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## Democracy in the MENA

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**Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)**

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Since the end of World War II, the United States foreign policy has disseminated the idea of democracy and its opportunity to provide greater peace between countries of the world. However, in recent years, the spread of democracy has ceased. According to the Pew Research Center, by the end of 2017, only 57% of countries with populations of at least 500,000 had democracies of some kind (DeSilver, 2020). One region of the world that has struggled to develop democracy is the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). When asked on a scale of zero to ten the extent in which their country is democratic, zero being completely authoritarian and ten being fully democratic, seven countries, in 2017, within the MENA rated their country on average a 5 (Rahman, 2018).

This region is of particular concern to the West due to its strategic location, terrorist threats, human rights violations, and vital resources. Over the last 20 years, countries within the region like Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen have been observed in order to find trends in democratic development; no significant opportunities for this development have been found, (*Middle East/North Africa (MENA)*). The objective of this paper is to examine variables such as population diversity, inequality of wealth, income, resources, education, basic human rights, and external actors and how they impact the likelihood of countries in the Middle East and North Africa to transition to democratic systems.

According to Enrique Hernández, indicators of democracy include free and fair elections, differentiated policies, parties free to criticize the government, retrospective accountability, participation in deliberation, and migrant inclusiveness (Hernández, 2016). Although these elements hold consistent values amongst the different democracies in the world, each democracy ultimately has its own way of operating, causing some discrepancies amongst different policies.

During the development period in the Middle East during the 1950's and 1960's, democracy did not evolve.

Over the years, the region has been under scrutiny because of its political corruption, radical movements, and valuable resources in one of the most strategically located regions in the world. Given the strategic importance of the MENA, developing democracy can lessen corrupt or radical government entities prevailing in these countries. However, democracy has proven difficult to develop. For example, the 2010 the Arab Spring, a series of pro-democracy movements, were subsequently silenced by the authoritarian governments. As attempts have occurred to create a democracy in the Middle East, a rise in liberalization can be seen. However, even by taking this rising trend of liberalization into account, it is still unlikely for a democracy to be established or sustained in this region of the world. If the Middle East were able to take advantage of creating a democracy, there may be opportunity for improved foreign relations and high quality of life. But as Issawi has argued in the past, democracy is difficult to establish in the region because of the lack of economic and social basis that is required for democracy to flourish (1956).

### **Factors Influencing Democracy**

The lack of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa can be attributed to several factors that, individually do not determine a democracy, but when absent make democracy difficult to develop (Issawi, 1956). The variables that can influence the creation of a democracy are population diversity, inequality of wealth, income, resources, education, basic human rights, and external actors.

#### **Population Diversity**

Diversity of a population allows for different beliefs and wants throughout the society, but also “inspires new thoughts and ideas while discouraging stagnation and increasing the possibilities of finding better ways to address various issues” (Gambini, 2018). For democratic institutions to develop, and for the democratic spirit to flourish, two conditions seem necessary: the community must be bound by a strong, social solidarity and, it must contain enough diversity to produce tension between its constituent parts (Issawi, 1956). When looking at different countries, it is important to note how the society handles the tension needed for condition two, and whether that tension is derived from diversity or segregation masked as diversity. If segregation is present in any meaningful sense, social trust is diminished. This leads to a distrust in the political system and its political representatives. Segregation can trigger trust being weakened (Ziller, 2020). Once social distrust has occurred, these communities are unable to meet the first condition for creating a democratic institution. Without the conditions of a strong community and diversity, democracy development is difficult to evolve, especially in relation to religion. When a large percentage of a country follows the same religion, there will be a lack of difference in thinking due to common morals and beliefs. Having a nearly homogenous population of beliefs will create segregations amongst the population with those individuals who choose to follow a separate religion. As Ziller stated, this segregation of a part of the population will create a distrust for the system and government.

### **Inequality of Wealth**

The distribution of wealth that is present within the Middle East leads to the relative inability to create a sustaining democracy within this area. The distribution of money in a country is extremely important, when money is not spread in an equal or semi-equal fashion, excessive political power is held by the people who have this money (Issawi, 1956). Not only

does an unequal distribution of money create political inequality, but it also creates a large gap between the upper and lower classes. Therefore, having and sustaining a middle class denies the rich from oppressing the poor and the poor from confiscating the wealth from the rich. In both cases violence, instability, and revolution can occur (Vanderbilt University, 2017). Thus, higher income levels and the presence of a solid middle class can prevent backsliding into authoritarianism or, in the case of the Middle East, maintaining the non-democratic status of these countries (Lawson-Remer, 2013).

The high level of inequality that is evident in the Middle East can result in social conflicts and coups due to relative deprivation, which occurs when people perceive an inequality in their social condition. These individuals feel they deserve equal treatment that other individuals or groups receive, more services than their expectations anticipate, or a change in legislature that they feel is needed to receive the treatment that they envision.

