Valuing Freedom and History in the Middle East: A Review of Mazinani's 'Full Freedom' Model

Academic Polemic

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Abstract

This paper qualitatively compares Mazinani's model for the measurement of freedom, the called Full Freedom model, with the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Freedom of the World Index (FWI) and examines the advantages and disadvantages of using this model for the measurement of freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The particularity of historical trajectories in the MENA will be held against the HDI and FWI. Then, shortcomings in Mazinani's model for the measurement of freedom will be assessed in relation to this model's dependency on its two competitors.

Keywords: Full Freedom, Freedom House, Human Development Index, Middle East and North Africa, political development, socio-economic development.

Introduction

In a recent edition of Politikon, Mehran Mazinani (2014) puts forward an inclusive and comprehensive model that aims to transcend and reduce the tension between two key indices of development. The Human Development Index (HDI), compiled by the UN, focuses on basic socio-economic indicators while the Freedom in the World Index (FWI), which is compiled by Freedom House, a non-governmental think tank, is exclusive to the field of politics and political freedom. Their divergent valuation of what constitutes 'freedom' puts them in opposition to one another in several regions in the world, most notably in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

This article will attempt to evaluate Mazinani's model of 'Full Freedom' against the background of modern historical trajectories of political and economic development in MENA countries. Mazinani's attempt to develop an inclusive index, combing the HDI and the FWI, encompasses a more complete definition of what freedom means. Additionally, Mazinani's model can be particularly fruitful in quantitatively expressing situations in which the HDI and FWI clash, notably in the MENA region. On the other hand, rightly because of this model's dependency on combining two models, it also tends to transmit their deficiencies.

Mazinani's Inclusive Model of Measuring Freedom

The Full Freedom model conglomerates the HDI and FWI as a way of representing more fully the concept of freedom, which Mazinani correctly beliefs, encompasses the totality of human wants and activity. The HDI and FWI are one of the most employed indices of socio-economic and political freedom respectively. The HDI attempts to successfully capture a skeleton conception of what modern socio-economic development means. HDI is calculated on three basic socio-economic indicators: life expectancy, income and education. The simplicity of the HDI has contributed to its success in evaluating development and creating a universal standard of human progress. Importantly, the HDI combines income and non-income indicators in describing socio-economic development. Consequently, along with the economy, the HDI endows the state with a crucial role in advancing societies.

Freedom House's FWI is calculated by giving numerical values to 25 topics related to their conception of freedom. These questions relate to political rights, the election process, political participation and state functioning, or to civil liberties, such as freedom of expression, associational rights, rule of law and individual rights. The FWI derives from Western conceptions of political progress, assuming that liberal values stand at the basis of what political freedom means. The Western nature of these values does not preclude their universal significance however. In fact, the spread of liberal values globally, closely connected to histories of imperialism and capitalism, has put such values at the center or periphery of many local demands for political change.

Mazinani chose these two models because of their role in representing both socio-economic and political indicators of freedom. In turn, he combines the two by averaging their respective influences into a combined index, which he calls the Full Freedom Index (FFI). FFI is inclusive:

the model assumes that freedom relates to a wide set of indicators found in economics, society and politics. His formula takes the forms of:

$$Full\ Freedom = \sqrt[5]{\frac{L.E.I}{PR.CL}}$$

Where L, E and I represent the UN's calculation of Life expectancy, Education and Income respectively, and PR and CL represent Political Rights and Civil Liberties as calculated by Freedom House.

Mazinani defines freedom "as whether or not a definite set of choices are actually available to a people, who have enough effective power to exercise them, regardless of whether they may or may not wish so" (2014: 87). The FFI is thus based on a conceptualization of freedom. Incorporating human wants and choices and this is reflected by combining socio-economic and political standards of development.

