

## REGIONALISM FROM ISLAMIC VIEWS: THE CASE OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA) REGION

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**Abstract:** *Regional experiences have certain assumptions in common and have been framed within a common globalist perspective. Nevertheless, each regional cooperation process has its own distinctive features. This diversity reflects the differential local characteristics of regionalism which need to be included in any discussion about the subject. The case of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) stands out clearly in this context. This study addresses two major research questions. Firstly, what is the Islamic perspective on regional cooperation? secondly, is there any role of Islam in reshaping MENA's regional cooperation? The objectives are to investigate the Islamic perspective of regional cooperation with regard to MENA and to examine the role of Islam in shaping MENA's cooperation. This study uses Islamic perspective and regional cooperation as its conceptual framework. It is found that despite some positive motives of regionalism, MENA suffers from poor regionalism. It is characterised by slow and weak regional cooperation process and the absence or less dependency on Islamic values. On the other hand, the dependence of MENA on the political processes and economic development of the West; conflicts and weak governance; and the suffering in promoting a collective identity have continued to preserve the MENA region as an under-developed, less integrated and poorly cohesive regional unit.*

**Keywords:** *Regional Cooperation, Islamic Perspective, Regionalism, MENA Region*

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### Introduction

Regional experiences have certain assumptions in common and have been framed within a common globalist perspective. Nevertheless, each regional cooperation process has its own distinctive features. This diversity reflects the differential local characteristics of regionalism which need to be included in any discussion about the subject. The case of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) stands out clearly in this context. There is considerable and growing interest on how religion impacts economic, social, legal and political developments of countries. Most economists generally agree that there are many determinants of economic growth and that successful explanations of economic performance have to go beyond narrow economic variables to encompass political and social forces. Religion is one such force and currently there is considerable attention on the role of religion in economics (Laurence, 1990; 1998; Rehman & Askari, 2010).

Islam has always played an important part in the MENA region. Therefore, Islam should be integrated with any study that attempts to explain or analyse the phenomena in the region. Muslim scholars agree that Muslim countries can perform better economically when they apply the Islamic principles and teachings. The application of Islamic teachings can further promote free markets, economic growth, good economic governance, systems and policies that encourage social justice; all of these are fair and just to all members of society and include global standards of human and political rights. Lastly, and most importantly, they promote and foster better international relationships with neighbouring countries as well as foster regional cooperation and integration.

The researcher intends to highlight the Islamic perspective and its relation with the regional economy of the MENA region. Therefore, in this study, we will focus only on those concepts that might be applicable for an analysis of MENA experience. As a fact, the modern concepts of regionalism focusing on analysing already well-established institutions are inapplicable. Thus, we have chosen those concepts which analysed the very outset of the regionalism process in MENA region since the creation of Arab Union. For the theoretical analysis of cooperation, we focus on two views based on Islamic perspective.

Also, despite the many studies that have been conducted on regionalism in MENA, there are few that explain and explore the role of religion as a characteristic of regionalism in the region. Halliday (2005) mentions that the common assumption among scholars is that MENA is an exceptional case, quite different from other regions in the world yet incomprehensible to outsiders and this is because of the role of religion within the region. Therefore, this study attempts to provide a framework that recognises the common characteristics of regionalism of MENA as well as clarify the role of religious characteristic as a contributor to cooperation and as an exceptional feature of the MENA region.

## **Literature Review**

There is a wealth of literature on the Middle East and North Africa as well as on regional integration that describes an array of activities, especially on state-led efforts to develop different aspects of cooperation in the region. However, most of the literature does not deeply link regional cooperation, regionalism and new regionalism to the Islamic perspective. Thus, this literature can be discussed under the following headings: the concept of regionalism and regional cooperation in the MENA region.

