

Approaching Freedom: Islamic Studies and Arab-Muslim Freedom Movements

ABDESSAMAD BELHAJ*

Abstract

One of the key problems of publications in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies is running the risk of producing an academic discourse that is somewhat disconnected from reality. This paper analyses freedom-related publications from the IslamicInfo and Index Islamicus databases to highlight this concern. Here, it is suggested that important ideas and moments of freedom movements in the modern history of Arabs and Muslims have been overlooked by Western publications. While the Saudi Arabian database IslamicInfo (1931–2024) indexed writings that emphasized freedom as a desired then appropriated right, Index Islamicus (1930–2024) presents a century of research in which Arab-Muslim societies were denied freedom as a reality, a dynamic, or an aspiration. The publications indexed in the two databases are compared and examined in relation to the significant political shifts that have occurred in the Arab world.

Keywords

Islamic studies, freedom, West, Middle East.

Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Islam-related publications in the West were a contentious subject. In *Orientalism* (1978) and *Covering Islam* (1981), Edward Said demonstrated how Western media, politics, and hegemonic interests shaped how information about Islam was produced in the West.¹ Numerous critical studies have been published since the 1980s, and many Western scholarly works on Islam no longer promote essentialist images of Arabs and Muslims. As a result of revolutions in critical theory and social sciences in Western universities, these studies provide information as close to the reality and dynamics of Muslim and Arab societies as possible. However, prejudices, gaps, and silences persist in twenty-first-century Islamic and Middle

* Senior Researcher, Institute of Religion and Society, University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary.

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Random House, 1981).

Eastern studies,² especially since 2001, when the Middle East gained significant geopolitical attention in the West. In this regard, the quantity of publications on Islam has grown to reflect this geopolitical interest, and the knowledge produced by Islamic and Middle Eastern studies in recent decades is used, misused, or influenced by Western (especially American) policies and actions in the Middle East.³

In the last twenty years, freedom has been a crucial issue that has influenced both the Arab and Islamic movements and ideologies, as well as the American agenda in the Middle East. This article examines two databases, Index Islamicus (Brill-Leiden) and IslamicInfo (Saudi Arabia), to evaluate the number and scope of publications on freedom. While IslamicInfo is the premier archive of Arabic-language research in Islamic studies produced in the Middle East, Index Islamicus is the primary database of Western Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. In terms of both quantity and focus, I argue that Index Islamicus (1930–2024) offers a century of knowledge in which Arab-Muslim societies were denied freedom as a fact, a dynamic, or an aspiration; Western scholarship remains mute on the pivotal moments of freedom in the Middle East and instead concentrates on the boundaries of freedom and the exportation of freedom from the West to the Arab-Muslim world. Conversely, the Saudi Arabian database IslamicInfo (1931–2024) indexed thousands of texts that desired or appropriated freedom, and from the early twentieth century to the present, it shows a consistent Arab and Muslim interest in freedom, particularly political freedom.

To be considered credible, a subject of research in the social sciences must be rooted in and as close to the dynamics of the cultures it examines as possible. This study compares the outcomes of publications indexed in the two databases and looks at the publications' histories in light of the major political changes that have taken place in the Arab world, as well as how and to what degree they reflect these changes. While IslamicInfo's first article on freedom was published in 1931, Index Islamicus's first piece was published in 1930. For this reason, the study's time frame spans from 1930 to 2024 to assess how Western and Arab academic literature on freedom has evolved until the present.

² Suad Joseph, *Reporting Islam: Muslim Women in the New York Times, 1979–2011* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023); Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011).

³ Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Desiring Freedom

IslamicInfo is the premier Arabic-language database for Islamic studies and covers dissertations, conference papers, and journals from most Arab countries (from Morocco to Iraq).⁴ It is part of the Saudi Almandumah Inc. in Riyadh, founded in 2004, and focuses on Arabic academic content.⁵ IslamicInfo indexes 655 journals, mostly from the Arab world, and a few journals from Turkey, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, and Iran. A search on freedom (*ḥurriyyah*) in IslamicInfo (between 1931 and 2024) conducted in January 2025 yielded 6565 publications, most of which are research articles (5876), with the remainder being book reviews or book chapters, as this database does not cover books. The bulk of published works or authors are located in Egypt, which, overall, dominates the Arab-Islamic intellectual activity.⁶

There was only one publication on freedom in Arabic in 1931, and only twelve articles were published on this topic between 1931 and 1959. One publication advocates for freedom as an Islamic value, while another tries to reconcile freedom with Islamic law. In two publications, Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), the South Asian Islamic philosopher, poet, and politician, is studied as a proponent of freedom and the fight against colonialism. The other publications discuss the hypocrisy of the United Nations when it comes to the violation of freedom of religion (of Muslims in the Soviet Union), Islam and freedom of conscience, courts and freedom, administration and freedom, and freedom and virtue. These few publications suggest that freedom was an established concept in early modern Islamic thought and was debated in different areas. Nonetheless, freedom still needs to be justified in terms of Islamic ethics, and overall, the number of publications is surprisingly small. This undersized number may be explained by the fact that the majority of Arab countries were under occupation until the 1940s (Syria and Lebanon) and 1950s (North Africa and Sudan), and 1962 for Algeria, during which time freedom and publications were restricted. Arab

⁴ Marwah Bakr Muḥammad Abū ‘Umar, “Al-Dirāsāt al-Bayniyyah fī ‘l-‘Ulūm al-Islāmiyyah wa ‘l-Qānūniyyah al-Mutāḥah fī Qawā‘id al-Bayānāt: Qā‘idat IslamicInfo Namūdhajan,” *Majallat Kulliyat al-Lughah al-‘Arabiyyah bi l-Manūfiyyah* 39 (2024): 2111.

⁵ ‘Azīzah ‘Alī Muḥammadi, “Al-Tawajjuhāt al-Mustaqbaliyyah li Qawā‘id al-Bayānāt al-‘Arabiyyah Dhāt al-Naṣṣ al-Kāmil,” *Cybrarian Journal* 67 (2022): 62.