Mazinani focuses his attention immediately on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This region is particularly interesting for the FFI because it is where direct confrontation between the HDI and FWI tends to occur. While the HDI praises the advances in socio-economic development in the MENA and gives most of its countries a high or medium HDI rating, the FWI finds authoritarianism, corruption and limited civil liberties as the most important impediments towards political progress. In the most recent (2014) edition, the FWI argues that MENA "registered the worst civil liberties scores of any region [globally]".

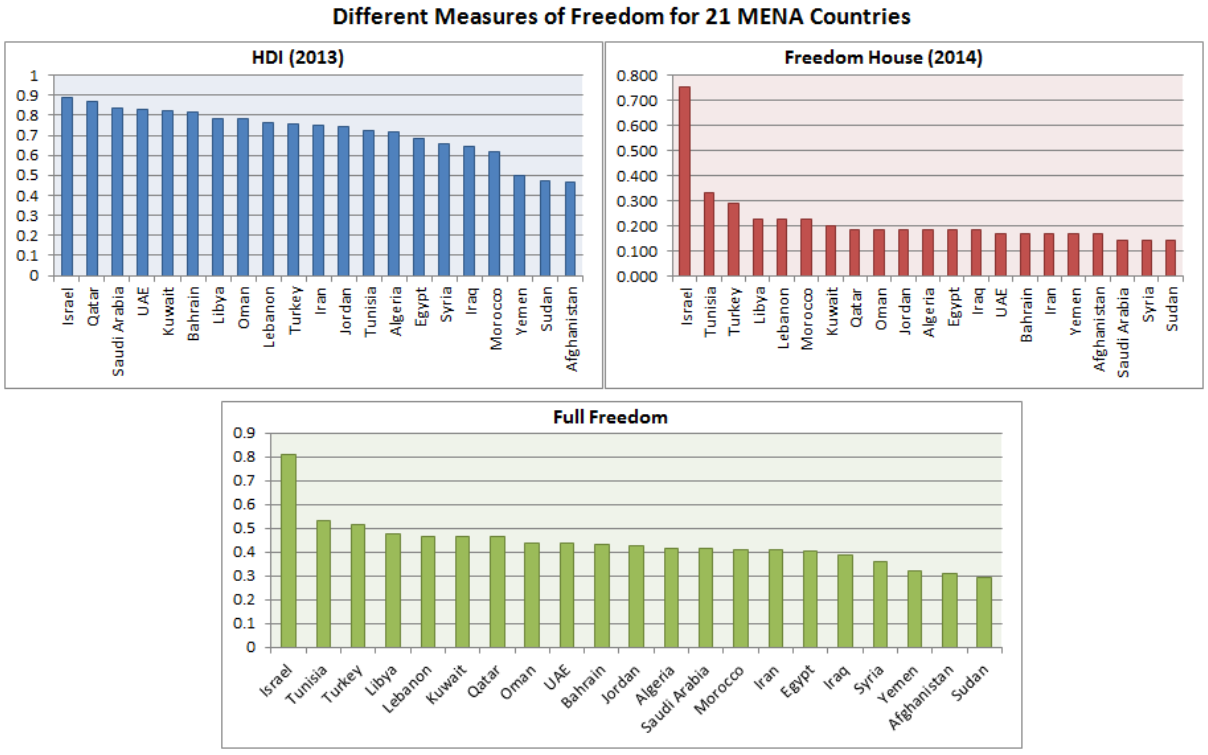
Inherent in this contradiction is the failure of both indices to translate complex historical trajectories of MENA countries in synchronized standards of political and socio-economic development. Most importantly, corporatist-military regimes have played a key role in the post-WWII history of MENA states. Such regimes were based on particular social contracts which tended to promote socio-economic advancement but hold back liberal standards of political progress.

The Advantages of FFI over HDI and FWI

While the HDI and FWI tend to sketch divergent histories of development, the FFI attempts to represent a more valid numerical representation of a reality inherently linked to history. Taken together the HDI and FWI sketch a conflicting image of what freedom means: on the one hand, liberties arising from socio-economic development are evaluated positively; on the other hand, much of the MENA is dubbed politically 'unfree' by the FWI. It is in this environment where the FFI can be of most practical use.