### **Concept of Regionalism**

Extensive scholarly interest in regionalism has yet to generate a widely-accepted definition of this term (Mansfield & Milner, 1999). As a result, the concept of regionalism is used differently by different authors. For instance, according to Karl Deutsch, any cooperation starts with an increasing level of social interaction and communication. It leads modern governments to the formation of communities, in which no state or region poses a threat to any other (Deutsch, 1953). Regionalism can also be defined as a multi-dimensional process of regional integration that includes economic, political, social and cultural aspects (Hettne, 1995). According to Hettne (1995), regional integration is a package rather than a single policy, concerned with either economics or other aspects. Regionalism may also mean a complex process of change involving state as well as non-state actors, occurring at global, regional and national levels. It is not easy to state which level is dominant because actors and processes interact at different levels and their relative importance differs over time and space.

Economic integration is basically concerned with efficiency in resource use with particular reference to the spatial aspect. Necessary conditions for its fullest attainment include the freedom of movement of goods and of factors of production, and an absence of discrimination amongst members of the group (Robson, 1987). Thus, economic integration is a means, not an end. In practice, most economic groupings are established or advocated partly for political and security reasons whose importance as a factor in understanding the actual progress of economic integration can scarcely be over-rated (Tabb, 1999). Anderson and Blachhurst (1993) describe regional economic integration as a process of reducing the economic significance of national political boundaries within a geographic area. Both authors agree that Europe is the most popular sample of integration.

### **Regional Cooperation in MENA Region**

While numerous regional blocks exist all over the world, the geographic nations of MENA have been slow and unsuccessful in joint efforts for economic cooperation among themselves. Limited arrangements for regional integration have been attempted in the past by a number of countries from the region. However, they generally fail to produce concrete results.

The economic and political state of the region in the past was far from conducive to any form of regional cooperation. A glance at the forms of regional organisations which have emerged in the Middle East and North Africa since 1945 will show that such organisations have primarily been concerned with security (Fawcett, 1995). The states have been established to allow the governments involved to preserve an existing political order within and between their countries. In some cases, this has been due to perceived military danger which has been assumed to threaten all the independent states involved. Another motive, often operating jointly with the foregoing, has been the fear of potentially disruptive political developments in the region which might destabilise the politics of the states concerned by endangering the various regimes. At times, these fears have produced regional organisations which are designed to answer not simply regional concerns about security but also those of the Western powers (Tripp, 1995).

Focusing on regionalism in MENA usually includes a list of regional organisations and institutions that have been set up to promote growth and market efficiency in this part of the world but in reality the main focus is on security and the struggle for regional power (Santi, Romdhane & Shaw, 2012). Among these are Arab League (AL), Maghreb Union (MU), Arab Cooperation Council (ACC), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Mediterranean Free Trade Area (MFTA).

The most obvious regional organisation in MENA incorporating all of the Arab countries is AL. The ultimate goal of the Arab League at its establishment was to liberate Palestine (Tripp, 1995). It might be argued, however, since most of the Arab and Muslim countries in the region were under colonisation during this period, the main objective at that time was actually to liberate most of the states, including Palestine.

However, According to Nonneman (1992), the organisations within the region had, in reality, been based firmly on the state system and interstate relations rather than on regional cooperation. There was always deep-rooted mistrust and a serious ideological polarisation between the so-called progressive leadership in the Arab republics and the conservative Arab monarchies. State interests and state nationalism took a *de facto* lead over regionalism, although some concepts like Arabism continued to play an ideological role. Moreover, Hasou (1985) points out that firstly, and because of internal and external factors, organisations like

the Arab League turned into a regional body that reflected MENA countries rivalries, contradictions and the seemingly endless disputes among the states within the region (Hasou, 1985). Secondly, the reason for regional weakness was the member states' lack of confidence and trust in cooperation because of the widely conceived domination by some MENA states.

Although MENA is often regarded as a peculiar exception to global trends and norms, when it comes to regionalism, discussions on prospects for the process of increased regional cooperation in the Middle East flourished back in the 1980s (Carkoglu, 1998). An example of this increase in regional cooperation is the creation of certain organisations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Maghreb Union. All kinds of cooperation schemes in MENA have remained at low level. In terms of regional organisation, little has been achieved (WTO, 2011). Also, the study on regional and sub-regional organisations in MENA cannot be separated from an analysis of the factors that may lead to more failure in regional cooperation. The Gulf Crisis, for instance, dealt a devastating blow on the organisation of its regional system, highlighting its profound deficiencies.