When there is an unequal distribution of wealth within a country, the opportunity for corruption by the highest bracket of citizens is great. There is evidence that proposes that inequality of wealth creates opportunities of corruption and allows for it to become a norm within the society (Harvard Kennedy School, 2004). Within the last year, there has been a near quadrupling of coups within Africa (Faucon, 2021). This increase can be attributed to the large inequality present within many of the countries within the region and “struggling economies weakened by poor and corrupt governance and persistent security challenges,” (Faucon, 2021). There is a cyclical relationship between corruption and inequality, where corruption “interferes with the transitional core functions of government: allocation of resources, stabilization of the economy, and redistribution of income” (Gupta, 1998). Thus, countries with high levels of

income equality and no redistribution tactic to improve the inequality, are less likely to survive and maintain a democratic regime (Diamond, 1997).

### **Income**

The overall wealth of a country has a strong link to democracy. Democracies survive in wealthier societies due to higher incomes lowering the conflict over the distribution of income. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, which is the best measure of a country's standard of living, is especially low in Middle Eastern countries compared to democratic countries. For instance, comparing the GDPs of the United States (\$56,469), Canada (\$43,324), and Germany (\$41,324) to Syria (\$2,080), Yemen (\$1,406) and Afghanistan (\$570) shows the drastic gap in quality of living between these Western and Middle Eastern countries (Freedom House, 2018). Without a higher level of living, the ability to establish and maintain democracy in this area would be difficult to accomplish. In addition, the continued economic development of a country has a strong effect of the likelihood that democracy endures (Diamond, 1997).

Poor democracies, they are more likely to have a fragile government that is ruled by a dictator. Citizens in poverty-stricken countries consume less, live shorter lives, have more children, see more of them die, and are more likely to suffer from collective violence. Simply put, people with low incomes lead poor lives which hinders democratic development (Przeworski, n.d.). Therefore, without a gradual rise in country income and standard of living, the chance for transition to democracy is low and the continuation and survival of democracy is even lower.

### **Resources**

Resources have a stronghold on a country and how they work due to its ability to create income for the country. Throughout the MENA, oil, natural gas, and phosphate is plentiful and

is the main exports of many of these countries. When a country has bountiful resources, this “curse” can evolve that creates significant social, economic, and political struggles. The resource curse signifies to the countries that have plentiful resources but fail to use these resources for effective public welfare needs, (The Resource Curse, 2015).

In the MENA, there are countries that have more freedom and democratic practices with limited resources, than countries that have bountiful resources. These countries have included Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia in the past (Ross, 2011). Even though resources allow for economic growth from the high demand around the world, these countries are also experiencing economic droughts. These droughts can be referred to as an economic boom “hangover” because of the long-term recession effects, putting them in a worse position than if they did not have the resource. This cycle can cause increased amounts of corruption, violent outbreaks, and inequality resulting in a decreased chance in democracy (Shaxson, 2007).

The resource curse has halted democracy development within this region. The main resource of the Middle East is oil, and this has created a blockade for the rise of democracy. Heavily using resources revenues to fund a country tends to decrease autocracies likelihood of democratizing (Wiens, 2014). That is, by using resources as the main income and creating a rentier economy, taxes in the MENA countries tend to be lower than other countries. Rentier economies are established when a country has a source of income other than taxes, for many of the MENA countries this income comes from oil. The lack of taxation in this type of economy affects the accountability of the government due to the lack of ability for citizens to protest their government. In Arab countries, most tax receipts are derived from indirect sales and customs taxes hidden in the price. These types of tax typically conceal the direct link between tax payments and funding of the public purse, thus weakening public pressure for accountability

(Whitaker, 2010). When this is the case, the opportunity for the government to conceal money from the public and use it for the government's own use increases, which can include police equipment to suppress the population or any coups that may occur. Similarly, the government can buy off the population when this happens, and people will submit for the money. Any country having sizeable amounts of petroleum or other exportable natural resources is unlikely to distribute the resulting wealth to most people, to grow a diversified modern economy, or to become a democracy (Samuels, 2021). When this occurs, the concentration of wealth is in the hands of landlords, powerful families, and the political elites, while the lower class is deprived of basic needs.

### **Education**

Having a well-educated population is another factor that influences democracy. Almond and Verba argued that education is a critical determinant of civic culture and involvement in democratic politics (Glaeser, 2007). Indeed, studies show that there is a strong correlation between education and democracy. In a democratic society, students need to understand how they, their community, and nation influence and are being influenced by the people, government, businesses, and other external actors (Center for Multicultural Education, 2005).

