

# Rising restrictions on religion

## Context, statistics and implications

Brian J Grim<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article discusses statistics from recent studies by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. It begins with general findings and a discussion of the general global context. It then examines three questions directly related to religious freedom. First, do constitutional protections for religious freedom matter? Second, do blasphemy, apostasy and anti-defamation of religion laws matter? And third, is there a relationship between government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion? The article then looks at the implications by describing how high levels of government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion in the Middle East and North Africa relate to these three issues. The article concludes with a review of the theoretical and statistical model of Grim and Finke (2007 and 2011)<sup>2</sup> that finds religious persecution and violence to be the result of higher restrictions by governments and groups in society on the freedom to practice religion.

**Keywords** Government restrictions on religion, social hostilities, statistics, transnational comparison, constitutional protection, blasphemy, apostasy laws, anti-defamation laws, persecution, violence.

For more than half a century, the United Nations and numerous international organizations have affirmed the principle of religious freedom.<sup>3</sup> For just as many decades, journalists and human rights groups have reported on persecution of minority faiths, outbreaks of sectarian violence and other pressures on individuals and communities that impinge upon their freedom of religion or belief. But until

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<sup>2</sup> More information on the studies and their methodology can be found at [PewForum.org](http://PewForum.org).

<sup>3</sup> According to Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one of the foundational documents of the U.N., „Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practise, worship and observance.“

the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life published *Global Restrictions on Religion* in 2009 and the second report, *Rising Restrictions on Religion* in 2011,<sup>4</sup> there had been no quantitative study that reviewed an extensive number of sources to measure how governments and private actors infringe on religious beliefs and practices around the world. This article summarizes some key findings from the studies and then uses data from the studies to look at the context of rising restrictions on religion, with a particular focus on the Middle East and North Africa, a region that has recently undergone a series of popular uprisings. The article concludes by reviewing a more advanced statistical test of the relationship between restrictions on religion and violent religious persecution from Grim and Finke (2011).

The studies by the Pew Forum find that approximately 70% of the world's population lives in countries with high restrictions on religious beliefs and practices, the brunt of which often falls on religious minorities – including, in some cases, people who are secular or non-religious. Additionally, more than 2.2 billion people, nearly a third (32%) of the world's total population, live in countries where either government restrictions on religion or social hostilities involving religion rose substantially between mid-2006 and mid-2009. Only about 1% of the world's population lives in countries where government restrictions or social hostilities declined.

This overall finding is based on a series of 33 core measures – all available online – phrased as questions, such as, “Is public preaching limited by any level of government?” And on the social side, “Is there mob violence related to religion?” Pew Forum staff answered the questions for each country by combing through three separate years of 18 widely cited and publicly available sources of information, including reports by the United Nations, International Crisis Group, the U.S. State Department, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Freedom House and the Council of the European Union. The study covers 198 countries and territories, representing more than 99% of the world's population for the three-year period of July 2006 through June 2009.

Before discussing the study's findings and their implications, a few general comments about the study are helpful. First, this study is part of a larger, ongoing effort – the Global Religious Futures Project, jointly funded by two non-governmental

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<sup>4</sup> This builds on work I started ten years ago at the Pennsylvania State University. See: Grim, B.J. (2004). „The Cities of God versus the Countries of Earth: The Regulation of Religious Freedom (RRF).“ University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University. Grim, B.J. and R. Finke (2006). „International Religion Indexes: Government Regulation, Government Favoritism, and Social Regulation of Religion.“ *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 2: Article 1. Grim, B.J., R. Finke, J. Harris, C. Meyers and J. VanEerden (2006). „Measuring International Socio-Religious Values and Conflict by Coding U.S. State Department Reports.“ In *JSM Proceedings, AAPOR-Section on Survey Research Methods [CD-ROM]*. Alexandria, VA: American Statistical Association. (pp. 4120-4127).

charitable foundations in the U.S., the Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation. The Global Religious Futures Project aims to increase knowledge and understanding of religious change and its impact on societies around the world.

Second, the study recognizes that religious beliefs and practices may be infringed upon not only by government actions but also by social groups, organizations and individuals. And, indeed, our study shows that in some places social hostilities may have an even greater impact than do government actions.

Third, government restrictions include not only national laws and policies, but also actions by local governments and officials, which the study finds account for a sizeable portion of government restrictions worldwide.

Fourth, the Pew Forum takes a strictly non-advocacy role in this research, recognizing that every country studied has some restrictions on religion, and that there may be strong public support in particular countries for certain restrictions. The Pew Research Center leaves it to others, to consider how these findings might or might not affect advocacy and policy.

And finally, when people think of religious freedom, they may have in mind the degree of religious dynamism and diversity in a country, which the Pew Forum measures in other demographic and public opinion studies. This study, however, focuses on the other side of the coin, that is, impediments to religious beliefs and practices.

However, being in Europe and given that demographic and public opinion studies indicate that European populations, on average, have lower religiosity than many other parts of the world, the global context regarding religion is worthwhile reviewing briefly.