### **Framework for the Study**

Islam is a source of unique perspectives on relations between people and nations. With the idea of cooperation as one of the guiding principles, it resists entertaining any distinction between religious teachings and temporal issues and affairs in the realm of different subjects of life. Temporal issues are as relevant as the so-called religious affairs to the human pursuit of the divine. As a community, Muslims view Shari'a law as the most important source of ethics to guide human actions in all sectors of life and as the most visible expression of Muslim identity. In this matter, Fuller (2016: 9) says that:

“Unlike in the West where Shari'a as a body of religious principles and rulings is perceived by many as dated, negative, and inappropriate to a more modern and secular world—in the Muslim world the concept of Shari'a is a strongly positive one. The word Shari'a itself derives from the Arabic root for “path” or “way”; it suggests a broad and generalized notion resembling in part the use of the term “The Way” in other religious traditions, including Christianity and Buddhism. It represents a quest to create a society in which people live in accordance with God's will and law, thereby perhaps attaining divine grace. In this sense, then, Shari'a can be perceived as above all a concept, something more than just a specific body of prescriptive laws.”

As such, Muslims see Shari'a as representing the core of their faith, an expression of the moral and legal framework within which to live on earth. For most Muslims, it represents a positive virtue worthy of embrace. This law is generally viewed as not only all-embracing in the scope of its applications but also dynamic enough to be adaptable to the changing needs of space and time. Therefore, we can distinguish between two major views that are leading the discussions in the Muslim world towards unity and cooperation:

1. Subjects are interrelated and comprehensive in Islam and we cannot separate them, *totally*. Therefore, cooperation should be the result of a good connection between economics, social, political and other different subjects.
2. Realising the objective of unity should be based on several ways of achieving integration. It does not matter if there is benefit from the West or not but choosing the correct way of cooperation that can be based on economic liberalisation, economic dependence or any other kinds of cooperation is more important.

### **Interrelatedness and Comprehensiveness in Islam**

First of all, Islam emphasises that Muslims must cooperate with each other and they must avoid becoming divided:

*“And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favour of Allah upon you - when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favour, brothers”.*  
[Qur’an 3: 103]

*“And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is severe in penalty.”* [Qur’an 5: 2]

Therefore, cooperation is not a choice in Islam; it is a must and a duty in all aspects of life. To this can be attributed the conceptual underpinnings of Muslim political thinking, which tend to view issues as interrelated rather than separated. Issues are typically seen as part of an overall phenomenon in which all elements lead to each other. There is little distinction between the political and the non-political, society and ethics, politics and economics, and state and religion. Muslim scholars agree that Islam is ‘a system of life’ in which the social, moral, economic and political components are part of the overall system.

Scholars have asserted that in Islam, all elements of life are and should be interrelated if the objective is to build a strong Muslim society. Islam is a way of life encompassing moral, social, economic and political sub-systems which are integral parts of an overall Islamic system. Al-Jabiri (1996), a famous thinker in the contemporary Arab world, has also emphasised this element of inter-connectedness in Arab and Muslim political thinking. He argues that Muslim thinkers did not view space and location as independent of their substance, as they linked the object with its location and space, and viewed them as one entity (Al-Jabiri, 1996: 143). Such a tendency partially explains why a disagreement among MENA countries on one issue spills over to all other issues which may not necessarily be a matter of dispute (Selim, 2011).

Moreover, and in distinguishing Muslim societies from secular ones, Abdul Rashid Moten (2011) argues that secular societies may not garner much value in understanding any phenomenon from an Islamic perspective for several reasons. Firstly, there is no difference in Islam between spiritual and temporal issues and affairs. It lays down the rules of human conduct, encompassing all spheres of human life. Moten (2011) prefers to see religion as "not a departmental affair, it is neither mere thought, nor mere feeling, nor mere action; it is an expression of the whole man". According to Moten (2011), “the *comprehensiveness* of Islam does not allow politics or economy or any other subject to be out of its fold, nor would it permit politics to become a dirty business” (Moten, 2011) and therefore, Islam does not separate matters about life from each other.