Education can influence individuals in multiple ways politically. Education allows individuals to engage in political action by having the ability to think critically, understand norms of tolerance, and recognize radical actions. This allows people to decide politically that they feel is best for themselves, their country, and everything that affects the selection (Kuhn, 2012). Schools provides the opportunity for young people to socialize in increase political involvement. Education allows for society-wide support for democracy due to the high participation benefits that are present within the education system (Glaeser, 2007).

With the general education that schools provide, education allows for a civic knowledge and broadening. As Almond and Verba argue, uneducated citizens are different political actors than those who were educated (Almond and Verba, 1989). Schools that teach the benefits of political participation, voting, serving in the military, among other things allow for greater opportunity for students to recognize corruption and how the political system can work for the people.

### **Basic Human Rights**

Respect for basic human rights is necessary for the development of democracies in countries. Rights such as freedom of speech, media, press, and assembly are required for a true democracy. According to Freedom House (2020), some of the least free countries of the world are present in the Middle East. When looking at the scores, political rights and civil liberties are considered to give each country a quantitative assessment of their freedom. Some of the scores that are possessed by these countries in 2019 include Saudi Arabia (7/100), Iran (17/100), and Yemen (13/100). The lowest score in the world is awarded to Syria who has a -1/100. Democratic countries have “Freedom Scores” far above those of the Middle East. The United States has an 86/100, India awarded a 77/100, and Canada boasts a near perfect 99/100.

In the case of Syria, there is relatively no electoral process, even with the government claiming to have fair elections. In many cases, the major democratic nations around the world deny the legitimacy of these elections (Freedom House, 2018). Furthermore, there are multiple obstacles that are put in place for newer political parties. For example, putting restrictions in place that prohibits groups with certain ideals and morals from forming. Even with the strict laws pushing for specific groups to maintain power, women have emerged on the political scene. If women do not have equal rights and opportunity, a true democracy will not be present in this

area of the world. Democracy offers an environment that respects human rights and fundamental rights, and in which the freely expressed will of people is applied. People have a say in choices and can hold decision-makers to account. Women and men have equal rights, and all people are free from discrimination” (United Nations, n.d.).

When these basic human rights are not implemented and enforced, parts of the population experience tremendous amounts of suffering and devastation. Clampdowns of freedom of expression can prompt imprisonment or even death when speaking out on topics that are restricted. Without clear human rights, the government, police, or regime can take advantage of using fear to control the population of feeling as though they have any power to overthrow the party in charge. The rights that are not being provided to the people of the MENA would empower the population.

### **External Actors**

The MENA has been heavily influenced by external actors throughout history. This impact has lasted and been significant enough to have an influence on the governmental structures that are in place within these countries. Actors across the globe have pushed for their own agenda across the MENA. Any struggle experienced in the region, or internationally, was met with international visitors with contradicting and differing visions for the regions, which allowed for external pressures across the MENA. Przeworski explains that as there is a higher proportion of democracies in the region, the higher the likelihood of democracy to survive in that country (Przeworski, 1997).

Considerable influence from other countries began post World War I. European influence increased when the Ottoman Empire was defeated by the British Empire. Britain and France maintained presence until the end of the 1960’s when the United States began to seek influence

within the region, (Stivachtis, 2018). Britain and France pushed for colonialism within the MENA, which contradicted any push that the MENA felt for democracy (Bates, 2011). During the Cold War, there was strong influence by the United States and Soviet Union struggling for power within the region due to their allies and location. Following September 11, 2001, The U.S. had strong support for invasion within the region (Stivachtis, 2018).

Role theory suggests that influence and regional developments through external actors have allowed for the rise of new generations of rulers in countries in the MENA, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. These countries have become the primary drivers of regional developments (Project on Middle East Political Science, 2019). When it comes to authoritarian regionalism, regional organizations and neighboring countries may use different tools to control their government and support similar authoritarian regimes that have similar and parallel agendas. These tools include redistributing resources and providing legitimacy, (*Understanding authoritarian regionalism*, n.d.)

A specific example of external actors playing a specific role in domestic politics by redistributing resources is in Bahrain during the Arab Spring uprisings. Once the protests began, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an economic and political union of Arab states comprising of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain, financed a 10 billion USD package of support. This support package provided backing to the population of Bahrain to suppress them from continuing their demonstrations (Debre, 2021).

### **Hypothesis and Research Design**

As aforementioned, the independent variables I examine are population diversity, inequality of wealth, income, resources, education, basic human rights, and external actors to

explain the likelihood of democracy. To accomplish this task, I utilize quantitative and qualitative methods<sup>1</sup> and will compare these variables to their correlation to a democracy index.