## 1. How pervasive is religion globally?

Surveys show that large portions of the global population hold strong religious beliefs and consider religion important to their lives.<sup>5</sup> Large shares of the global population also indicate that religious freedom is very important. For instance, a Pew Global Attitude Project's survey carried out in 34 countries found that, on average, 93% of people reported that "living in a country where I can freely practice my

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, the Pew Forum found that roughly three-in-four or more people in Sub-Saharan Africa express *absolutely certain belief* in the existence of God. And such views are also common in the United States, where 71% of adults say they are absolutely convinced of God's existence. <http://www.pewforum.org/commitment-to-christianity-and-islam-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa.aspx>, 19 country survey in Sub-Saharan Africa, last accessed February 14, 2012. Also: This is not to say that religion is only important to people with monotheistic faiths. In India, for instance, 81% said that religion was rather or very important. (Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 204.)

## Global Religious Affiliation: 1970 and 2010

Religion	1970		2010	
	Population (million)	Percent	Population (million)	Percent
<b>Unaffiliated*</b>	<b>708.1</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>813.6</b>	<b>11.8%</b>
<b>Affiliated**</b>	<b>2,988.1</b>	<b>80.8%</b>	<b>6,082.3</b>	<b>88.2%</b>
Christians	1,229.0	33.2%	2,260.4	32.8%
Muslims	577.2	15.6%	1,553.8	22.5%
Hindus	463.2	12.5%	948.6	13.8%
Buddhists	235.1	6.4%	494.9	7.2%
Chinese folk-religionists	228.8	6.2%	436.3	6.3%
Ethnoreligionists	168.9	4.6%	242.5	3.5%
New religionists	39.4	1.1%	63.0	0.9%
Sikhs	10.7	0.3%	23.9	0.3%
Jews	15.0	0.4%	14.8	0.2%
Spiritists	4.7	0.1%	13.7	0.2%
Daoists	1.7	0.0%	8.4	0.1%
Baha'is	2.7	0.1%	7.3	0.1%
Confucianists	4.8	0.1%	6.4	0.1%
Jains	2.6	0.1%	5.3	0.1%
Shintoists	4.2	0.1%	2.8	<.1%
Zoroastrians	0.1	<.1%	0.2	<.1%
Sum	3,696.2	100.0%	6,895.9	100.0%

\* *Unaffiliated* include agnostics and atheists as well as some who may believe without specifying a particular faith tradition.

\*\* *Affiliated* include those who expressed that they belong to a religious tradition on a census, survey or other enumeration, sometimes including membership statistics  
Source: *World Religion Database*, <http://www.worldreligiondatabase.org/>  
Eds. Todd M. Johnson & Brian J. Grim, Brill online, 2012.

religion” is somewhat or very important, while less than 2% indicated that it wasn’t important at all.<sup>6</sup>

These empirical findings seem to suggest that there is a global trend toward greater religious affiliation, but is this the case? By one attempt to measure these dynamics, it is. Data from the World Religion Database<sup>7</sup> at Boston University indicates that more people are affiliated with religion today than 40 or 50 years ago. At the height of Communism in 1970, about one-in-five people (19%) were *unaffiliated* with any religion. Since then, the share of the world’s population *affiliated with religion* has substantially increased to the point that today, nearly nine-in-ten people (88%) worldwide are *affiliated* with one religion or another.<sup>8</sup> In numeric terms, however, the difference is even more remarkable. Between 1970 and 2010, the world’s religiously *unaffiliated* population increased by 15%, from 708 to 814 million, but the world’s religiously *affiliated* population increased by 104%, from 3 to 6 billion. Of course, in some parts of the world, such as Western Europe, the unaffiliated have grown, but these data suggest that such increases in the unaffiliated are offset by the demographic growth of religious populations in places such as Sub-Saharan Africa and patterns of re-affiliation in former communist lands, such as Russia, China and Vietnam.

So, given these global religious trends – as general as they are, it is fair to say that the rise in restrictions on religion around the world affects many people, with implications that extend into the areas of security, cooperation and social wellbeing.

## 2. Main findings from the study

First, the extent of violence and abuse related to religion, certainly one of the harshest measures of restrictions on religion, increased in more places than it decreased.

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<sup>6</sup> Of the world’s major regions, Europe, and China in particular, have relatively lower levels of religious participation. So, is religion a non-factor in these places? The Pew Forum’s recent demographic study on Christianity found that despite strong secularizing trends, more than half a billion people in Europe, or more than three-in-four (76.2%) Europeans today, identify at least nominally as Christian. This is in addition to growing and active minority European faiths, such as Islam, which we estimated to number 43 million and account for about 6% of Europe’s total population. Religious affiliation is lower in China, but recent surveys by the Chinese polling firm Horizon have found a fourfold (400%) increase among those who considered religion either rather or very important in their lives (increasing from 4 in 1990 to 16 percent in 2007), with a corresponding sharp decrease among those indicating that religion was not at all important in their lives during the same time period, dropping from 76 percent in 1990 to 35 percent in 2007. See: <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Global-Christianity-worlds-christian-population.aspx>, last accessed February 14, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>, last accessed February 14, 2012. Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied*, 2011, 204.