In trying to assess the usefulness of the FFI in representing freedom more accurately than its competitors, we may firstly note the balancing out of extreme political moments. One recent such extreme political moment was the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was a particular moment of political change in the Arab MENA, starting in 2011. As the name implies, the Arab Spring was seen by many analysts as the eventual 'waking up' of the Arab people in response to what were often decades of military rule. This idea of 'waking-up' is reflected numerically in the FWI ratings. Before the Arab Spring, most MENA countries 'slept' at the bottom end of the FWI. However, successful political change and democratization in a handful of MENA states suddenly

catapulted these countries to the very top of regional rankings. In the FWI's 2011 report, Libya was rated as one of the world's most 'unfree' countries and Tunisia was ranked on par with Iran and Afghanistan. However, in 2014, Freedom House ranked Tunisia and Libya second and fourth respectively in the MENA (see Appendix). These rapid quantitative movements of formal political freedom obscure human perceptions and feelings of freedom, which consists of a broader socio-economic context, in particular employment and income. In the case of Tunisia, while it received a score of 0.167 in 2011, this increased to 0.333 three years later. These rapid swings obscure reality. Notably, the HDI gives Tunisia a value of 0.716 in 2011, rising only to 0.721 in 2013, the most recent available HDI data set. These are much slower HDI growth rates than achieved between 1980-85 and 1990-2000. FWI thus encounters a problem of harmonizing static representations of a state (quantitative valuations of political freedom in one year) with total perceptions of freedom. A full account of freedom would tend to stress growth trends over the long-run, rather than sudden 'awakenings'. On the other hand, in the HDI interpretation of freedom, years of authoritarianism were more effective in promoting socio-economic development than the Tunisian revolution was. In fact, the HDI completely discounts the Arab Spring as a moment of change, and sees it instead as a moment of stagnation: a moment in which the state is temporarily unavailable for expanding public education amid widespread civil disobedience and paralysis of state institutions. The FFI is thus more fruitful on this regard by combining socio-economic and political indicators (compare graph 3 with graphs 1 and 2).



Source: Freedom House, Human Development Report, Mazinani (2014); compiled by Author.

Present Realities and Historical Trajectories in the MENA

Let us now have a deeper look into why contradictions between the HDI and FWI arise. As stated, our argument is that these contradictions are a result of the particular historical developments MENA states have experienced.

Contradictions between the HDI and FWI are reflected in what can be classified as three different main currents in modern historical development: Gulf Countries, Corporatist-Military Regimes and Underdeveloped States.[1] The cluster of countries belonging to each category can be listed as follows:

Gulf Countries	**Corporatist-Military**		**Underdeveloped**
Bahrain	Algeria	Libya	Afghanistan
Kuwait	Egypt	Morocco	Sudan
Oman	Iran	Syria	Yemen
Qatar	Iraq	Tunisia	
Saudi Arabia	Jordan	Turkey	
UAE			