⁶ https://search.mandumah.com/Search/Results?lookfor=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9&type=AllFields&submit=%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AB&filter%5B%5D=%7Edatabase_holdings%3A%22IslamicInfo%22&limit=20&sort=year+asc

nationalism and the notion of unity were prioritized in countries that were already independent, such as Egypt.⁷

In the 1960s, the number of publications on freedom improved and reached 135. Given that the average of 13 publications each year is excellent when compared to prior years, this represents a substantial shift in scholarly interest in freedom. Still, the 1960s were the peak of Arab nationalism and Nasserism in the Middle East. This had an impact on Arab academic discourse as freedom was discussed often in relation to Arab unity. Nonetheless, Muslim intellectuals continue to be primarily concerned with freedom in the Muslim tradition in the quest for Islamic legitimacy. Additionally, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, freedom of contracts, freedom of women, civil disobedience, nonalignment, freedom in international affairs, individual liberties, and freedom in society were all explored in this period. Moreover, another example of the Arab desire for freedom in the 1960s is the translation of European texts on freedom into Arabic. Thus, the celebrated French poet, essayist, and philosopher Paul Valéry's (1871-1945) work on freedom of thought was translated and published in 1964 by the Moroccan Islamic journal *Da'wat al-Ḥaqq*, which is run by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Simultaneously, freedom was envisioned within the broader framework of Islamic ethics, which also included social and political ethics. Some publications support human rights and are critical of Western values and international relations that deny Muslims the right to practise their religion freely in the Soviet Union and India. All things considered, the 1960s laid the groundwork for the establishment of Arab states and the attainment of their independence.⁸ For most Arab scholars and intellectuals, the primary concern was how to maintain a minimally Islamic identity while supporting modernization and Arab unity.⁹ One key concept in this reconciliatory effort was freedom, and Arab academics demonstrated faith in their capacity to achieve it. However, they overlooked the repressive policies of Arab nationalism.

The 1970s showed a similar trend, with 175 publications (an average of 17 findings per year). Some of the key issues were still the struggle

⁷ Marlène Abou-Chedid Nasr, "Analyse des champs sémantiques de la notion de umma arabiyya (nation arabe) dans le discours nassérien (1952-1970)," *Mots. Les langages du politique* 2 (1981): 13-35; Caesar E. Farah, "The Dilemma of Arab Nationalism," *Die Welt des Islams* 8 (1963): 140-64.

⁸ James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

⁹ Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962).

against colonialism and freedom in Islamic ethics. However, new topics such as Muslim freedom in China and other communist states were increasingly being discussed. The Palestinian issue joined the series of debates on freedom and human rights. Other major issues that emerged in the 1970s were academic research freedom and economic freedom. Another new and important subject was legal and judicial freedom, reflecting the authoritarian and repressive era of the 1970s. In 1971, Islamic anti-authoritarian critiques of Arab nationalism began to emerge, particularly in relation to Egypt. Islamist and Salafi perspectives on limiting social freedom also began to appear; they were absent in the 1960s. Following the defeat of Nasserism in 1967, Islamism emerged as the dominant ideology in the Middle East in the 1970s. The conservative tone in Islamic academic discourse is clear, and the limits of social freedom are now emphasized. Additionally, the conservative turn of the 1970s is mirrored in the intense way women's modesty was promoted.

Overall, in the Middle East, freedom was subjugated or integrated into authenticity and authority, which was finally expressed in significant events in 1979: Iran's Islamic revolution, Mecca's extremists' takeover of the Grand Mosque, and Afghanistan's fight against the Soviet Union. Both anti-authoritarianism and the restoration of Islamic authority and authenticity are present in these events, often in religious and violent ways.¹⁰ Repressive policies and the collapse of Nasserism led to the rise of radical Islamism in Egypt, which culminated in bloodshed and the 1977 assassination of the Egyptian Minister of Islamic Affairs.¹¹

A major change took place in the 1980s, with 283 publications and a yearly average of 28 publications. The authenticity thesis has dominated in asserting a particular Islamic understanding of freedom. Conflicts with Israel and Communism are now viewed as conflicts over religious freedom. The Islamic state and society were perceived until the early 1980s as more important than freedom, and rituals such as fasting were regarded as Islamic acts of emancipation. The limitations on women's freedom are more evident now, especially when compared to the situation of women in the West, which is portrayed in favour of Muslim women. Muslim scholars portray Islam as the religion of complete and authentic freedom. Both authoritarian governments in the Middle East and Islamic-minded intellectuals who wished to establish an Islamic state and society shared a mistrust of liberal freedom. The 1983 article on the duty to kill apostates published by *al-Wa'y al-Islāmī*, a prominent

¹⁰ Hamit Bozarslan, "Revisiting the Middle East's 1979," *Economy and Society* 41 (2012): 558-67.

¹¹ Hamied N. Ansari, "The Islamic Militants in Egyptian Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16 (1984): 123-44.

Islamic review in Kuwait, is typical of this environment (spanning from the 1970s until the 1980s).

However, there is a clear return to discussing the need for freedom and promoting it within an Islamic framework in the second half of the 1980s (1984–1985). Muslim intellectuals have finally realized the value of political freedom eliminated by the authoritarianism of the 1970s and early 1980s, as various Islamist movements themselves were victims of these governments.¹² The second half of the 1980s is comparable to the 1960s in that it desired and was receptive to liberal freedom, and opposed to repressive policies, emphasizing freedom of conscience, and recovering all that vanished in the 1970s and early 1980s under the influence of Islamist ideologies and authoritarian regimes. By the end of the 1980s, there was a greater conviction in freedom, as well as a greater discussion of pluralism, individual liberties, humanism, and fairness in international affairs. The shift of some Arab regimes towards a semi-liberal stance in the late 1980s (Tunisia, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen) may be the primary cause of this renewed interest in political freedom. However, the global debates on human rights may also have played a role in this process. The concept of freedom within the context of human rights—rather than Islamic law and ethics—has also been disseminated by the Intifada (1987 in Palestinian territories) and the Algerian uprising (October 1988).

In the 1990s, 456 articles on freedom were published, while the annual average rose to 45 publications. We may speak of a notable rise here, which may be explained by the changes in world political affairs following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the triumph of liberalism.¹³ After the conflicts in the 1970s, Islamic thought made peace with freedom in the 1980s, but it has since changed to call for freedom on many levels and in different countries. Freedom of expression was demanded as early as 1990 in Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan, Yemen, and Iraq. Additionally, there is a growing endorsement of human rights, and Muslim academics have come to appreciate the value of political freedom they have given up for the sake of the state and unity. In this period, freedom was also associated with economics, freedom of the press, and pluralism—all of which were prominent ideas in the 1990s following the waves of globalization and liberalization. Significant progress has also been made in the practice of liberties in courts. Freedom is also correlated with human dignity, democracy, coexistence,

¹² Gawdat Bahgat, "Democracy in the Arab World: An Elitist Approach," *International Relations* 12 (1994): 49–60.

¹³ R. Brynne, B. Korany, and P. Noble, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995).

citizenship, constitutionalism, and tolerance (with regard to non-Muslims). Starting in 1995, there were many articles criticizing the liberal agenda of the Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in Beijing, China. Some Muslim intellectuals also practised self-criticism for the course they took in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of denying freedom in favour of Islamic governance.

Both internal and external factors contributed to the constant and systematic rise in optimism and interest in freedom during the 1990s. This decade saw the height of Western civilization's appeal. Furthermore, the Arab interest in liberal democracy and political freedom remained unaffected by the conflicts of the Gulf War (1990–1991) and the First Intifada (1987–1993). The internal conflicts between governments and Islamist groups in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt during the 1990s may have demonstrated Islamism's limitations in that it encourages violence and gives authoritarian governments an excuse to suppress their citizens even more.¹⁴ The thesis of the clash of civilizations, which was promoted in the West by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, among others, did not lessen the appeal of liberal principles. This further illustrates that although global factors can contribute to the generation of some enthusiasm for ideas, local or regional adoption, which can only come about after long processes and historical experience, is necessary for the ideas to persist or take root.