<sup>7</sup> *World Religion Database: International Religious Demographics and Sources*, Eds. Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim. Brill online. 2008-2012.

<sup>8</sup> These changes are in varying parts due to the collapse of European Communism, the opening of China in the 1980s and 1990s, and the demographic growth of countries in the developing world.

The number of countries in which governments used at least some measure of force against religious groups or individuals rose from 91 (46%) in the period ending in mid-2008 to 101 (51%) in the period ending in mid-2009. This violence was wide-ranging, including individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their homes, as well as damage to or destruction of personal or religious properties.

In nearly three-quarters of all countries, private citizens or groups committed crimes, malicious acts or violence motivated by religious hatred or bias. Such acts occurred in 142 countries (72%) in the period ending in mid-2009, about the same as in the previous reporting period (141 countries or 71%). However, the number of countries that experienced mob violence related to religion rose from 38 (19%) as of mid-2008 to 52 (26%) as of mid-2009.

Religion-related terrorist groups were active in 74 countries around the world in the period ending in mid-2009, a slight increase from the period ending in mid-2008.<sup>9</sup> The groups carried out acts of violence in half of the 74 countries. This includes people who were killed, wounded, displaced from their homes, kidnapped or had their property destroyed in religion-related terrorist attacks.

Adherents of the world's two largest religious groups, Christians and Muslims, who together comprise more than half of the global population, were harassed in the largest number of countries. Over the three-year period studied, incidents of either government or social harassment were reported against Christians in 130 countries (66%) and against Muslims in 117 countries (59%). Buddhists and Hindus, who together account for roughly one-fifth of the world's population and who are more geographically concentrated than Christians or Muslims, faced harassment in fewer places; harassment was reported against Buddhists in 16 countries (8%) and against Hindus in 27 countries (14%).

In proportion to their numbers, some smaller religious groups faced especially widespread harassment. Although Jews comprise less than 1% of the world's population, government or social harassment of Jews was reported in 75 countries (38%). Incidents of harassment involving members of other world religions – including Sikhs, followers of ancient faiths such as Zoroastrianism, newer faith groups such as Baha'is and Rastafarians, and localized groups that practice tribal or folk religions – were reported in 84 countries (42%).

Europe had the largest proportion of countries in which social hostilities related to religion were on the rise from mid-2006 to mid-2009. Indeed, five of the 10

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<sup>9</sup> Religion-related terrorism is defined as politically motivated violence against noncombatants by sub-national groups or clandestine agents with a religious justification or intent. In all cases, the study was careful to identify a clear religious element. Religious people may be the target, as is the case sometimes with FARC in Columbia, or religion may be the motivation, as is the case with al-Qaeda.



countries in the world that had a substantial increase in social hostilities were in Europe. The kinds of social hostilities that recently erupted in shootings in Norway reflect a growing trend among certain European countries with growing Muslim immigrant communities. As indicated by the Pew Forum's January 2011 study, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population*, the number of immigrant Muslims has and will continue to increase in Europe, though the study estimates that Muslims will likely make up only 8% of Europe by 2030 – still a relatively small proportion.

However, restrictions and hostilities in general were the highest in the Middle East and North Africa – with nearly a third of the region's countries (30%) imposing greater government restrictions. Egypt, in particular, ranked very high (in the top 5% of all countries, as of mid-2009) on both government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion. Only two countries are very high on both – Indonesia is the other.

Three main findings from the study are worth looking at in some more detail, particularly because they help explain why, on average, the Middle East and North Africa region has both the highest government restrictions on religion and the highest social hostilities involving religion of the five main regions analyzed. The three findings – phrased as questions – are: First, do constitutional protections for religious freedom matter? Second, do blasphemy, apostasy and anti-defamation of religion laws matter? And third, is there a relationship between government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion?

### **3. Do constitutions matter?**

Nearly all of the 198 countries included in the Pew Forum study either call for freedom of religion in their constitutions or basic laws (143 countries) or protect at least some religious practices (an additional 48 countries). But not all constitutional promises are clear and unqualified. In fact, more than half of the countries (111, or 56%) include stipulations in their constitution that substantially contradict the concept of religious freedom. Afghanistan's Constitution, for instance, appears to protect its citizens' right to choose and practice a religion other than Islam. However, the constitution also stipulates that "no law can be contrary to the sacred religion of Islam" and instructs judges to rule according to Shariah law if no specific Afghan law applies to a case, which in Afghanistan prescribes the death penalty for Muslims who convert to another religion.

Seven countries – Algeria, Eritrea, Libya, Maldives, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia and Yemen – do not include any provisions for religious freedom in their constitutions or basic laws.<sup>10</sup> The Algerian Constitution, for example, establishes Islam as the state religion and forbids practices that are contrary to Islamic ethics.