Secondly, the central concept of Islam, *Tawhid* (Unity and Sovereignty of God), rejects the power of control and making laws or commands to anyone but God. To proclaim, as the Qur'an does frequently, that "the command rests with none but Allah" (Moten, 2011) is to repudiate anyone who claims absolute right and power over anything else:

*“And to Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and Allah is over all things competent “*[Qur’an 3:189].

*“Say, ‘Indeed, I am on clear evidence from my Lord, and you have denied it. I do not have that for which you are impatient. The decision is only for Allah. He relates the truth, and He is the best of deciders”*[Qur’an 6:57].

Thirdly, Islam also perceives a believer to be one who performs every individual and social activity for the sake of God. Finally, Islam demands a life in conformity with the law, the Shari'a, the implementation of which should eliminate injustice and abolish *oppression* from society. In Islam, the leader and the led both submit to the same Shari'a (Moten, 2011). Therefore, and based on these concepts of *interrelatedness* and *comprehensiveness* in Islam, the issue of economic cooperation in MENA, as part of the Islamic world, cannot be dealt separated from other issues. If cooperation is looked to as a must and as an objective, then all subjects - economic, political, social, security and so on - must come together in order to realise that objective.

### **Islam and the Concept of Economic Integration**

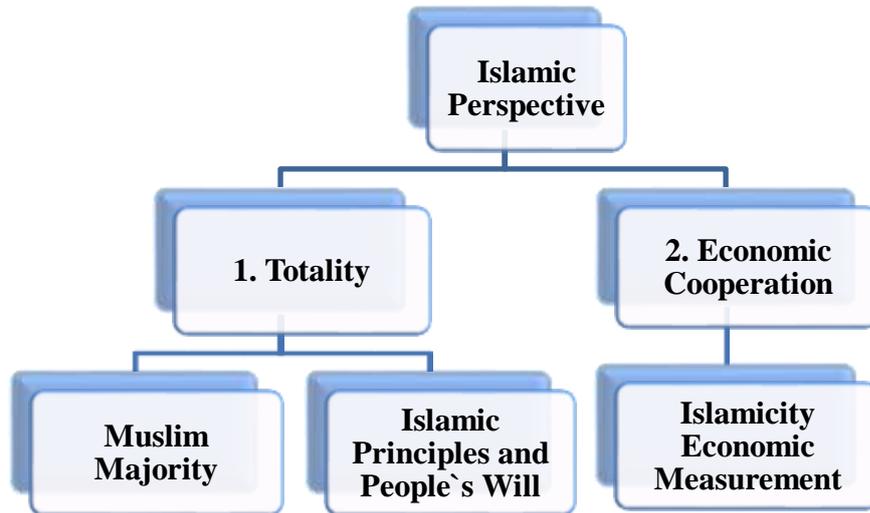
Another Islamic concept of cooperation which can be seen in different works like Chapra's (2001; 2009) thought for example, is that the goal of integration of economies is not something new to Muslim thinking. Unity of mankind is an essential corollary of the fundamental Islamic concept of the Unity of God (*Tawhid*) according to Chapra's point of view. If God is one, then mankind is also one. The distinctions created by nationality, race and colour are artificial and have no place in a religion which stands for human unity. The Qur'an clearly states that people were created as one nation (*Ummah*) but became divided because of their differences:

*"And mankind was not but one community [united in religion], but [then] they differed."* [Qur'an 10:19]

Conflicts of interest, prejudices, exploitations and misuse of power have all played their part in dividing mankind. However, the ultimate objective of religion is to re-unite all of them. There are several ways of achieving integration. One of these is the creation of better understanding among people through greater interaction and cooperation with a view to remove, or at least reduce the prevailing prejudices, misunderstandings and conflicts, at the same time promote morals and ethics. Since economics plays a dominant role in human life, the process of integration may be accelerated if the economies of different countries are integrated. This will promote increased mutual dependence. Integration of the economies may, however, be difficult to realise without the removal of all artificial barriers through trade liberalisation and non-discrimination that are Islamic concepts so as to allow free movement of goods, capital, labour, technology and information. Therefore, this point of view focuses more on economic issues to promote regional cooperation. The fulfillment of economic functions is an Islamic and rational choice in order to meet the objective of cooperation and unity.