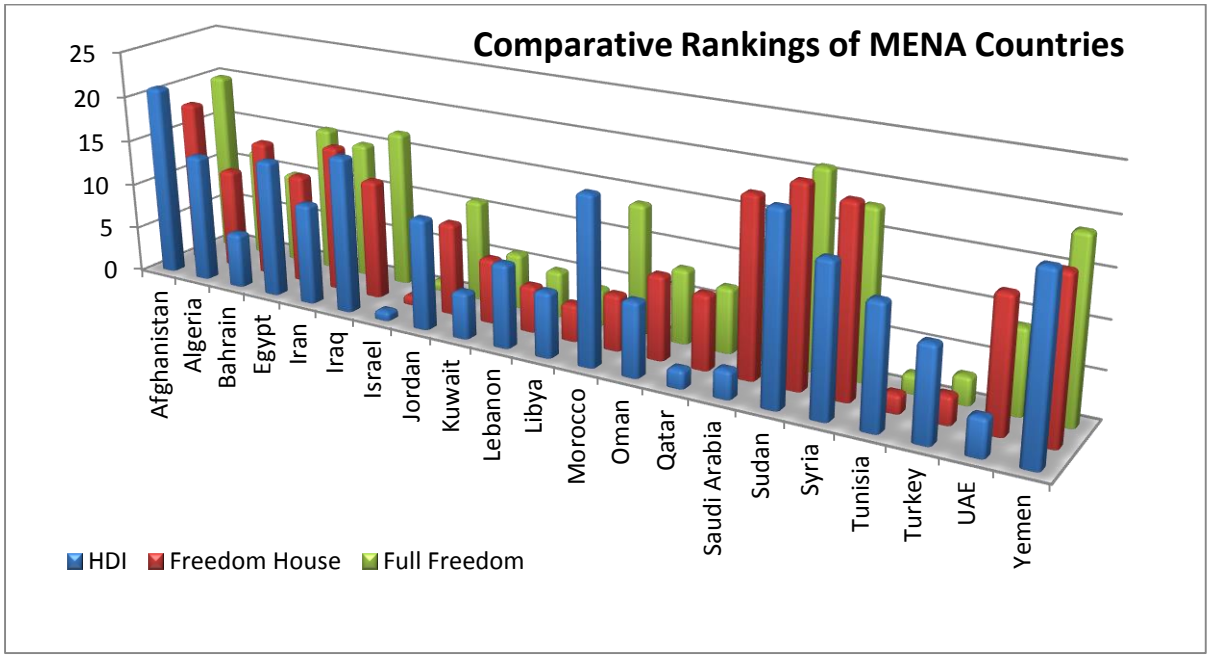
Source: Author.

The classification of each group depends on the particular social contract on which these states have been built. Gulf Countries have been ruled by what Kevan Harris calls "an oligarchy of mercantile chiefdoms." The social contract was formed between the elite of these small (city) states and migrant labor from South Asia and East Africa. Capital penetration from the West has a long history and more recently huge oil revenues have caused a boom in real estate and financial sector growth, with surplus capital being exported to New York, London and other MENA states, mostly in the forms of volatile, short-term investment and real estate, rather than long-term direct investment (El-Erian et al, 1996). The corporatist-military state in contrast arose from class struggle between the old aristocracy and the new military rulers, which had come to power amid widespread discontent with elitist liberalism in these countries (Harris, 2014). That social contract was based on rapid depeasantization (Araghi, 1995); and the substitution of much of the private sector by the state (Achcar, 2013: 69; Batatu, 1984). In return for rapid urbanization, the state promised expansion of state employment and public schooling. Between 1960 and 1985, corporatist states managed to increase incomes significantly. According to the World Bank, during this period the "MENA region outperformed all other regions except East Asia in income growth and the equality of income distribution (Shafik and Mundial, 1995: 2)." Since the 1980s these states have gradually liberalized their economies (generally called *infitah* or 'openness'). Liberalization has increased corporatism: networks related to the political elite were able to capture economic institutions, causing increased inequality. At the same time, the formal state sector was gradually perked in. This, in combination with the lack of employment opportunities in the private sector, made many young work-force entrants unable to find a job. Consequently, an increasingly well-educated, young, urban poor was reproduced. This MENA-

[1] These classifications are fairly common, although exact country indexing may differ. See for example (Achcar, 2013; Harris, 2014).

wide phenomenon of poor jobless youngsters was in Algeria mockingly called *hittistes* or wall-leaners (from Arabic *hitt;* wall) (Kepel, 2002). Lastly, underdeveloped states are marked by extended periods of civil strife and war. These states have occupied an historical position as buffer zone between imperialist powers that deemed the creation of stable state institutions unnecessary or dangerous and opted for the diffusion of national power among competing ethno-religious groups. They lack economic centralizing tendencies, notably oil, and have experienced low and unstable HDI growth.