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<sup>10</sup> The Eritrean Constitution that was ratified by the National Assembly in 1997 provides for religious

The study finds a relationship between constitutional protections for religious freedom and overall changes in government restrictions on religion. Among the countries with the *least* robust constitutional protections for religious freedom – that is, countries whose constitutions contain one or more substantial contradictions concerning religious freedom or provide no protection for it at all – index scores increased in 11 and decreased in only two (more than a five-fold difference). In contrast, among the countries whose constitutions provide for religious freedom *without* substantial contradictions (including those with limited qualifications), index scores increased in three countries and decreased in six (a two-fold difference *in the opposite* direction).<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Blasphemy, apostasy and anti-defamation of religion laws

As of mid-2009, 59 countries (30%) had a law, rule or policy at some level of government forbidding blasphemy (remarks or writings considered to be contemptuous of God), apostasy (abandoning one's faith) or defamation (disparagement or criticism) of particular religions or religion in general. Penalties for violating these laws (which collectively I refer to as "anti-blasphemy laws"), ranging from fines to imprisonment to death, were enforced in 44 of the 59 countries.

The Pew Forum's study finds that while such anti-blasphemy laws are sometimes promoted as a way to protect religion and reduce social hostilities involving religion, in practise they often serve to punish religious minorities whose beliefs are deemed unorthodox or heretical, and who therefore are seen as threatening religious harmony in the country. Indeed, the study finds that overall high restric-

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freedom, but the government has not yet implemented the constitution. Therefore, there is no effective constitutional protection for religious freedom in Eritrea.

<sup>11</sup> More specifically, among the countries whose constitutions or basic laws do not provide for religious freedom, government restrictions on religion substantially increased in three (Algeria, Libya and Yemen) and did not decrease in any. In the 111 countries that provide for religious freedom but have substantial contradictions in their constitutions or basic laws (such as limiting religious freedom in order to protect "public morals" or making the nation's laws conform to one particular religion), government restrictions substantially increased in eight countries (Somalia, Syria, France, Malaysia, Egypt, Qatar, Hong Kong and Serbia) and substantially decreased in two countries (Greece and Nauru) – a four-fold difference. However, the pattern is reversed among the 41 countries whose constitutions or basic laws provide for religious freedom without qualification or contradiction, with a three-fold difference in the opposite direction. Among these countries, government restrictions decreased in three countries (Timor-Leste, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Macedonia) and increased in one (Kyrgyzstan). This pattern is also seen, though more faintly, among the 39 countries whose constitutions or basic laws provide for religious freedom but include limited qualifications, such as the right to limit religious freedom to protect "public order." Restrictions decreased in three of these countries (Togo, Guinea Bissau and Nicaragua) and increased in two of them (Uganda and Tajikistan). (The level of government restrictions stayed roughly the same in the vast majority of cases during the three years covered by the study.)



tions on religious beliefs and practises are particularly common in countries that prohibit blasphemy, apostasy or defamation of religion.<sup>12</sup> For instance, the following examples illustrate the connection:

75% of governments (33 of the 44 countries) that enforce anti-blasphemy laws also used force against religious groups. However, only 43% (60 of 139 countries) of governments that do not enforce anti-blasphemy laws used force against religious groups.

Similarly, national governments in countries that enforce laws against blasphemy, apostasy or defamation of religion were more than five times as likely to attempt to eliminate an entire religious group's presence as those that do not have such laws (32% vs. 6%).

This pattern also holds true for social hostilities involving religion. Mob violence related to religion occurred in more than twice the share of countries that enforce penalties for blasphemy, apostasy or defamation of religion than in countries where there are no such laws (45% vs. 19%).

Also, the share of countries in which women were harassed for violating religious dress codes was 8 times higher among those that enforce such laws (48%) than among those without such laws (6%).

Not only were government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion generally higher in countries with anti-blasphemy laws, but restrictions also rose in many of these countries. From mid-2006 to mid-2009, restrictions or hostilities increased substantially in 10 (23%) of the 44 countries where governments actively enforce anti-blasphemy laws; restrictions or hostilities decreased substantially in just one country in that category (2%). In the 15 countries where such laws are on the books but are not actively enforced, restrictions or hostilities increased substantially in four (27%) and decreased substantially in just one (7%) – the same pattern as in countries where the laws were actively enforced. By contrast, among the 139 countries that do not have anti-blasphemy laws, restrictions or hostilities rose in nine (6%) and fell in 10 (7%).

These findings do not mean that anti-blasphemy laws necessarily cause higher restrictions on religion. But they do suggest that the two phenomena often go hand-in-hand: governments that impose anti-blasphemy laws also tend to have rising restrictions on religion. If the rationale for such laws is to reduce social conflict, it

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<sup>12</sup> Globally, countries that have laws against blasphemy, apostasy or defamation of religion were more likely to have *high government restrictions or social hostilities* than countries that do not have such laws. A solid majority (59%) of countries that enforce such laws had high or very high restrictions on religion (government or social) as of mid-2009. Among countries that do not have such laws, by contrast, the majority (58%) had low restrictions or hostilities.

appears, however, that anti-blasphemy laws tend to contribute to the conflict rather than reduce it.