#### Demographic Variables:

*Population diversity* can be studied through demographics data. The demographic variable that will be studied as religious affiliation. This demographic will be studied due to their inherent ability to affect the individual and their decision making. *Education* is a crucial component to democracy. Without an educated population, democracy is difficult to develop. When looking at this variable, the data that will be evaluated will be the average years of education for the citizens of the country. *Basic Human Rights* is a component to democracy but is also a variable that increases when democracy is present within a country. Once that country increased human rights, there will be an increase in democracy. When looking at this variable, qualitative data from the 2020 Political Terror Score will be used. *External Actors* can have a large effect on a country that is attempting to develop a democracy. To study this variable, qualitative data will be assessed at involving aid provided and additional countries that are making a significant impact on the specific country and if the countries that surround them are authoritarian regimes.

#### Economic Variables:

*Inequality of wealth* will be studied through the income levels of the citizens of each country. Looking at the difference between the upper, middle, and lower class within each country is crucial for this variable. This variable will be studied through quantitative data of each country's GINI ratio between 0 and 100 with data from the World Bank. 0 representing perfect

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<sup>1</sup> Countries that will be studied include the following MENA and surrounding countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, U.A.E. Yemen, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Chad, Cyprus, Somalia, Sudan, and Turkey.

equality and 100 reflecting perfect inequality (*Gini Index*, n.d.). *Income* level will be examined through gross domestic product (GDP) of each country. *Resources* is complex to measure. When looking at resources, there is qualitative data, as each country provides different resources, but mostly oil. The data that will be observed will examine the amount of oil exported annually.

From the variables that will be studied, I developed the following hypotheses:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Higher level of diversity within a religion allows for an increase in democracy.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: Higher levels of inequality hinder democratic development.*

*H<sub>3</sub>: In countries that have a higher GDP, democracy is more likely to develop.*

*H<sub>4</sub>: Countries with higher levels of oil resources are less likely to develop a democracy.*

*H<sub>5</sub>: Countries that have higher education levels are more likely to develop democracy.*

*H<sub>6</sub>: Countries that fail to respect basic human rights are less likely to develop a democracy.*

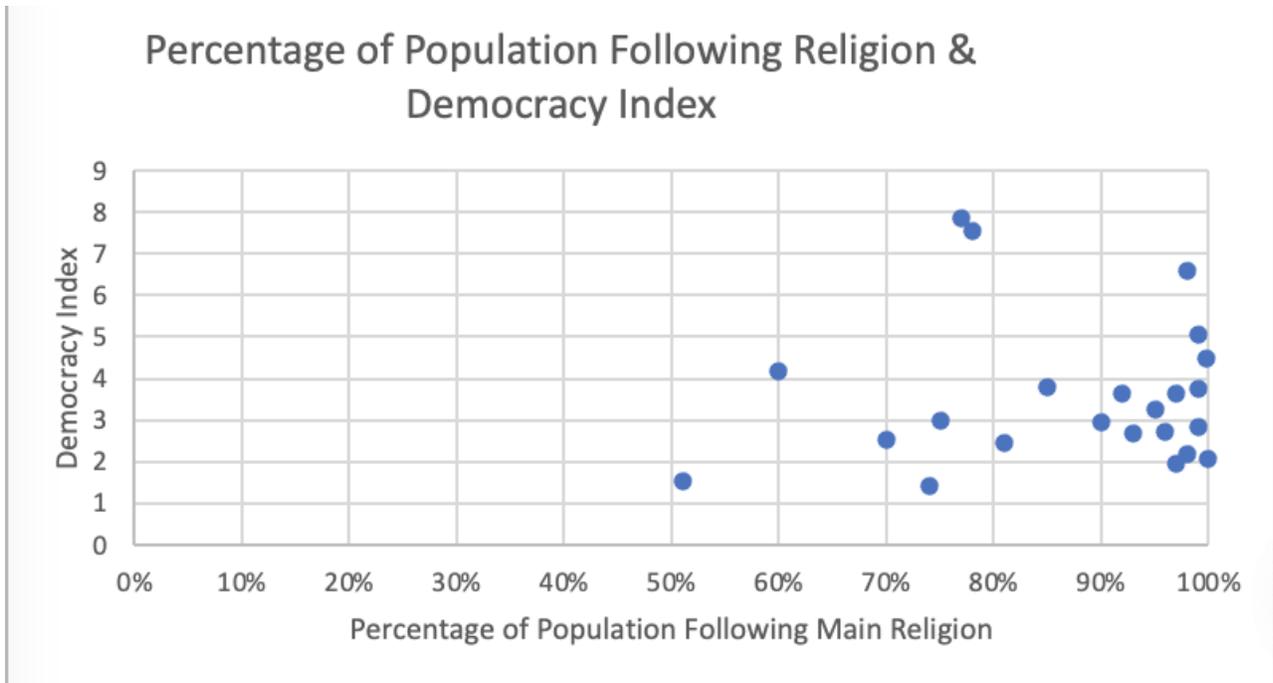
*H<sub>7</sub>: Countries that are surrounded by authoritarian regimes are more likely to remain authoritarian.*

Therefore, countries that have high population diversity, low inequality of wealth, higher income level, abundant resources, high education, high basic human rights, and low external actors will be the countries that are the most likely to develop and sustain democracy.