Between 2000 and 2009, the number of publications climbed to 804, while the average number of articles nearly doubled to 80 a year. However, the September 11 terrorist attacks and the Second Intifada (2000–2005) intensified conflicts between the West and Muslims. Given that it took place in the decade that would ultimately lead to the 2010–2011 Arab Spring, this quantity of publications is significant in itself. In addition to efforts to reinterpret Islamic ideas in terms of liberal democracy and freedom, concepts like civil society are becoming more widely accepted. At the same time, the American foreign policy's freedom agenda is criticized. While in the 1990s, the effort was put into reconciling freedom with Islam, freedom is now incontestably endorsed as necessary and as a way to defend Islamic identity in a globalized world. The idea of the right to cultural freedom or the right to difference became obvious after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Operation Iraqi Freedom). The Arab attitude towards freedom in this decade can be summarized by the article "Arabs and Muslims need

¹⁴ Gilles Kepel, "Islamists versus the State in Egypt and Algeria," *Daedalus* 124 (1995): 109–27; Alaya Allani, "The Islamists in Tunisia between Confrontation and Participation: 1980–2008," *The Journal of North African Studies* 14 (2009): 257–72.

democratic systems, but in their own hands, not in the hands of others” by the Egyptian thinker Muḥyī ’l-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm, published in the Kuwaiti review *al-Wa’y al-Islāmī* in 2004. In 2007, in Egypt, the first Arabic-language article about the right to protest was published. The authenticity thesis, which was popular in the 1970s, is no longer relevant since freedom is appreciated per se (independently from its Islamic legitimacy), and foreign invasions, as well as local terrorism, did not push Muslim intellectuals to give up freedom, and political freedom has been irrevocably internalized by Islamic scholars. Conflicts with the West were unable to change the Middle East’s democratic transition and the globalization of freedom in the 1990s because the shift was profound, local, and widespread. Yet, the invasion of Iraq and 9/11 only sparked a conversation about the freedom agenda. The West, especially the US, is perceived as engaging in the instrumentalization of freedom and the use of democracy.

Between 2010 and 2019, that is the decade of the Arab Spring, 2679 publications on freedom were indexed, with an average of 267 publications annually. Thus, the Arab Spring has caused the number of publications to reach previously unheard-of numbers—nearly ten times as many as in the 1980s. In 2011, Egypt released the first article about freedom, revolution, and the role of civil society in the Arab Spring. Discussions on the liberties between religious and civil states, the impact of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia on freedoms, and revolution and human rights were among the key subjects covered that year. While some articles argue that Islam supports a moderate philosophy of freedom, other articles portray Islam as the religion of freedom. As in the previous ten years, the approach is centred on human rights, legislation, and institutionalization. Although some articles criticize Western liberalism, the majority of articles support it, particularly press and political freedom, as well as the way individual liberties are structured with respect to public institutions. Many articles call for pluralism, human dignity, and religious freedom. Freedom is also associated with fighting corruption and promoting social justice. There is also increased criticism of authoritarianism and tyranny. Muslim intellectuals frequently called to uphold freedom without excess to avoid transgressing Islamic values; the cross-fertilization of Islamic ethics with liberal democracy and liberalism achieved its zenith in these years. The counter-revolution in Egypt in June 2013 and the Arab Spring’s setbacks in Syria, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen did not affect the pace of publications on freedom. Following these regressions, there were numerous discussions about the freedom of protest and constitutions, as well as the roles of foreign interventions and counter-revolutions. As the

decade came to an end, more was written about citizenship (as rights and responsibilities) and good governance, and freedom was irrevocably incorporated into Islamic political thought. No piece out of the 2679 articles, published between 2010 and 2019, was a counter-discourse on freedom, though there was occasional criticism of Western liberalism.

As reflected in these publications, even though the Arab Spring was aborted and freedom movements were contained in most countries (Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Libya, etc.), the idea of freedom became central to Arab political thought. While it is true that Arab-speaking scholars have been cautiously engaging with freedom since the 1930s (per IslamicInfo), this interest has been constantly increasing until the 1980s when a notable change took place, and continued until the Arab Spring. We must also take into account that Arab countries were ruled by autocratic regimes and that there was fear among academics to write about freedom. However, even though most Arab countries still operate under autocratic rule to this date, the number of publications has increased dramatically over the past twenty years.

These changes could be attributed to several factors, chief among which is the political context in the Middle East. In the 1990s, when liberalism was popular around the world, we find that publications in the Arab world on freedom did not significantly follow this trend (only forty-two publications per year). However, the annual average rose to 267 publications after the Arab Spring and remained high until 2019. This indicates that the Arab Spring has sparked greater interest in freedom than the Soviet Union's collapse. Youth movements established freedom as a tangible reality that persisted even after these movements failed and were overthrown by counterrevolutions and civil wars. One could argue that in Arabic-speaking Islamic and Middle Eastern studies, freedom has now been irreversibly activated.

One of the primary points of contention among scholars studying Arab politics and society was the reason why they were unable to foresee or observe the signs of a shift towards calls for freedom.¹⁵ As we can see, one clue of this change was the notable and abrupt rise in publications on freedom from forty-two in 2001 to eighty-nine in 2002, 106 in 2006, and 119 in 2009. The number of publications changed significantly between 2001 and 2010, indicating a degree of local maturity and support

¹⁵ Magid Shihade, "On the Difficulty in Predicting and Understanding the Arab Spring: Orientalism, Euro-centrism, and Modernity," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 17 (2012): 57-70.

Jeff Goodwin, "Why We were Surprised (again) by the Arab Spring," *Swiss Political Science Review* 17 (2011): 452-56.

for freedom that is distinct from worldwide trends. Since the US war on terror peaked between 2001 and 2008, the primary headline was terrorism, and the 9/11 attacks justified significant geopolitical shifts, including the 2001 and 2003 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the creative chaos strategy, and the imperialism of the Neocons.¹⁶ Freedom was envisioned and sought after in the Arab world concurrently with these repressive foreign policies.