Anti-blasphemy laws are one of many types of restrictions where there are major differences among the five regions of the world – Asia-Pacific, Middle East-North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and the Americas. When it comes to penalizing blasphemy, apostasy or defamation of religion, eight-in-ten countries in the Middle East-North Africa region have such laws, the highest share of any region. In comparison, four-in-ten countries in Europe (38%), three-in-ten countries in the Asia-Pacific region have anti-blasphemy laws. By contrast, relatively few countries in sub-Saharan Africa (15%) or the Americas (11%) have such laws or policies.<sup>13</sup>

One limitation of these findings is that they lump together three related but different factors: blasphemy, apostasy and defamation of religion. In future studies, the Pew Forum will have separate data on these because it is likely that each has a different relationship with other restrictions on religion.

## **5. Understanding the Middle East and North Africa**

One of the results of this research is that it provides a way to understand the context for one of the most dramatic developments of the 21st century – the so-called Arab Spring uprisings that have swept the Middle East and North Africa. While restrictions on religion may not have directly caused the unrest, it's unarguable that changes in religious restrictions are a part of the larger social and political forces shaping the Middle East and North Africa today.

Indeed, according to Pew Forum's study, government restrictions on religion and belief as well as social hostilities involving religion are highest in the Middle East and North Africa of the regions of the world. Moreover, the study finds that government restrictions were not only high, but they were rising in the Middle East and North Africa prior to the recent unrest that continues in the region. For instance, prior to the recent uprising in Egypt, government restrictions on religion were already very high there. By mid-2009, Egypt also had joined the 5% of countries with the most intense social hostilities involving religion. Five other countries in the region (Algeria, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Qatar) also had substantial increases in government restrictions from mid-2006 to mid-2009, while no country in the Middle East and North Africa region had a substantial decrease.

What are some of the characteristics of the region that help explain its high and rising restrictions? First, in only one country of the region (or 5%) does the constitution, or law that functions in the place of a constitution (basic law), specifi-

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<sup>13</sup> In the United States, a few state legal codes still contain anti-blasphemy laws, but they generally are not enforced.

cally provide for “freedom of religion” or include language used in Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Overall in the world, however, 72% of countries have such provisions. And as already discussed, the lack of such provisions is associated not only with high government restrictions, but also rising restrictions on religion.

Beyond this basic protection for freedom of religion or belief, the study found that restrictions in the Middle East and North Africa were especially high in a number of other ways. First, more than nine-in-ten governments in the region limit religious literature, broadcasting, preaching, proselytizing and conversion. In comparison, these normal religious activities do not face such limits the majority of the rest of the world’s countries. Restrictions on religious literature, broadcasting, preaching, proselytizing and conversion not only limit the possibility for free speech and a diversity of ideas in the public forum, restrictions on conversion – in particular – limit the fundamental freedom of belief. And limits on conversion are very common in the Middle East and North Africa, where 90% of countries in the region limit the ability of people to freely choose their religious affiliation – including the freedom to have no religion at all. However, only 19% of countries worldwide place such limits on their citizens.

Overall, governments in the Middle East and North Africa region were twice as likely as governments worldwide to resort to physical force when dealing with religious groups. Instances of force toward religious groups included individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their homes, or having their personal or religious properties damaged or destroyed.

Of course, the use of government force is not necessarily felt evenly by all religious groups in society, because religious minorities often bear the brunt of the force. In particular, government hostility to religious minorities in the Middle East and North Africa region is far above the world average. Two-thirds of national governments in the region displayed hostility involving physical violence toward minority or non-approved religious groups, compared with just one-third of countries worldwide. This abuse was not only by direct action, but also by inaction. In 70% of countries in the region there were instances when the national government did not intervene in cases of discrimination or abuses against religious groups. Worldwide, however, just 27% of governments stood by as such discrimination and abuse occurred.

One contributing factor to the imbalanced protection of religious minorities is that governments of nine-in-ten countries in the Middle East and North Africa region give privileges or government access to one particular religious group that is unavailable to other religious groups. Worldwide, however, only about a quarter of countries (27%) have such an imbalance. Indeed, religious favoritism is so com-

mon that national governments in every country of the region defer in some way to religious authorities, texts or doctrines on legal issues – the most common being deference to Shariah law.

When it comes to social hostilities involving religion, there are also major differences among the five regions of the world. Again, on average, social hostilities are highest in the Middle East-North Africa. For instance, nearly every country of the region was beset with crimes, malicious acts or violence motivated by religious hatred or bias during the three-year period of the study. And in half the countries of the region, these resulted in deaths. By way of comparison, deaths resulted from religious hate crimes in just 18% of countries worldwide.