However, this research tries to combine both points of view. Interrelatedness and comprehensiveness that represent totality are crucial in analysing and explaining the motives that lead to cooperation in the MENA region. In addition, choosing the correct function of cooperation is also important, both as a necessity for compatibility with the realities of the world and as a rational choice for the Muslim regions. This should in no way be in contradiction to Islamic principles. Figure 1 summarises the frame of this study.

**Figure 1 Frame of the Study**



**Source:** Created by the author.

Therefore, for the purpose of unravelling the role of Islam in shaping MENA's regional cooperation, this research has adopted a Muslim majority context and people's will of implementing Shari'a in the region as indicators and motives for regional cooperation. The study assumes that the more cohesive people are and accepting of Islamic principles, those can facilitate MENA regional cooperation. Meanwhile, the Economic Islamicity Index is thus an indicator to measure Islamic economic function.

Concerning the data, in this research, data for Muslim majority feature in the MENA region were obtained from the Pew Research Report (2015) and World Population Review (2018) while data on people supporting Shari'a in MENA were collected from the World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society report (Pew Research, 2013). Data and results for economy were obtained from the Islamicity Index (2016). Data were obtained for recent years in 20 MENA countries.

### **Discussion**

It is necessary first, to determine whether each MENA country is a Muslim-majority whose motive in life is to adopt and practise Islamic principles in all aspects of life, Shari'a. secondly, discuss the Muslim-majority countries demand a voice for Islam in public life to one degree or another. Finally, to determine whether MENA countries have really adopted and practised Islamic teachings in economy and could be correctly classified as Islamic in their economic and financial practises.

#### **Muslim-Majority as a Motive for Regional Cooperation in MENA**

MENA region is home to an estimated 550 million Muslims, or about 30% of the world's Muslim population. Of these, approximately 100 million live in Egypt, 80 million in Iran and another 82 million in Turkey; in other words, about half (50%) of the Muslims in the region live in these three countries. More than half of the countries in MENA have populations that are approximately 95% Muslims or greater. These include Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Mauritania and Yemen. Other countries in the region also have populations with a high percentage of Muslims, including Syria (92%), Oman (88%), Bahrain (81%), Qatar (87%), United Arab Emirates (76%) and Sudan (71%). Although most of the citizens of the Persian Gulf countries of Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are Muslims, these countries have a substantial number

of non-Muslim foreign workers who are not citizens; this brings down the total percentage of their populations that are Muslims. North Africa is also home to the three largest Muslim populations in the MENA region: Egypt (100 million), Algeria (42 million) and Morocco (36 million). Other countries in the region with large Muslim populations include Iraq (30 million), Sudan (30 million), Saudi Arabia (33 million), Yemen (30 million), Syria (17 million) and Tunisia (12 million). The population of the remaining 9 countries and territories in the region - Libya, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain - totals about 40 million Muslims.

The Muslim-majority countries in the MENA region should be a driving force for cooperation and unity. However, the Muslims in the region are gravitating toward conflicts and identity issues. The political and identity drivers of instability in the MENA region have become sources of conflicts. For example, most of the conflicts are exacerbated by the increased deployment of expressions of sectarian identities for political ends. State weakness in MENA tends to encourage recourse to identities that do not align with Muslim identity, such as sectarian, ethnicity, or tribal. Sectarian conflicts face the symptom of political conflict rather than the cause. Moreover, it could become a cause of violence as groups strike preemptively against perceived threats to their countries and communities or pursue revenge as in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Egypt. Also, Muslims are struggling and distracted by different internal issues like conflicts, economic problems and political instability. Therefore, it is difficult at the moment to work towards regional cooperation and make a solid platform for cooperation when solving internal problems is the priority.