Several additional points are worth making regarding this classification. Firstly, two countries are not listed: Israel and Lebanon. These are both exceptional cases with regards to their economic role in the region and political structure. Both countries are close US allies but while Israel is a developed democracy with a highly-educated labor force and economic development, Lebanon is a weak US vassal state, politically handicapped by sectarian strife and with a history of overt imperialism from the east (Syria) and south (Israel) but held up economically by a large influx of financial capital from the West and the Gulf (Harris, 2014). Secondly, it's worth mention that major differences between the political positions of corporatist states do exist, as well as highly divergent attitudes to international politics. Their corporate-military identity has not precluded diversity. The three most populated MENA countries belong to this category.



Source: Freedom House, Human Development Report, Mazinani (2014); compiled by Author.

Each of these categories indicates a shared relation to FWI and HDI rankings (see graph). Among MENA states, Gulf countries tend to score low on the FWI but are among the highest (with Israel) in the HDI. Apart from two special cases, Tunisia (since the Arab Spring) and Turkey (since the 1990s), corporatist states score low on the FWI. Simultaneously, they score relatively high on the HDI. What is more, between 1975 and 2010, these countries enjoyed, together with the Gulf Countries, the fastest growth rates in average years of schooling in the world (Harris, 2014). The World Bank reported that in the period 1985-2000 these two groups of countries developed much faster in the fields of literacy rates, schooling years and life expectancy

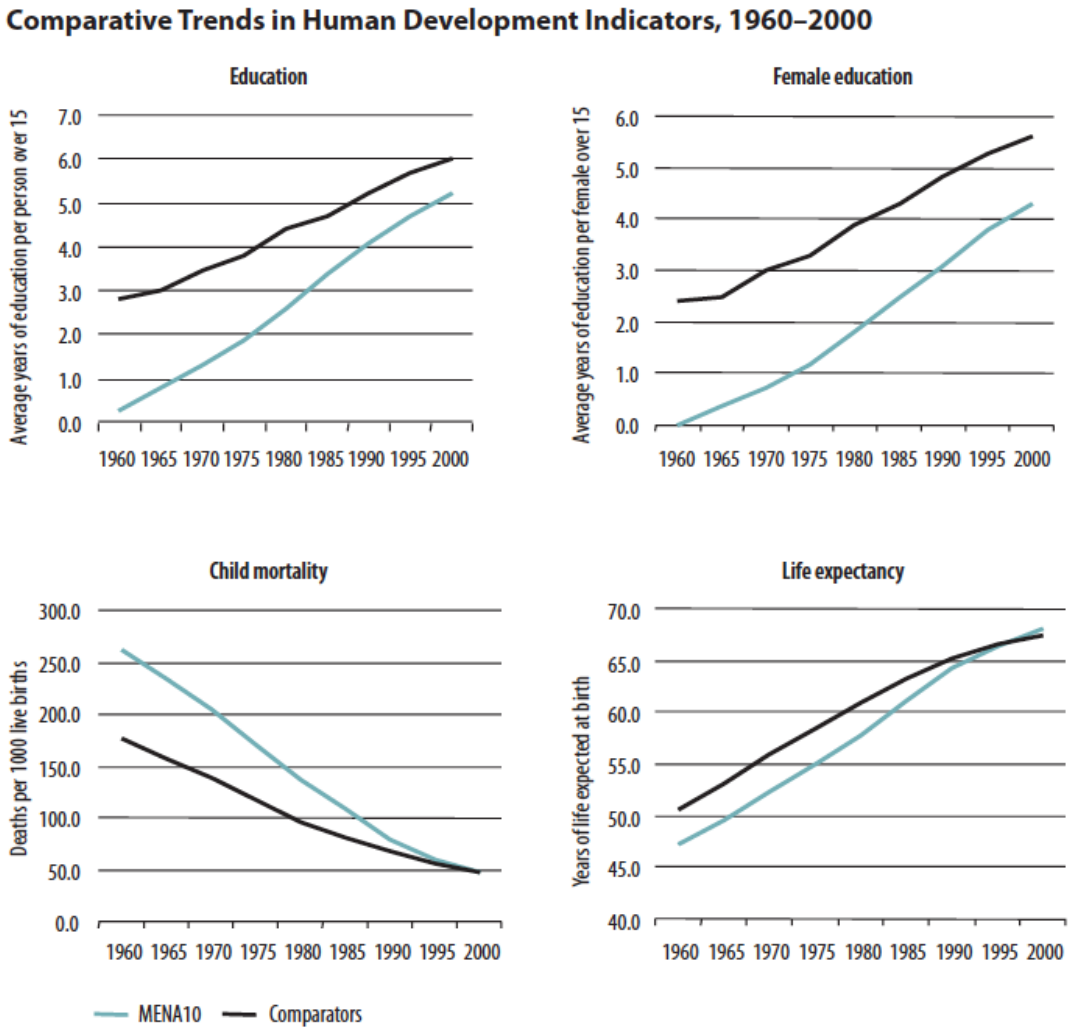
compared to other middle-income countries in the global south (Iqbal, 2006). Lastly, underdeveloped MENA countries are the only category on which both the FWI and HDI agree: scoring low on political and socio-economic development.