Other serious types of religion-related violence were also much higher in the Middle East and North Africa region. For instance, acts of religion-related mob-violence and sectarian or communal violence between religious groups were more than twice as likely in the region than in the world as a whole. Also, nearly every country had religion-related terrorist groups active in the country. Moreover, half the countries in the region were affected in some way by religion-related war, compared with just 13% of countries worldwide.

Social hostilities in the region were not just present at these macro levels; they were often very personal. For instance, in two-thirds of countries, individuals or groups used violence or the threat of violence, including so-called honor killings, to try to enforce religious norms. In three-quarters of the region's countries, individuals were assaulted or displaced from their homes in retaliation for religious activities, including preaching and other forms of religious expression, considered offensive or threatening to the majority faith.

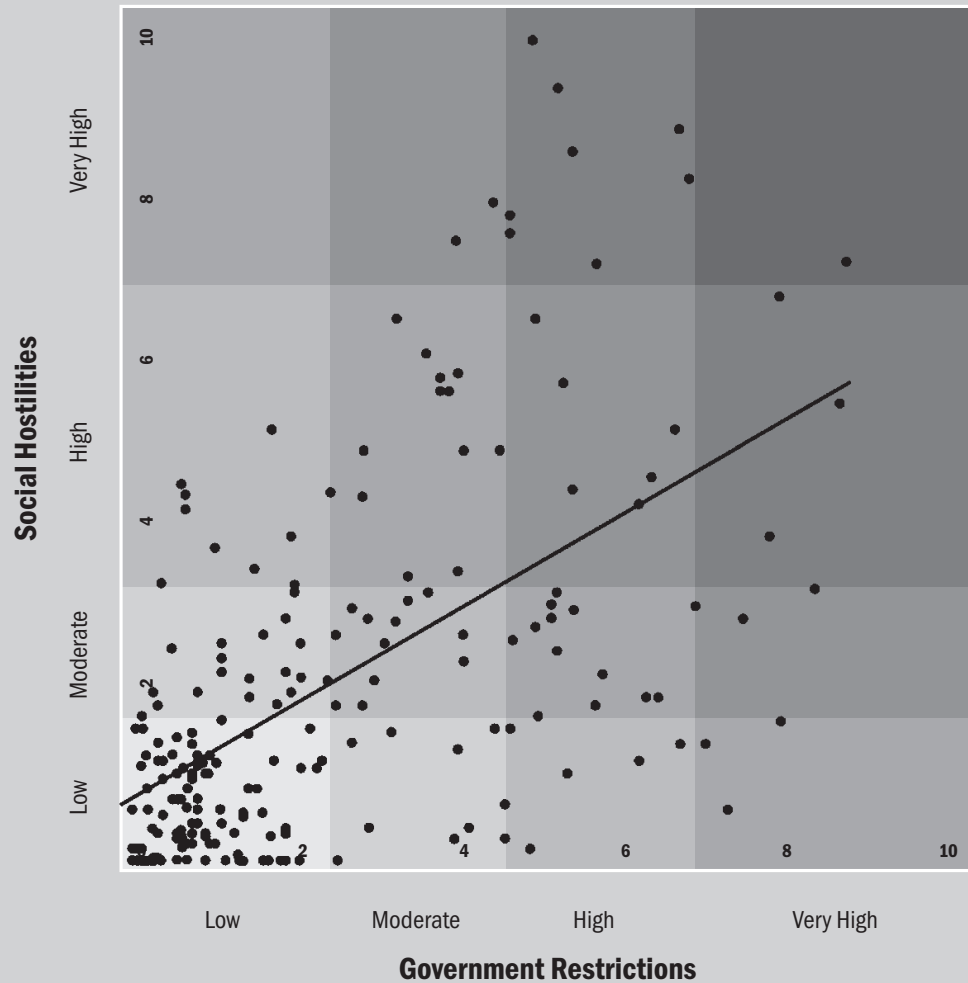
Also, women were harassed for violating religious dress codes in twice the share of countries the Middle East and North Africa region as they were worldwide.

Of particular note, Muslims were harassed in a slightly larger share of countries in the Middle East and North Africa than were Christians or Jews. Much of the harassment fell upon Muslim minorities, such as Sunnis in Iraq or Shias in Saudi Arabia, or groups with political agendas contrary to the interests of the government in power, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Finally, in eight-in-ten countries, there were tensions in society over conversion from one religion to another. Of particular note is that tensions over conversion become particularly high when governments get into the business of regulating it. For instance, among the 41 countries worldwide where governments limited religious conversion, incidents of social hostilities over conversions occurred in 83% of the 41 countries (34). By contrast, among the 158 countries where governments do not limit conversions, incidents of social hostilities over conversions occurred in 19% (30 countries) – a smaller share by four times. This correlation between

## Religious Restrictions in 198 Countries

This chart shows how the world's 198 countries and self-administering territories score in terms of both government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion. Correlation =  $-.586$  ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed);  $r$ -square =  $.34$



Note: The Pew Forum categorized the levels of government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion by percentiles. Countries with scores in the top 5% on each index were categorized as "very high". The next highest 15% of scores were categorized as "high", and the following 20% were categorized as "moderate". The bottom 60% of scores were categorized as "low".