## **Results & Discussion**

I will be performing a mixed analysis to assess the hypothesis listed. I examine the twenty-five MENA and surrounding countries to discover correlations between my independent variables and democracy outcomes. Each analysis is compared to a Democracy Index from

Freedom House<sup>2</sup>. These index scores are evaluated and assigned to each country after evaluating their political rights and civil liberties that are accessible to citizens of the given country.



<sup>2</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/>

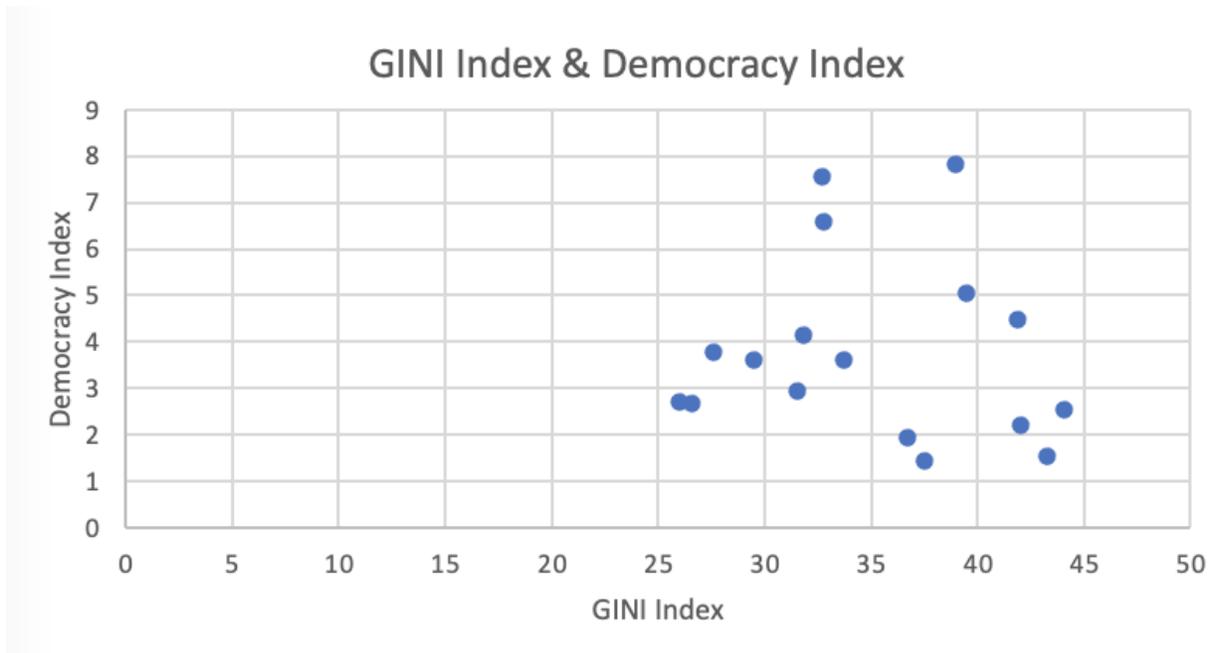
When comparing the percentage of citizens practicing the most followed religion of each country<sup>3</sup>, I find no relationship to democracy. Running a correlation between the two variables produces a correlation coefficient of 0.047, almost exactly no correlation. This shows that even if there is a nearly homogeneous population with the same religious beliefs, it does not individually have a strong effect on a country's ability to develop a democracy. The data clearly depicts the percentage of a population following their main religion on its own has no effect on a country's democracy index.

The Democracy Index shows the score from 0-10 for the current year. 0 shows a lack of democracy and 10 shows a sustaining and successful democracy. The percentage of the population that follows the most followed religion in that country is shown<sup>4</sup>. If the literature review would have been correct, there would be an increase in the democracy index when there is less of the population following the most followed religion, as the population would be increasingly more diversified. An example of this is how Chad has the lowest percentage of the population following the highest followed religion (51%), yet they have one of the lowest democracy index in the study (1.55).