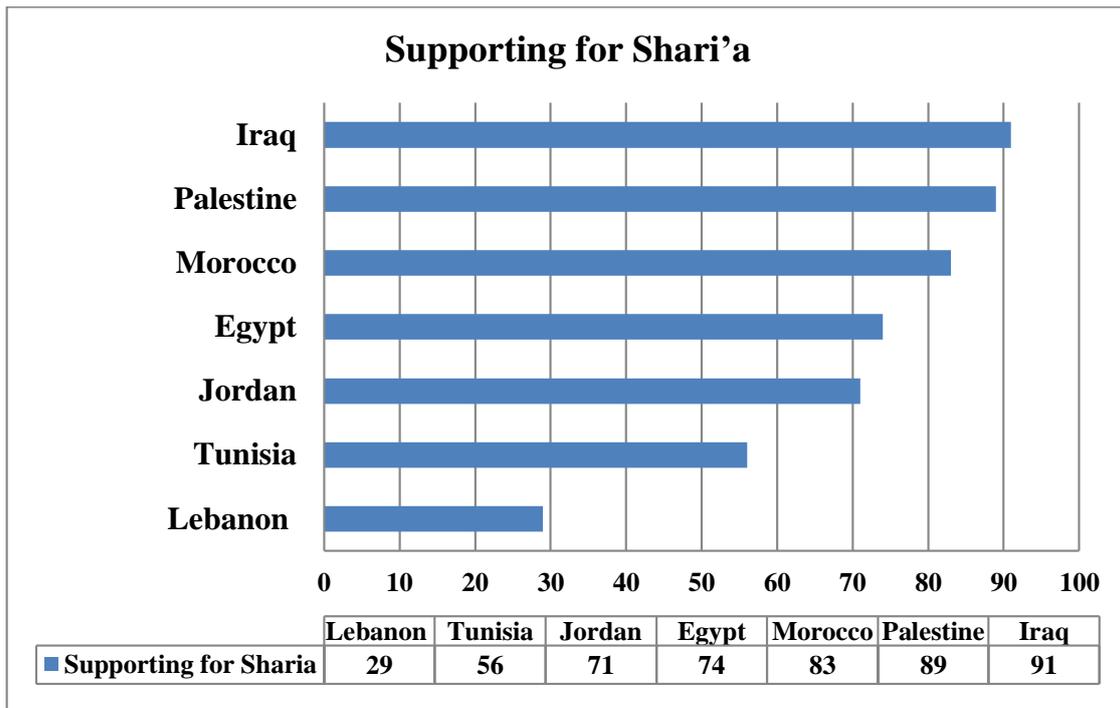
There is another important factor that influences the unity of MENA governments which is the role of outside powers. Some powers like America, Britain and France began to increase their economic and financial investment in MENA, creating new forms of economic and political separation between MENA countries. As an example of that, European Union is leading negotiations on tariffs, import and export, investment and economic add with different MENA countries but separately. Each country in the region is seeking its own interest whether it may affect other neighboring states or not. Therefore, this situation can be considering it as a sign of non-cooperation in the MENA region.

### **Islamic Principles as a People's Will**

Overwhelming percentages of Muslims in many countries want Islamic law (Shari'a) to be the official law of the land as found in worldwide surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center between 2008 and 2014. Shari'a can be broadly defined as the ethical principles set down in Islam's Holy Book (the Qur'an) and examples of actions (Sunnah) by Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Figure 2 shows the support for making Shari'a the law of state in some MENA countries.

According to a worldwide survey by the Pew Research Centre (2014), attitudes toward Islamic law vary significantly by country. Also, many supporters of Shari'a say it should apply only to their country's Muslim population. Support for making Shari'a the law of the land is highest in Iraq (median of 91%). Many Muslims in Palestine (median of 89%), Morocco (83%), Egypt (74%) and Jordan (71%) also favour enshrining Shari'a as the official law. But in Tunisia, only about half of the Muslims (56%) say Islamic law should be endorsed by the respective governments of each Muslim country.

**Figure 2 Supporting for Shari'a as Law of State (2015)**



**Source:** Pew Research Center. (2014). *The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*. Forum on Religion & Public Life: Washington, D. C: Pew Research Center.