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government restrictions and social hostilities is a common pattern in the data, and one which is useful to understand for those looking to possible ways to defuse tensions and reduce conflict.

### 5.1 Correlation between restrictions and hostilities

When all 198 countries and self-administering territories are plotted on a chart comparing their scores on the Government Restrictions Index and the Social Hostilities Index (see chart on page 29), it is apparent that the two measures tend to move together. Running through the graph is the so-called regression line, which plots how scores on one index are related, on average, to scores on the other index. The upward slope of the line indicates that higher scores on one index generally are associated with higher scores on the other. Many countries are clustered in the lower left corner, showing that they are low on both types of restrictions. Though the remaining countries are fairly dispersed, most still follow the direction taken by the regression line, and very few are located in the upper left or lower right corners of the graph. This means that, in general, it is rare for countries that are high in social hostilities to be low on government restrictions, or for those that are high on government restrictions to be low in social hostilities.

### 5.2 An analysis of the correlation

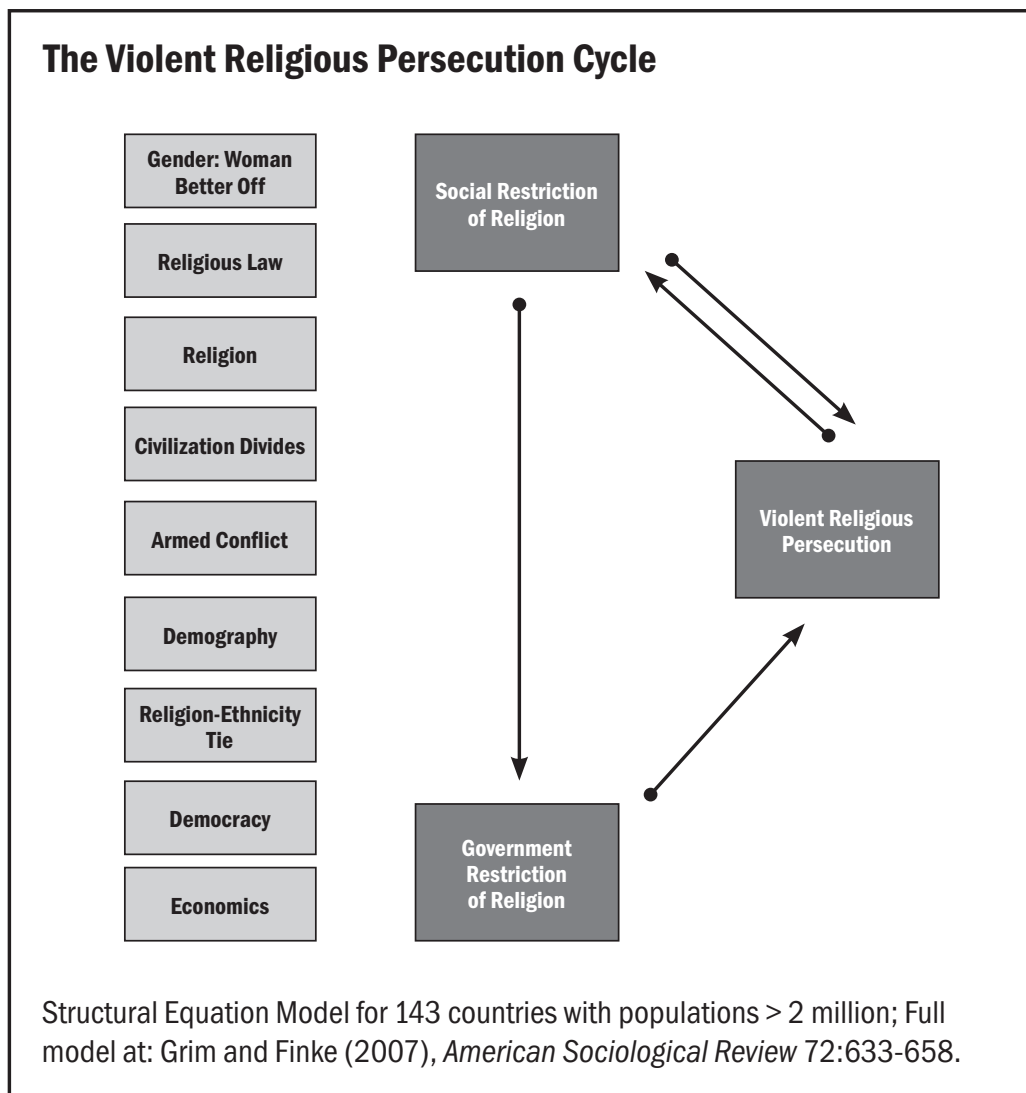
My 2011 Cambridge University Press book, co-authored with Professor Roger Finke of Penn State University, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the 21st Century*,<sup>14</sup> provides some additional theoretical and advanced statistical analysis that helps to further understand this correlation. In our analysis originally published in the *American Sociological Review*, we found that higher levels of regulations on religion result in more violence and conflict, not less. Specifically, we observed that social restrictions on religious freedom lead to government restrictions on religious freedom and the two act in tandem to increase the level of violence related to religion – which in turn cycles back and leads to even higher social and government restrictions on religion. This creates what we call a *violent religious persecution cycle* (see chart on page 31).