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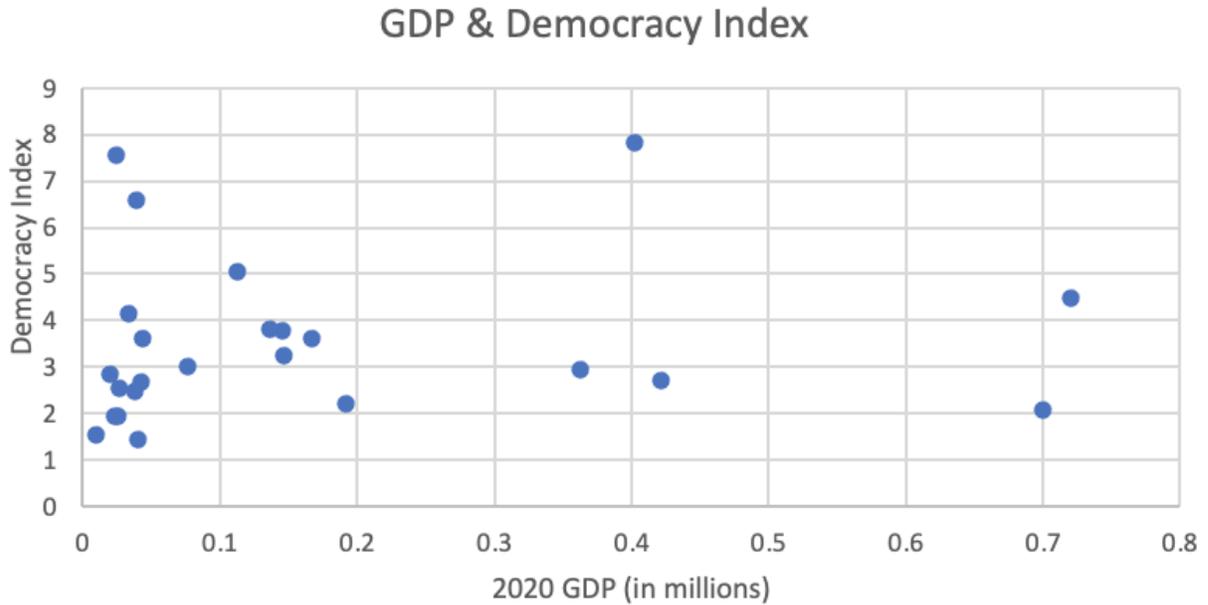
<sup>3</sup> Data from <https://www.infoplease.com/world/social-statistics/world-religions> shows the percentage of the population that practices the religions within the country.

<sup>4</sup> Data is from 2017.



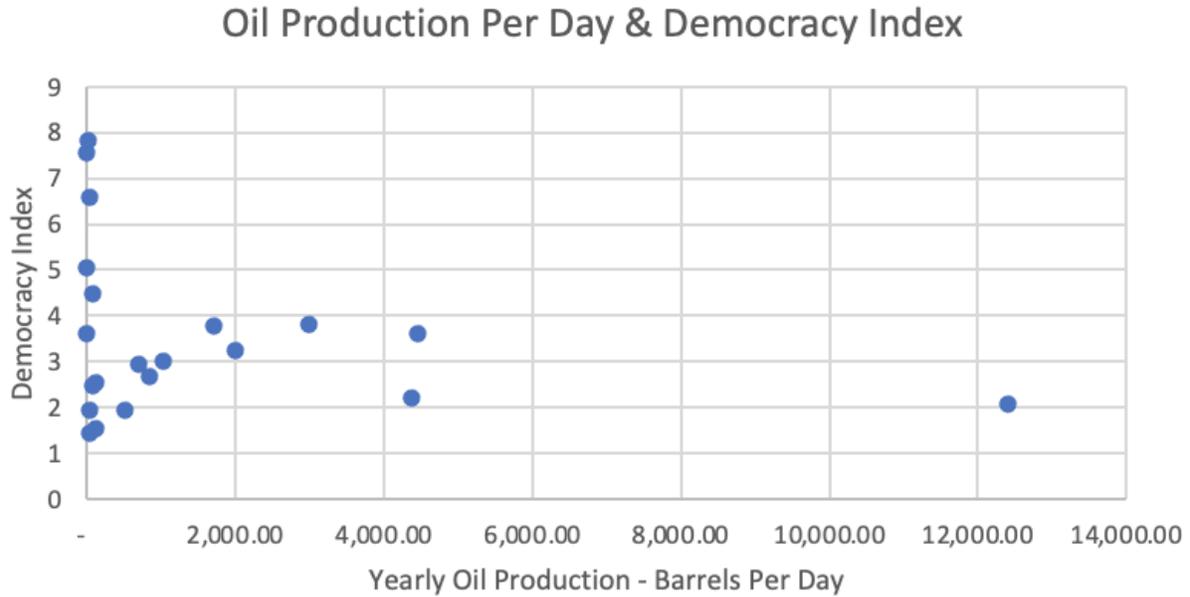
When looking at the GINI Index<sup>5</sup> created by the World Bank and comparing them to the democracy index of each country, there is no relationship. The correlation between the two variables is -0.086. The proposed hypothesis and literature theoretical model do not translate into reality as in the countries with higher economic inequality will develop democracy. When looking at the data, a higher index should indicate greater democracy, according to my hypothesis, but after comparing the data, there is not a correlation. This can be seen by Sudan, who has one of the highest GINI index scores in the data set (44.1) but only has a democracy index of 2.54.