Problems in the HDI and FWI

It is by now clear that the FFI is a fusion of the UN and Freedom House indices. This fusion contains the danger of transmitting deficiencies which are inherent in each of its two sub-models. Although the FFI can in some instances, like those mentioned above, provide a more appropriate and balanced picture of what freedom means, it also tends to underestimate certain political and economic constellations which are badly accounted for by the HDI and FWI.[2]

One issue is that political progress and socio-economic development are calculated as composites of several variables. The increase of one variable coupled with a simultaneous decrease in the other will produce similar numerical results, although far from equally representing reality. Let us take the HDI as an example. While corporatist MENA states reported higher income growth than their counterparts in the Global South up until 1985, thereafter income growth tended to falter as the state sector could not keep up with rising employment demands (Abed and Davoodi, 2003). Iqbal confirms that MENA states after 1985 experienced "a considerably slower rate of output growth and a decline in levels of public spending" (Iqbal, 2006: xix). This occurred while education and literacy were all expanding at rapid rates. The MENA region thus caught up with countries at comparable income levels with regards to non-income indicators, however, income growth consistently underperformed (see graph down). Because the HDI combines non-income and income indicators, assuming that generally these variables rise or fall together, the HDI fails to reflect these particular trajectories. In fact, according to Mazinani's definition of freedom, this trend should have negatively impacted full freedom significantly: on the one hand the range of choices has increased substantially with rapid urbanization and expanded public schooling but on the other, the capability of exercising these choices shrank as income growth stagnated. However, due to the formula on which the FFI is built, it reproduces the failure of the HDI to account for this phenomenon. Due to the assumption that its basic socio-economic development indicators would not move in opposite directions, the HDI is unable to account for the specificity of historical trajectories in corporatist-military MENA states. The failure to reflect present reality through historical comparison is thus reflected in the FFI.

[2] For lack of space, this essay does not extensively discuss all the quantitative issues in the FWI or HDI. Refer to (Munck and Verkuilen, 2002) or (Vreeland, 2008). In this regard, Nathan Brown goes so far as to say that: "Serious scholars of political regime should avoid Freedom House (2011, p.180)."



MENA10: Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen
Comparators: 30 middle-income countries around 1980
Source: (Harris, 2014) and (Iqbal, 2006).