Communication and access to information might also explain the dramatic increase in interest in freedom in the years 2000–2009. The use of social media, the growth of the Internet in the Arab world, and the connectivity factor (being more informed and connected to the outside world) also occurred between 2000 and 2009.¹⁷ Since location is no longer a barrier, ideas and movements spread more quickly and easily thanks to communication technologies. We may also include the effect of Al Jazeera (and other satellite networks), which started airing in 1996 and has subsequently gained popularity. The Internet and these media outlets have freed political discussion and information from the sway of Arab nations' national media. By the end of the 1990s, the effects of Al Jazeera on Arab youth were evident, and some governments made an effort to mitigate these effects.¹⁸ In the ten years before the Arab Spring, Arab youth may have converged more quickly towards freedom due to the breakdown of authoritarian regimes' control over information and the availability of alternative means of viewing and communicating about political issues. This means that the Arab apparatus's final line of defence against demonstrations and calls for independence was no longer able to regulate the flow and exchange of ideas.

Publications in the last five years (2020–2024) have already surpassed the number of 1985 articles. Arab scholars continue to emphasize political freedom as a human right, which includes the freedom of protest, expression, and citizenship, as well as the freedom of political parties and trade unions (from regime control). There is also much discussion of the right to justice, freedom of religion, and other forms of freedom (such as academic freedom, movement, the right to information and trade in particular, and political humour). Discourses on

¹⁶ Ira Chernus, *Monsters to Destroy: The Neoconservative War on Terror and Sin* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

¹⁷ Jeffrey Ghannam, *Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011* (Washington: Center for International Media Assistance, 2011).

¹⁸ Sam Cherribi, "Al-Jazeera Arabic, Transnational Identity and Influence," in *The Sage Handbook of Political Communication*, ed. Holli A. Semetko and Margaret Scammell (London: Sage, 2012), 472–83.

freedom of movement in connection with lockdown and freedom in connection with social media have also been impacted by the coronavirus context. Freedom is now unquestionable and addressed in relation to different laws, circumstances, and rights. Regarding the Prophet's cartoons, several authors argue that insulting faiths is not protected by the right to freedom of religion. Additionally, other scholars attempt to reinterpret the apostasy law in the Muslim tradition to support the freedom of belief for other religions. Freedom of belief has been prevalent throughout the past five years since Muslim communities appear to be more accepting of religious minorities and non-believing groups. Some of the new themes that have been covered only in recent years include the freedom of the body (the idea that a person owns their body and can use it as they like), which Muslim authors oppose and treat as the promotion of sexual freedom by human rights organizations. Among the subjects that have vanished are women's freedom and the Islamic conception of freedom.¹⁹

Despite the political repression of the Arab Spring (2010-2012), Arab aspirations for freedom were consolidated by the expansion of freedom discourses to all spheres of life (business, academia, courts, trade unions, media, religion, etc.). This background explains the Arab Spring's resurgence (the second Arab Spring, 2018-2024) and the success of the Syrian freedom movement in December 2024, liberating the country from the Assad regime in power since 1971.²⁰ In Jordan, Tunisia, Iraq, Algeria, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Oman, Libya, and Sudan, there were upheavals and confrontations against authoritarianism, sectarianism, and human rights violations during the second Arab Spring, with various degrees of success.²¹

Denying Freedom

Index Islamicus, a database produced by Brill publishers in the Netherlands, is the main "bibliography of publications in European languages on all aspects of Islam and the Muslim world . . . containing over 600,000 records . . . surveying over 5,000 journals together with

¹⁹ https://search.mandumah.com/Search/Results?lookfor=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9&type=AllFields&submit=%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AB&filter%5B%5D=%7Edatabase_holdings%3A%22IslamicInfo%22&limit=20&sort=year+asc

²⁰ Jean-François Bayart, "Après la chute d'Assad, les incertitudes d'une révolution," *Alternatives Économiques* 454 (2025): 52-53; Laura Ruiz de Elvira, *Charities and Politics in Bashar al-Assad's Syria: The Unravelling of the Old Social Contract* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025).

²¹ Timothy Ubelejit Nte, "The Algerian Crisis of 2019 and the Second Arab Spring Uprising: A Comparative Analysis," *International Journal of Public Administration and Management Research* 6 (2021): 16-24.

books and multi-authored works.”²² On freedom, it provides 1743 search results covering the years between 1930 and 2024, of which 291 are books and the remaining are journal articles or book chapters. English is the most common language used, with 1,696 results (out of 1743), followed by French with 13 publications and German with 11 publications. Minorities in Muslim countries and Muslims in non-Muslim nations, law, women, human rights, and censorship are the top five issues related to freedom, accounting for the majority of publications. The top three geographical regions which are related to freedom are Iraq (28), Turkey (42), and South Asia (96). Most publications were produced between 2001 and 2024 (1400 results). Thus, Index Islamicus presents a different image than IslamicInfo does. While from 1931 until the 1980s, when a significant change occurred in favour of greater interest in freedom, IslamicInfo paints a picture of Arabs’ constant and growing interest in freedom. It indicates that for over 50 years, Arabs have not ceased to aspire to freedom. On the other hand, Index Islamicus portrays freedom as something that has gained attention suddenly since 2001, mostly in regions that are of strategic importance to the Anglo-Saxon world, such as South Asia, Turkey and Iraq. Freedom is also connected to issues of human rights, gender, and minorities, all of which are key to American foreign policy in the Middle East.

Between 1930 and 1949, only six articles were published in the West on freedom in the Muslim world. This appears anecdotal in light of the colonial liberation movements that were very active in the Middle East during this period. Five out of these publications are written to challenge the existence of freedom in Islam (the Qur’ān and freedom of will, religious freedom in Egypt, Islam and intellectual freedom, and the hope for religious freedom in the world of Islam). Only one publication deals with the national movement for freedom in Syria and Palestine, written by the Palestinian Burhan Dajani (1920-2000) and published by *India Quarterly* in New Delhi in 1947. On the ground, from Morocco to Indonesia, freedom-related movements, ideologies, and symbolic figures reached their peak in the region, and over the course of two decades, all of that was absent, except for one single article. Thus, there has been a purposeful silence on Muslim liberation movements, which calls into doubt Islamic and Arabic Studies as a grounded field of research and critical analysis in the first half of the twentieth century.

During the 1950s, there were five publications on freedom according to Index Islamicus. The majority of these publications discuss the fight

²² <https://bibliographies.brill.com/IIO/>.

for independence from British rule, and they were written by native authors and published in India or Pakistan. In addition to being a decade in which numerous nations gained their independence, the 1950s also saw the rise of Nasserism in the Middle East. However, scholarly interest did not reflect these changes. Thus, in 30 years (1930-1959), Western academia did not pay any attention to the ideals and liberation movements in the Muslim world, per Index Islamicus.