As can be seen in Figure 2, in two countries - Tunisia (56%) and Lebanon (29%) - far fewer Muslims say Islamic law should be endorsed by their governments. The main explanation for this is that the Islamists will have weak governance and will never be able to lead the region according to that view. The typical Muslim state in MENA seeks the legitimacy that voluntary religious support could potentially provide but does not grant a degree of autonomy that could threaten legitimacy and crystallise an Islamic opposition. Poor governance on politics and economics has a spillover effect on religion.

Moreover, the majority of governments in the MENA region that have ruled over the past six decades by essentially secular leaders, have not had better governance records than those ruled by governments committed to Islam in one form or another. Secular regimes have been just as repressive as their religious counterparts. Cumulatively, the three North African Muslim leaders toppled in 2011 (Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi) had been in office for 96 years, an average of 32 years each; yet, they had never committed to good governance.

### **Measuring the Islamic Economy of MENA Region**

Rehman and Hossein (2008) argue that “we must still demonstrate that it is these teachings, and no other factors, that have shaped and determined their economic performance over time”. Based on Islamic principles, Rehman and Askari (2010) have tried to build a set of measurements that can be used to measure the levels of Islamic character of the Islamic countries and compare them with non-Islamic countries.

The following section provides a brief discussion and results of measurement of the Economic Islamicity Index (EI). Preliminary results indicate that the so-called and self-declared Islamic countries in the MENA region have not adhered to Islamic principles. The

result of this index concludes that MENA countries are poorly ranked compared to other countries based on the Economic Islamicity Index. Even though the majority of people in this region are Muslims, and most people support the Islamic principles, the implementation of the Islamic economy is still very much unsatisfactory and inadequate in reshaping economic cooperation in the MENA region.

**Table 1: the Economic Islamicity Index of MENA Region (2017)**

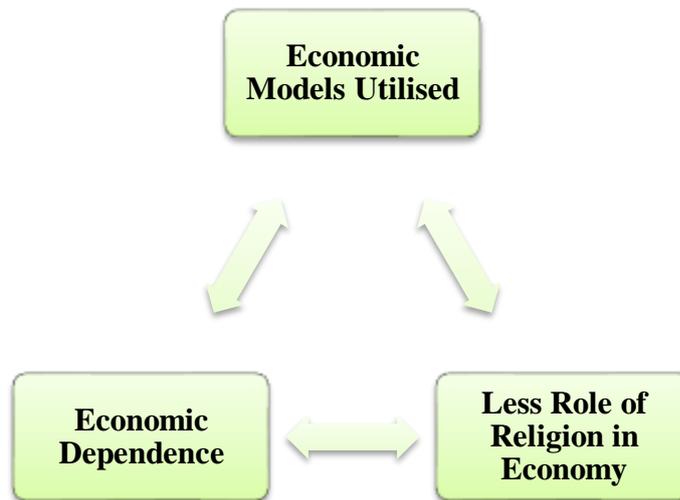
Country	MENA Region Rank	World Rank	Score
<b>UAE</b>	1	34	0.695
<b>Bahrain</b>	2	36	0.670
<b>Qatar</b>	3	38	0.664
<b>Oman</b>	4	45	0.623
<b>Kuwait</b>	5	46	0.617
<b>Jordan</b>	6	49	0.585
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	7	52	0.564
<b>Turkey</b>	8	71	0.485
<b>Tunisia</b>	9	73	0.470
<b>Morocco</b>	10	77	0.464
<b>Lebanon</b>	11	87	0.422
<b>Iraq</b>	12	96	0.413
<b>Syria</b>	13	103	0.380
<b>Algeria</b>	14	111	0.368
<b>Yemen</b>	15	116	0.353
<b>Egypt</b>	16	119	0.345
<b>Libya</b>	17	124	0.335
<b>Iran</b>	18	130	0.324
<b>Mauritania</b>	19	134	0.311
<b>Sudan</b>	20	142	0.275
<b>Average</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>84.15</b>	<b>0.468</b>