Our research, which looked at 143 countries with populations of two million or more, found that when governments and religious groups in society do not erect barriers to religious competition but respect and protect such activities as conversion and proselytism, religious violence is less. These results offer a different perspective than the Clash of Civilizations theory, in that, rather than religious competition automatically leading to violence, the protection of fair religious competition

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<sup>14</sup> Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, 2011, *The Price of Freedom Denied*. New York.





is suggested to lead to *less* religious violence. Indeed, in the model we statistically controlled for alternative explanations and found that

The specific mechanism that leads most directly and powerfully to religious persecution is not clashes *between* civilizations but the concrete regulatory actions of societies and governments. . . . The important point is that the regulation mechanism we describe *accounts for* differences between religious traditions and offers empirically-supported conceptual clarity to one of the fundamental challenges of the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup>

This means that restrictions on religion may just as often be directed toward Muslims in a Muslim-majority country as toward other faiths; likewise, restrictions

<sup>15</sup> Page 654 in Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, 2007, „Religious Persecution in Cross-National Context: Clashing Civilizations or Regulated Economies?“ *American Sociological Review* 72:633-658.

in a Christian-majority country may sometimes affect Christians including minority denomination, as much or even more than other faiths. Of course, clashes occur across religious lines, as has been happening in Nigeria with the actions of Boko Haram, but the data indicate that such clashes are not the primary mechanism explaining restrictions and violence.

An additional contribution from *The Price of Freedom Denied* is that the analysis demonstrated that *social* restrictions of religious freedom (or social religious intolerance) often drive government restrictions.<sup>16</sup> Examples include the social pressures in India for anti-conversion laws, calls for Shari'a law in northern Nigeria and parts of Indonesia, expulsions of evangelicals in Chiapas, Mexico, and numerous religious rebellions from China's long history.<sup>17</sup> One of the clearest historical examples of the way social restrictions of religious freedom can feed into the religious violence cycle is the Holocaust. Research has shown that the Nazi government's violence toward Jewish people reinforced pre-existing social prejudices, creating a cycle of violence that was carried out with the support of many in society.<sup>18</sup>

Another tragic example of the religious violence cycle can be seen in Iraq since 2003, which I have written about elsewhere.<sup>19</sup>

## 6. Concluding observations

The data reviewed show that religion appears to be on the rise around the globe, and with it a new sense of urgency for understanding the relationships between rising levels of government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion. Several patterns are clear. First, social hostilities involving religion have risen in Europe, and in a number of cases the rise was due to the difficulties of integrating new immigrant populations. Though I have not emphasized this point, it is clear that religious freedom faces new challenges in a variety of situations.

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<sup>16</sup> The social restriction of religious freedom can be thought of as the gap between the value people place on living in a country with religious freedom for their own religion versus freedom for other religions. A recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life of populations in 10 countries from Asia, the Americas, and Africa found an average gap of 14 percentage points across the countries. For details see <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/pentecostals-06.pdf>. Also see Grim, B.J. and R. Wike. (2010). "Cross-Validating Measures of Global Religious Intolerance: Comparing Coded State Department Reports with Survey Data and Expert Opinion." *Politics and Religion* (journal of the American Political Science Association).

<sup>17</sup> See Vincent Y.C. Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> See William I. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003) Also see Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963).

<sup>19</sup> Grim, B.J. (2012). "Religion, Law and Social Conflict in the 21st Century: Findings from Sociological Research," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, pp. 1-23, doi:10.1093/ojlr/rwr020.

Second, certain laws, such as anti-blasphemy laws or contradictory constitutional protections for religious freedom, are associated with high and rising overall restrictions. Recognizing the effects of different types of restrictions is one of the new and potentially useful applications of statistical analysis when applied to religious freedom. For instance, some types of restrictions, such as government restriction on people's freedom to convert from one religion to another, are indicative of higher overall restrictions, and may be part of a select number of indicators that could serve as an early warning system of mass violence. Restrictions falling into this category were very high in the Middle East and North Africa before Arab Spring. But, at a minimum, rising restrictions on religion were undeniably a part of the context in which the uprisings occurred.

And finally, advanced statistical analysis of these data from the book, *The Price of Freedom Denied*, indicates religion-related violence increases as restrictions on religion increase. Indeed, religion-related terrorism is mostly bred in countries where restrictions on religion are high. However, the prospects of seeing lower restrictions on religion in countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia are indeed daunting. In such places, added restrictions appear to be a logical way to contain conflict. However, according to the data, higher restrictions often have the unintended consequence of fueling additional grievances that feed a cycle of violent religious persecution and conflict.



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