The number of publications did not improve much in the 1960s (ten publications). Again, native academics (who publish in English) wrote most pieces, focusing on independence struggles in Algeria and India. Conversely, we can see two directions in Western scholarship that started to appear in the 1960s as Middle Eastern studies took a foothold in the West: 1) One that continues the previous suspicion about freedom in Islam (which previously was led by some missionary figures in the journal *The Muslim World* and now by biased historians such as Bernard Lewis). 2) A second trend is an attempt to revisit Muslim reformist movements and ideas of freedom, with the first attempt in this regard appearing in 1964 on “al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and political freedom” (Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī being a Nineteenth-Century Muslim Reformist in Egypt), published in *The Muslim World* by Leon Zolondek, an American Arabist at the University of Kentucky.²³

In the 1970s, the number of publications on freedom was fifteen, a very low figure. Native researchers’ works on freedom from colonialism continue to be the primary share of these publications, led by local journals such as Pakistan’s *Sind Quarterly*. However, compared to the 1960s, there is greater diversity in the way that freedom is viewed. For instance, the 1978 essay by American anthropology professor Clyde-Ahmad Winters on Afro-American Muslims and their quest for freedom represents a new line of inquiry and possibly the first study of Muslims in the West and freedom. Furthermore, interest in existential or philosophical freedom has been stimulated by research on Muhammad Iqbal, the prominent Muslim philosopher. Journals such as *Majallat al-Azhar* (Cairo) and *Islam in the Modern Age* (New Delhi) also started to publish Islamic apologetics on freedom that emphasized freedom in the Muslim tradition. The apologetic trend is a result of the rise of Islamism in the 1970s, which has drastically altered the political and intellectual landscapes of the Arab and Muslim countries.²⁴ Islamist ideologies have supplanted nationalism of various kinds as well as communism. The Islamist turn, while it reached most Muslim countries, only Egypt and

²³ <https://bibliographies-brill-com/II0/items/?anyField=freedom&from=1960&to=1969>.

²⁴ Alaa Al-Din Arafat, *The Rise of Islamism in Egypt* (Cham: Springer, 2017); Bryan S. Turner, “Class, Generation and Islamism: Towards a Global Sociology of Political Islam,” *British Journal of Sociology* 54 (2003): 139-47.

India appear to be concerned when it comes to the Index Islamicus. Apparently, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries have not sparked academic interest in the West yet.

A significant change in the number of Western publications on freedom took place in the Muslim World in the 1980s, as the results jumped from fifteen in the 1970s to eighty-nine in the 1980s. Besides the staple topics of lack of freedoms in the Muslim world, existential freedom, and the movements of freedom in the Muslim world, new topics appear now, such as the freedom of information, freedom of women, freedom of Palestinians, academic freedom, and religious freedom of Muslims in the West. Publications that pay attention to movements of political Islam as movements of freedom start to appear in Afghanistan (as they fight the Soviets on behalf of the US), Egypt, and Iran. The emergence of political Islam as an ally of the West against communism has pushed Western scholars to see freedom as a legitimate quest in the Muslim world. The first study in this regard was published in 1986 under the title *Paths to Progress: Bread and Freedom in Developing Societies* by William Maxwell McCord, a sociology professor at City University of New York. Critical views of the role of Western powers in harming freedoms in the Muslim world start to be published, usually written by native authors (with a focus on the foreign policies of the US and France in particular). In parallel, Islamic thinkers carry on the task of Islamizing the concept of freedom and take it back to early Islamic ethics, as political Islam has now succeeded in some countries in the Muslim world (Iran, Afghanistan, and Sudan). Still, some publications by Western scholars compare freedom in Islam with Christianity or the West, a comparison that is intended to disfavour Islam. Said's critique of Orientalism (1978) has not yet produced a visible self-criticism in Western Islamic and Middle Eastern studies.

In the 1990s, the trend continued in terms of the number of publications on freedom, which have now reached 201 research works with an average of 20 publications a year. An important area of research in the West remains the lack of freedom and censorship in the Muslim world. Conversely, freedom from colonialism has now been put aside as a topic. We can now see the effect of Said's work as the journal *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East* was founded in 1992, and played a key role in publishing critical Western views on the Middle East. For example, some articles published in this journal challenged the perception of liberal feminism as the standard for Muslim women. In a similar vein, historians and critical anthropologists like Mary C. Wilson and Emory Bogle started publishing their research on the Middle East's struggle for liberation. Muslim authors' research reveals a clear desire for freedom in contemporary Arabic and Persian literature as well as

religious and literary traditions. Besides this literary turn, there is a clear dominance by native authors in writing about freedom (as movements and struggles). Furthermore, a transition is observed from publications on anti-colonial freedom movements to movements of freedom to overthrow regimes (Indonesia, Albania, Pakistan, Palestine, Turkey, Algeria, Jordan, Malaysia, and Iran). Furthermore, Western authors tend to conduct research on freedom in pre-modern religious and philosophical texts or modern literary texts. We might call this trend poetic freedom. Western academics started to publish pieces in which they showed the pitfalls of researching Islam and the Middle East. Some of the conundrums of this divided awareness were encapsulated in two publications: 1) "Eastern Veiling, Western Freedom?" an article by Nancy J. Hirschmann, published in 1996, and 2) Robert Kennedy's article "Is one Person's Terrorist Another's Freedom Fighter? Western and Islamic Approaches to 'Just War' Compared," published in 1999. Many Western scholars viewed freedom as a Western value and certain groups as terrorists, which contributed to denying Arabs their freedom and failing to acknowledge the region's struggle for liberation.

The years 2000–2009, which preceded the Arab Spring, were crucial in setting the stage for the freedom movement that began in Tunisia in December 2010. The number of publications increased dramatically (390 publications with an average of thirty-nine publications annually). Non-Western researchers continue to dominate research on the struggle for political freedom in a variety of countries (Palestine, Morocco, Bangladesh, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, India, Somalia, and Indonesia). For Western researchers, the conflicts between Muslim minorities and secular laws in the West have now become the main topic of study in relation to freedom. This decade has also shown us how the use of freedom in American foreign policy (NATO's Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (2001) and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003) became discussed and promoted in scholarly circles. Numerous studies and journals, such as the *Journal of Democracy*, and organizations, like Freedom House, contributed to promoting this freedom agenda. Furthermore, threats to freedom became the primary catchphrase of studying nations in Africa (Nigeria), Central Asia, and the Middle East (Turkey, Iraq, and Syria). As the United States is using freedom as a weapon to combat terrorism attributed to Muslims, the latter is increasingly viewed as the adversary and inflated to meet the objectives of American foreign policy.