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?view=map>



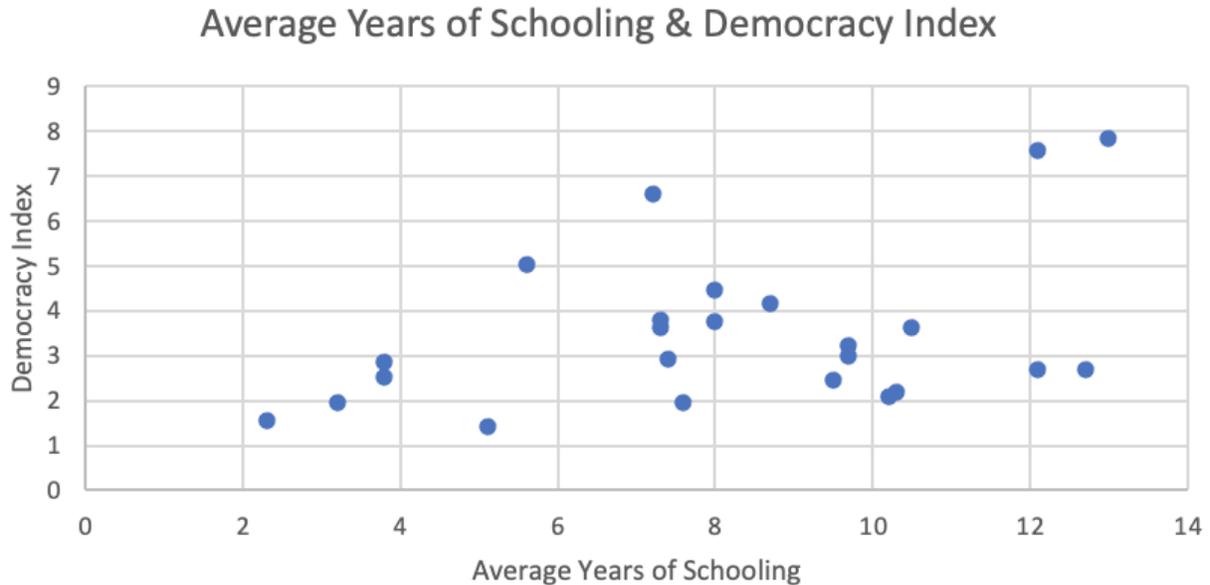
After looking at current GDP<sup>6</sup> by the World Bank compared to the democracy index, there is no relationship. The correlation was 0.087. This means that higher GDP does not cause democracy, contrary to my hypothesis and literature. According to my hypothesis, a country that has a higher GDP should also have a higher level of democracy because high GDP is associated with high levels of production, meaning manufacturing, and purchasing of goods. The data that was compared did not provide this correlation.

<sup>6</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2020&start=1960&view=chart>