**Note:** Rehman and Askari (2016).

Based on the Economic Islamicity Index (EI), the highest ranked MENA country (among the first 50 economies) is UAE (ranked 34), followed in order by Bahrain (36), Qatar (38), Oman (45), Kuwait (46) and Jordan (49). The countries ranked 50 to 100 include Saudi Arabia (52), Turkey (71), Tunisia (73), Morocco (77), Lebanon (87) and Iraq (96). Finally, the largest category of MENA countries (from 100 to 150) includes eight economies which are Syria (103), Algeria (111), Yemen (116), Egypt (119), Libya (124), Iran (130), Mauritania (134) and Sudan (142). The average rank among MENA countries is 84.15 while the score is 0.468. Table 1 shows the Economic Islamic Index in MENA countries in 2017.

Unsurprisingly, there is a lack of economic, financial and social development that can be attributed to the cooperation problems of MENA countries, such as inefficient economic institutions, bad economic policies, underdeveloped rule of economic law, economic and financial as well as other traditional MENA countries issues. It is, in fact, other factors such as shortcomings in MENA countries' governments and their respective policies. These as well as the economic models utilised by these nations since their independence and economic dependence on other countries account for the dismal economic integration and progress in this region. Religion, however, has not had a role to play in this situation. The figure 3 summarise the dilemma and economic realities in MENA region that describe the lack of economic unilateral reforms toward cooperation.

**Figure 3 Economic Realities in MENA Region**



**Source:** created by the author.

### **Conclusion**

Starting the premise with regional cooperation from an Islamic perspective, the paper presents a background for the Islamic perspective along with an explanation on the concepts of regionalism and regional cooperation in the MENA region. There are two domineering views from the Islamic perspective. The first is totality when there is a combination of interrelatedness and comprehensiveness. The second view is based strictly on the role of economy as a functional element of cooperation.

The paper discussed the Muslim-majority countries in the MENA region and people's will of implementing Shari'a as motives for regional cooperation from a totality point of view. The Economic Islamicity Index was also applied as an indicator to measure the level of practising Islam in the economic areas of these MENA countries. Despite the existence of majority Muslims in the region and the people's will to implement Shari'a, the region is still unable to progress towards cooperation for several reasons; most importantly is that the building of state and regional cooperation in MENA has become a project of reinforcing the position of controlling elites in one way or another who have no interest in cooperation. The similarities in regional values, which used to be Islamic, have been replaced by occidental values and Western traditions. Conflicts have also increased disunity among Muslims in MENA rather than promoting cooperation and unity. Authoritarian states in MENA have been more intent on achieving state control of religious activities. On the other hand, poor governance on politics and economy has spillover effects on religion. The level of practicing Islamic principles in MENA region based on Islamicity Index shows that it is not high, and the practicing of Islam in terms of principles is partial even in majority Muslim countries within MENA, or for the countries that people have the will to practice Shari'a. Therefore, the role of Islam in reshaping regional cooperation in the MENA region is still far from realisation for the reason that there are many factors contributing to poor cooperation and disunity; and at the same time, those factors are hindering the implementation of Islamic perspective in the region.

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## Appendix

For the purpose of this study, MENA countries are:

Algeria	Egypt	Syria	Saudi Arabia	Kuwait
Morocco	Sudan	Iraq	Qatar	Yemen
Tunisia	Jordan	Turkey	Oman	Bahrain
Libya	Mauritania	Ira n	UAE	Lebanon

Main regional organisations in MENA region are:

Regional Organisation	Year	Remark
<b>Arab League (AL)</b>	1945	- Not functioning activity. There are a lot of disagreements among the member countries.
<b>Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)</b>	1981	- In 2017 Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Emirates decided to boycott Qatar. Countries are divided and there is no sign of cooperation.
<b>Arab Cooperation Council (ACC)</b>	1989	- The council has no power of legislation and enforcing laws among member countries.
<b>Arab Maghreb Union (MU)</b>	1989	- The organisation is not active since 1994, when there was a border dispute between Algeria and Morocco.
<b>Arab-Turkish Cooperation Forum</b>	2008	- Still in progress and economic negotiations.