The first attempt to acknowledge and make amends for the lack of Western research on freedom in modern Muslim societies was Israeli historian Barry Rubin's book *The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East* (2006). Rubin asserts that Arab

communities are split between forces of authoritarianism and freedom, just like societies in other countries, including the West. This book “normalizes” Arabs as seeking political freedom, despite its stated bias in favour of Arab liberals and its view of Western political freedom as the ideal to emulate.²⁵ Rubin’s endeavour builds on the Lebanese historian Albert Hourani’s *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, released in 1983, which provides a history of Arab liberal thinkers during the Arab Renaissance.²⁶ Despite its promises, Arab liberalism did not achieve the success that many Westerners had anticipated, as many of its claims are predicated on the opposition between Islam and freedom.²⁷

In the 2010-2019 period, Index Islamicus shows 767 publications on freedom, which is almost twice as many as the decade 2000-2009. The obvious explanation for this dramatic increase is the Arab Spring, which began in 2010. The trends seen in the 2000-2009 years continue, mainly observing the lack of freedom in the Muslim world championed by Freedom House’s yearly report and expressed in Beverley Milton-Edwards’s 2010 publication under the title of *The Democratic Freedom Deficit in the Middle East*. There is still interest among Western scholars to study the freedom of minorities and contest Islamic conceptions of freedom, usually by way of comparison with Western freedoms. During these years, some Muslim intellectuals such as Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Louay Safi, Mohsen Kadivar, and Taha Jabir al-Alwani regularly published pieces that attempted to find Islamic legitimacy for political freedom. There is also a timid Western interest in the Palestinian question as a freedom struggle, in relation to the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in 2010.

During these crucial years, some Western scholars engaged with freedom in the Arab Spring, but most authors who wrote about the Arab Spring were Arabs, and Western scholars only rarely published on freedom in light of the Arab Spring. Western scholars still prefer to discuss the deficit of freedom in Islam and autocratic Muslim regimes, the usual suspects being Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia, and Turkey. We can also see Muslim and Western authors contest the Western agenda on

²⁵ Barry Rubin, *The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2006).

²⁶ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Wael Abu-Uksa, *Freedom in the Arab World: Concepts and Ideologies in Arabic Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²⁷ Meir Hatina, “Arab Liberal Discourse: Old Dilemmas, New Visions,” *Middle East Critique* 20 (2011): 3-20; Tamara Cofman Wittes, “The Promise of Arab Liberalism,” *Policy Review* 125 (2004): 61-76; Mohamed Charfi, *Islam et liberté: Le malentendu historique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998); Mustafa Akyol, *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty* (New York: Norton & Company, 2011).

freedom, as in Hassan and Hammond's article, *The Rise and Fall of America's Freedom Agenda in Afghanistan: Counter-terrorism, Nation-building and Democracy*, published by the *Journal of Human Rights* in 2011.²⁸ There is also a consistent interest in women's freedom in relation to the headscarf controversy in Europe and beyond. Perhaps also echoing Rubin's and Hourani's works, some Western scholars started to study modern Arab thinkers about freedom, such as the Lebanese Buṭrus al-Bustānī, the Tunisian Rachid Ghannouchi, the Egyptian Abū 'l-'Alā Māḍī, and the Egyptian Rifā'ah Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī. Still, Arabic literature, women, and "the persecuted" minorities in relation to freedom are more appealing to researchers in the West.

In this regard, the debate between two Western scholars on whether or not political freedom is an Islamic virtue is symbolic. A British historian of Islam named Michael Cook claimed in 2013 that political freedom is not an Islamic value, encapsulating the perspective of denying Arabs freedom since Western scholarship avoided examining colonial liberation movements in the first half of the twentieth century, and following Bernard Lewis' tradition.²⁹ In response, the esteemed *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* published an article titled "Political Freedom as an Islamic Value" in 2018 by David Decosimo, a young American liberal political philosopher. Decosimo embodies a post-essentialist perspective on ethics and other people that enables one to look past ideology.³⁰

Finally, Index Islamicus provides 266 results of publications on freedom for the last five years (2020–2024). Although we need to wait and see how scholars perform over the next five years to complete the picture, it can be argued that interest in freedom has diminished. Nonetheless, the traditional topics (Islamic religious freedom, women's freedom, the lack of freedom in Muslim societies, and the Muslim conundrum in the West) remain at the forefront. More and more academics are increasingly adopting Decosimo's ethical framework for acknowledging freedom in Islam. Following this effort by Decosimo, two volumes attempt to recognize freedom as a bridge between Muslims and Westerners: Lucinda Mosher's edited volume on *Freedom: Christian and*

²⁸ O. Hassan and A. Hammond, "The Rise and Fall of America's Freedom Agenda in Afghanistan: Counter-terrorism, Nation-building and Democracy," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 15 (2011): 532–51.

²⁹ Michael Cook, "Is Political Freedom an Islamic Value?" in *Freedom and the Construction of Europe: Volume II*, ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 283–310.

³⁰ David Decosimo, "Political Freedom as an Islamic Value," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86 (2018): 912–52.

*Muslim Perspectives*³¹ and *The Concept of Freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, edited by Georges Tamer and Ursula Männle.³²

Discussion

Although in different ways, both Arab-Muslim and Western academics have been impacted by the religious traditions. Returning to religious literature was seen by many Muslim scholars as a counterstrategy to authentically seeking out Islamic perspectives on freedom. They also saw freedom in religiosity, particularly among Muslims in the West. Conversely, Many Western scholars perceived Islam as a barrier to freedom of all kinds and looked to religious scriptures for arguments about the boundaries of freedom in Muslim communities or as an argument for denying freedom to Arabs and Muslims.³³ This led to apologetic and anti-Islamic sentiments that all ignored the reality of movements of freedom throughout the twentieth century and viewed the world through the prism of religious texts and history, creating the bias of historians like we have seen in the cases of Michael Cook and Bernard Lewis. Knowledge about slavery and blasphemy in Islam is meant to be relevant to contemporary realities, as is the traditional comparison between Islam and Christianity/the West that resurfaces every time there is a significant political conflict (most recently, the Danish cartoons in Europe). Many Muslim and Western academics make the mistake of decontextualizing Islamic law and history, attempting to find an explanation for authoritarianism in pre-modern texts and societies. Then, they proceed to establish a conflict between Muslims and political freedom, denying freedom to Arabs and Muslims. At this point, some Muslim intellectuals feel the need to further explain how Islamic law is compatible with freedom.

Avoiding the topic of emancipation from colonialism is another significant setback of Western scholarship. The probable interpretation of this silence is a lack of interest in the struggle for political freedom among Muslims and Arabs. Western scholarship also reflected and sometimes promoted American foreign policy through its interest in military operations under the slogan of freedom. In the 1980s, anti-Soviet Mujahideen were viewed as liberation warriors; after the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq (in 2001 and 2003, respectively),

³¹ Lucind Mosher, ed., *Freedom: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2021).

³² Georges Tamer and Ursula Männle, eds., *The Concept of Freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

³³ Franz Rosenthal, *The Muslim Concept of Freedom prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1960).

these fighters were viewed as terrorists. The United States' advocacy of military invasion-based freedom in the Middle East has sparked interest in freedom in the region after nearly a century of silence. Publications about the Middle East's restrictions on freedom and the war against terrorism as a fight for freedom are also appearing at the same time. It is difficult for the freedom agenda to conceal its inconsistencies.