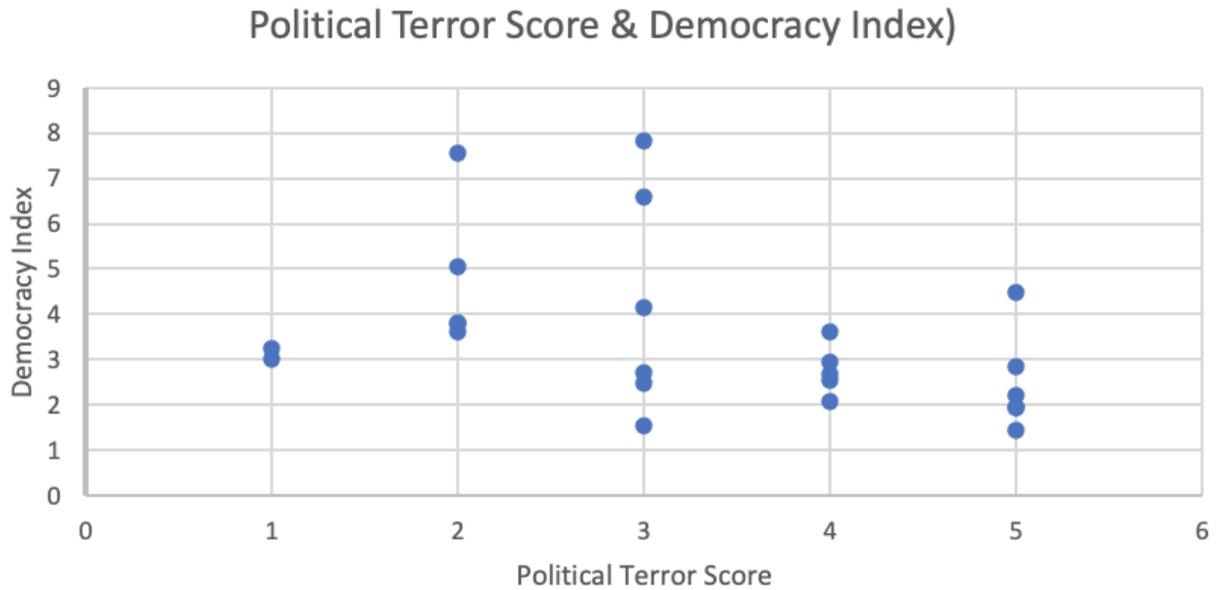
When looking at the oil production by country<sup>7</sup> compared to democracy index, the correlation is -0.244, which is not strong, but relatively negative. This is an expected result, with the more oil and resources that a country produces, the less chance for democracy to develop, clearly showing that there is a resource curse. The data that was compared was the ranking in the world of oil production to the democracy index. This correlation can be shown by the example of Saudi Arabia being the second highest producer of oil in 2019 with about 12 million barrels produced a day and having one of the lowest democracy indexes within the data set of 2.08.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/oil-production-by-country/>



When looking at the average years of schooling within each country<sup>8</sup>, there is a moderate positive correlation of 0.401. This is consistent with literature and my hypothesis that more educated countries create and maintain democracy, while lesser educated countries struggle to develop a democracy. Countries that have a higher level of education can be more informed and able to make educated decisions about themselves and can recognize when governments are abusing their powers. By looking at the graph, the data shows that countries with higher average years of education tend to have a higher freedom score. Israel boasted the highest average years of education with 13 and has the highest freedom score of 7.83 which signified a flawed democracy according to Freedom House.

<sup>8</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/average-schooling-vs-expected-schooling?tab=table>



There was a moderate, negative correlation of  $-0.395$  between the Political Terror Score for 2020<sup>9</sup> and Democracy Index. Consistent with my hypothesis and the literature, there is a correlation between human rights and democracy. The political terror score is between 1-5, 1 demonstrating countries with secure rule of law and people not being imprisoned for their views, while a 5 shows terror expanding to the entire population. Political leaders in a country with 5 will use whatever means necessary to pursue their personal agenda. This correlation shows that countries with a higher score on the scale will be less democratic, which is consistent with the hypothesis.

When looking at external actors, out of twenty-four countries<sup>10</sup>, eighteen countries (75%) are considered Authoritarian Regimes. Consistent to the hypothesis, when a country is surrounded by other authoritarian regimes, there are countries that can support similar governments and will fight any change. When looking at military coups gaining control within

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.politicalterroryscale.org/Data/Datatable.html>

<sup>10</sup> Somalia not included due to lack of data.

the MENA, requiring external actors, Sudan's democratic transition was halted November 2021 by a coup that has caused the assistance of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Similarly, Egypt has been seeking assistance from international partners, including Ethiopia (Faucon, 2021). The role of these external actors is to advocate for reform and make the legitimate and necessary dialogue for change. These foreign states, foundations, NGOs, and international institutions have the opportunity of reinforcing the role and stature of democracy in the MENA and facilitating democratic practices and discussions (*The role of external actors*, n.d.).

### **Conclusion**

There is not sufficient evidence that the Middle East will be able to democratize effectively. First and foremost, most attempts of implementing democracy have failed. The landscape and lack of industrialization also plays a role in the inability to apply democratic systems into this area. Lastly, the educational system, or lack thereof, struggles to educate their children and citizens as a whole and education is one of the biggest factors in the success of democracy.

When looking to see if a shift in government occurs, regional counterparts are analyzed. "A country is more likely to transition to democracy or nondemocracy when the same transition recently occurred in other countries in the same region" (*Democracy does cause growth*, 2017). In the case of the MENA, if one country transitions to democracy, we could see a domino effect. However, there is not enough sufficient evidence to conclude that the Middle East will democratize.

A study can be conducted to give a better answer that has a larger amount of quantitative data, rather than qualitative data that is seen in literature review. A suggested study that can be conducted is the comparison of a control group of democratic countries to a group of selected Middle Eastern and North African countries. Variables such as GDP, education level, and current government systems can be analyzed to recognize the Middle Eastern country's possible ability to become a democracy. This type of study could help add vital quantitative data that could help predict the democratic development in Middle Eastern and North African countries.

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