A second issue which the FFI faces is that it is limited by the definitions of freedom provided by the HDI and FWI. In particular, the FWI index takes a liberal approach to measuring political freedom: taking separation of powers, accountability and formal political participation, through elections, parties or unions, as standards of good governance. At the same time, a liberal interpretation of individual rights constitutes a keystone of what political freedom means. There are two problems with the use of a liberal approach to calculate freedom in the MENA that will be discussed here. First of all, a liberal approach undervalues the distribution of political power through non-formal and anti-liberal channels. One example is the Islamic Republic of Iran, where soon after the 1979 revolution, various radical political institutions were created with numerous purposes. One of these institutions is the *Basij* (a name implying militant solidarity in Persian), a populist paramilitary institution created to propagate revolutionary Islamist action throughout society and defend the Islamic Republic in case of foreign threats. The Basij has recruited particularly successfully among urban and rural lower classes. In cities, volunteers came from what were previously mafia-type *lumpenproletariat* networks (called *laats* in Persian) and the Basij successfully reintegrated these networks into revolutionary political settings (Majd, 2008).

As a result, these subaltern networks, which were formally repressed from any political representation, were now for the first time granted access to direct political participation. Even though political participation was not formalized constitutionally, such revolutionary institutions were still very influential. Their influence only grew when privatization, launched in the 1990s in Iran, allowed them to garner economic resources. The same could be said for Islamist networks in other MENA countries, such as Egypt or Jordan, particularly the radical, subaltern side of these networks. Here, the popularization of Islamic banking was publicly harnessed by the Muslim Brotherhood, which was increasingly allowed to enter the formal political arena, but whose influence was informally much greater and worked through extensive transnational paramilitary and charitable networks (Kepel, 2002). Freedom in the liberal conception is thus inherently bound to class representation in formal politics. However, in the case of the MENA, where many regimes have tried to cope with the integration of radical Islamism, freedom could be thought of as extending in non-formal, anti-liberal ways to mostly subaltern groups too.

Lastly, a much-explored issue is that this liberal conception of freedom might clash with local interpretations of freedom (see for example (Bollen and Paxton 2000); (Giannone 2010). As a result, FWI might impose itself as an ethnocentric, Western definition of freedom. Islamism, whatever its local form, has over the past 40 years been a particularly influential movement in the MENA. In general, Islamist movements have tried to implement forms of *sharia* rule, thus clashing with the values Freedom House attaches to individual rights, freedom of expression, elections and political participation. Examples are numerous but include the restriction of the office of head of state to male figures; limiting female participation in electoral politics and creating Islamic constitutional structures. This is not to say that Islamism is inherently anti-liberal. Instead, it has tended to take up oppositional, anti-imperialist, Third-Worldist positions in domestic politics. Therefore, Islamism(s) has also positively contributed to political freedom and often its ideal of freedom is quite similar to Western ideals. Examples include the AKP in Turkey, which has democratized strictly secular Kemalist institutions and laws as well as clamping down on the decision-making power of the military apparatus. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt under Mohammad Morsi (2012-13) can also be argued to have pursued democratic aims.

Conclusion

Mazinani's Full Freedom model poses interesting new questions in the quest to create an inclusive and comprehensive model of how freedom can be measured and compared on a global scale. This essay has restricted itself to a discussion of this model in the MENA region. The MENA is a particularly fruitful playing ground for the FFI as two of the most employed models of progress, the Freedom of the World Index and the Human Development Index, clash overtly in their valuations of what constitutes political/socio-economic advancement. In this situation the FFI can mediate between the two models through combination and fusion. However, apart from the range of quantitative issues inherent to the HDI and particularly the FWI, there are deeper issues with both models that are transmitted into FFI data, both relating to the basic assumptions on which these models are built. The HDI assumes a positive correlation between its three indicators. However, the particularity of historical trajectories in MENA states, notably states with a recent corporatist-military past, has created opposite result: income indicators falling

or growing slowly, while non-income indicators have grown very quickly. Indeed, the Arab spring can be thought of as a result of this contradiction. The FFI fails to reflect these divergent paths of development which have caused a true collapse in freedom. Secondly, the FWI is based on a liberal ideology, which, whatever the exact methodology of Freedom House, is unable to account for anti-liberal, informal movements in political power and freedom. Further research should try to broaden the scope of Mazinani's model of Full Freedom to either go beyond these two models or be able to account more fully for these phenomena.

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