We can summarize the attitudes of Islamic scholarship towards freedom into three perspectives. First, there is the desiring attitude, which developed in the first half of the twentieth century and reached its peak in the 1960s. During this time, Muslim intellectuals focused a lot of attention on establishing limits on freedom from Islamic law, or legitimizing freedom in Islamic ethics, and balancing Western liberal democracy with the social and religious norms of conservative Muslim societies. On the other hand, there was no hostility to or conflict with political freedom. Although it existed in some form, freedom may not have been given priority in the Arab world between the 1930s and 1960s since, following independence from colonialism, development and Arab unity took precedence. During the 1950s and 1960s, Nasserism was highly regarded by Arabs, who prioritized freedom from Western hegemony, the socialist economy, Arab nationalism, and the war with Israel over political freedom of Arab citizens. A drastic change would result from Nasser's collapse in 1967. Thus, an attitude of rejecting freedom in favour of Islamic identity and unity in the 1970s and early 1980s interrupted the desiring attitude. This marginalization of freedom was also the result of confrontation with Israel and the West in 1967, which cast doubt in the minds of many Arab elites.³⁴

In search of an alternative to Arab nationalism in an authentic Islamic identity, society and state, without political freedom, Islamic scholars lost about fifteen years (from the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s). In the second half of the 1980s, Islamic scholarship resumed committing to freedom and appropriated it. This appropriation was motivated by the rejection of repressive regimes, Islamist violence, as well as by a global context of liberalization in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union. This appropriation of freedom is exemplified by the 1988 Algerian uprising, which is similar to the movements of the Arab Spring in many ways.³⁵ Other uprisings of a smaller scale occurred spontaneously in Syria, Egypt, Morocco, and

³⁴ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

³⁵ Robert P. Parks, "Algeria and the Arab Uprisings," in *The Arab Spring: Will It Lead to Democratic Transitions?* ed. Clement Henry and Jang Ji-Hyang (Cham: Springer, 2012), 101-25.

Tunisia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, mainly in response to harsh economic measures or unjust policies.

Despite conflicts with the US and Israel, the appropriation of freedom solidified in the 1990s, this time due to local Arab regime openings that organized elections, gave some leeway for press and political freedom, and allowed a limited local civil society. This local naturalization of political freedom, especially by Arab youth, including by Salafi and Islamist thinkers,³⁶ resisted the international anti-terror framework and the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their consequences, leading to the Arab Spring (2010–2011). Civil conflicts in Libya and Yemen, the return of authoritarianism in Tunisia, and counterrevolutions and persecution in Egypt and Syria did not undo the support for freedom, as seen in the Second Arab Spring (2018–2024). Freedom was irrevocably internalized, institutionalized, and incorporated into Arab political systems and cultures. Despite certain reservations about Western liberalism, the discourse on freedom also became independent of religious legitimacy.

However, we must briefly address the internal inconsistencies that are common in Arab-Muslim scholarly research on freedom, especially in relation to authoritarianism and religious boundaries. It took decades for Muslim thinkers to accept freedom as a prerequisite for any viable society or polity and to place it above the quest for an Islamic state or society. The Islamic concept of *sharīʿah* sovereignty, also known as divine sovereignty, which captivated several Muslim intellectuals in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran from the 1940s on, aided authoritarianism in all its forms to suppress freedom and so postpone human rights and progress. Likewise, authoritarian governments and Islamist groups have sacrificed freedom of speech and expression in the name of Palestine or other struggles, resulting in the loss of generations of youth, efforts, and projects of development. Another challenge that many Muslim movements and intellectuals still face is that of blasphemy and freedom of expression. Beyond the Danish cartoons and Rushdie affairs, there is apprehension about acknowledging the freedom to leave Islam or to voice any criticism or viewpoint deemed anti-Islamic.³⁷ Islamist movements and authoritarian governments abuse certain blasphemy laws to stifle dissenting opinions. Even though there has been a lot of

³⁶ Ḥākīm al-Muṭayrī, *al-Hurriyyah aw al-Ṭūfān: Dirāsah Mawḍūʿiyyah* (Beirut: al-Muʿassasah al-ʿArabiyyah li 'l-Dirāsāt wa 'l-Nashr, 2004); Rāshid al-Ghannūshī, *al-Hurriyyāt al-ʿĀmmah fī 'l-Dawlah al-Islāmiyyah* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-ʿArabiyyah, 1993).

³⁷ Dominique Avon, *La liberté de conscience: Histoire d'une notion et d'un droit* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020).

progress in recent decades, religious freedom still has to be improved in several states.³⁸

Western scholarship has mostly endorsed an attitude of denial. On the one hand, it has disregarded the struggle for independence from colonialism in the twentieth century as a movement of emancipation. Instead, most Western scholars focused on the absence of freedom in Muslim traditions and, later, in Muslim societies following independence. It was not until the 1990s that Western academics began to take an interest in the discussions surrounding freedom in the Middle East in light of the effects of Western liberalism and the US strategy of “bringing freedom” to the region. Only until the Arab Spring (2010–2011) did this interest, however, undergo a substantial shift. This interest was haphazard and quickly vanished following the Arab Spring’s failures. Two outcomes resulted from this long silence, followed by indifference to or marginalization of freedom movements, ideas, discussions, and practices, which became irreversible in the decade preceding the Arab Spring and beyond: 1) a widespread misconception that Muslims and Arabs are incapable or unwilling to exercise their right to freedom, and 2) an inability to forecast the course of regional events and political shifts like the Arab Spring. Examining the realities of Middle Eastern societies as they are represented in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies reveals that, starting in the 1980s, political freedom gained prominence in the area. This trend was further solidified in the 1990s and, particularly, in the 2000s, when it was aided by communication revolutions, regime weakness, and international influence, leading to uprisings like the First Arab Spring (2010–2012) and the Second Arab Spring (2018–2024).

The same pattern has been seen in French-language Islamic studies. Although French scholars disregarded the liberation movement from French colonialism, several North African scholars and intellectuals wrote about freedom in French as early as 1905. The Tunisian reformist Abdelaziz Thâalbi (1876–1944) co-authored *Esprit libéral du Coran* (The Liberal Spirit of the Qur’ān) in 1905.³⁹ The Moroccan philosopher Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi (1922–1993) released his *Liberté ou libération? À partir des libertés bergsoniennes* (Freedom or Liberation? From Bergsonian Perspectives on Freedom) in 1956.⁴⁰ Works on freedom from French

³⁸ Katerina Dalacoura, *Islam, Liberalism and Human Rights: Implications for International Relations* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 51.

³⁹ Abdelaziz Ettâalbi, César Benattar, and el-Hadi Sebai, *L’esprit libéral du Coran* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1905).

