When people say they want democracy," he says, "you have to ask, 'What would that mean? Whose interests would the democracy serve?'