⁴⁰ Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi, *Liberté ou libération? (À partir des libertés bergsoniennes)* (Paris: Aubier, 1956).

colonialism were written by many Muslim Algerian intellectuals. Following independence from France, North Africa gave rise to French-speaking critical thinkers. The Tunisian Mohamed Charfi published his widely known work *Islam et liberté: Le malentendu historique* (Islam and Freedom: The Historical Misinterpretation) in 1998.⁴¹ Generally, French scholars of Islamic studies have neglected freedom except when dealing with heterodox schools of medieval Islamic thought, such as the study of Christian Jambet on freedom in Ismaili Shiism.⁴² Some French journalists, such as Robert Barrat, have also done justice to the liberation movement in Algeria, documenting its struggle against French colonialism.⁴³

Beyond Edward Said, more recent scholars deserve recognition for their modern critiques of Western Islamic studies. In particular, Wael Hallaq, who highlighted, in his 2018 work *Overstating Orientalism*, how Orientalism represents arbitrariness and self-arrogant freedom from restraint that can only be described in terms of sovereign will and knowledge, which is aggressive, reckless, and devoid of ethical content.⁴⁴ Joseph Massad refutes Western assertions that Islam and freedom are incompatible, stating that Arabs and Muslims have expressed their political initiatives against local authoritarianism and imperialism in the language of the liberal European tradition as fights for “democracy” and “freedom.”⁴⁵ Two other prominent examples of postcolonial critical Muslim studies are the journal *ReOrient*, which challenges Western exceptionalism and Orientalism on the concepts of freedom and pluralism in the Muslim world,⁴⁶ and the review *Critical Muslim*,⁴⁷ which publishes critical and stimulating pieces by Western and Muslim thinkers on a variety of subjects, including freedom. Both circles offer a dual critique of Arab-Muslim studies and the essentialism of Islam and Muslims in Western scholarship on Islam.

It is challenging to determine whether denying freedom in Orientalism has a real effect on how Western governments treat Arabs and Muslims abroad. The most evident example is Bernard Lewis, who

⁴¹ Mohamed Charfi, *Islam et liberté: Le malentendu historique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).

⁴² Christian Jambet, *La grande résurrection d'Alamût: Les formes de la liberté dans le shî'isme ismaélien* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1990).

⁴³ Robert Barrat, *Les Maquis de la liberté* (Alger: Témoignages chrétien, 1988).

⁴⁴ Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 266.

⁴⁵ Joseph A. Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), 96.

⁴⁶ Hakimeh Saghaie-Biria, “Decolonizing the “Universal” Human Rights Regime: Questioning American Exceptionalism and Orientalism,” *ReOrient* 4 (2018): 59-77.

⁴⁷ Ziauddin Sardar and Robin Yassin-Kassab, eds., *Dangerous Freethinkers* (London: Muslim Institute, 2014).

was a leading opponent of Arab and Muslim freedoms and produced an infamous discourse in support of the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq.⁴⁸ Lewis's discourse was merely a publicity ploy, though, as it could be claimed that the US decided to attack Iraq for geopolitical, military, and economic reasons as part of a larger plan to dominate the Middle East. Like Western media, which are ideological and rely on funding from hard centres of power, academic discourse also serves to legitimize imperialism. Prejudice, pride, and animosity were the driving forces behind Bernard Lewis and other Orientalists joining the imperialist goals of neoconservatives who support a militaristic and hegemonic American foreign policy, not just in the Middle East.⁴⁹ Although these hardliners of US foreign policy and these deniers of freedom share anti-Muslim sentiments, there is no evidence that the latter influenced the former.

However, some Western scholars disagree with the essentialist viewpoint on denying freedom to Arabs and Muslims, under critique here. According to Katerina Dalacoura, it is possible to integrate human rights into an Islamic worldview and to practice Islamic liberalism.⁵⁰ Stewart Fenwick contends that despite restrictions imposed by some conservative groups through the blasphemy law, religious freedoms in Indonesia are preserved and guaranteed by the law.⁵¹ The volume *Islam after Liberalism*, co-authored by various Muslim and Western scholars (Negin Yavari, Armando Salvatore, Carol Kersten, and Edward E. Curtis) and published in 2017, examines how Muslims embrace freedom, sometimes liberalism, and beyond.⁵² Furthermore, Joseph Kaminski argues that safeguarding the fundamental liberties and rights of non-Muslims is a moral requirement, even in a state that is genuinely controlled by Islam. Different discourses may not necessarily conflict to coexist in harmony.⁵³ In general, the postcolonial viewpoint has altered Western essentialism's approach to the freedom issue. Recent paradigm shifts in post-colonial Islamic studies are evident, and as perceptions towards Islam and Muslims shift across

⁴⁸ Lamis Salih Yunus al-Muhtasib, "The Role of Intellectuals in the Making of American Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case of Bernard Lewis and the 2003 U.S.A. Invasion of Iraq," *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences* 47 (2020): 413-42.

⁴⁹ Ihab Shalbak, "The Roots of Bernard Lewis' Rage," *Postcolonial Studies* 21 (2018): 505-11.

⁵⁰ Dalacoura, *Islam, Liberalism and Human Rights*, 200-1.

⁵¹ Stewart Fenwick, *Blasphemy, Islam and the State: Pluralism and Liberalism in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2017), 46.

⁵² Faisal Devji and Zaheer Kazmi, eds., *Islam After Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵³ Joseph J. Kaminski, *Islam, Liberalism, and Ontology: A Critical Re-evaluation* (London: Routledge, 2021), 192.

generations at Western universities, more will be seen at this level in the years to come.⁵⁴

However, the current study has limitations. Even though it discusses the Arab Spring and other major political events in relation to freedom in the Middle East, research is needed on further case studies of different events, such as the more recent Second Arab Spring, which is a series of Arab protests in the years 2018–2024. The various accounts of these events in scholarly discussions on freedom require a more thorough examination. Our understanding of the intellectual history of freedom may also benefit from the inclusion of more concrete evidence, especially with regard to the possible influence of the perception of freedom on social and political movements. To convey new empirical results and more thorough data, such as concrete cases of how academics have overlooked or distorted the history of freedom movements, additional research is also required. Incorporating the cases of non-Arab Islam could further broaden the scope of originality by offering a more comprehensive perspective. Here, we concentrated on the major trends of Arab and Western scholarship on freedom. This also critically and qualitatively examines some of the politically agenda-driven research tendencies in the West. A more quantitative-bibliometric analysis of freedom-related publications found in databases created in different parts of the world (especially in Asia) might offer an alternative perspective to databases from the Middle East and the West.

Conclusion

By examining the development of publications on freedom in the Middle East, this article assesses the ability of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies to represent the dynamics in Muslim cultures and societies. We looked at publications that were indexed in two databases: IslamicInfo for research in Arabic and Index Islamicus for Western academia. It has been demonstrated that the majority of Western academics rejected freedom as a feature of Muslim societies and instead invoked Islamic traditions to support their denial of freedom. The quest for freedom and emancipation from colonization and later from Western hegemony was then disregarded by Western scholarship. Additionally, Western research does not show awareness of the signs and the importance of the several waves of the Arab Spring that started in 2010 (and earlier in Algeria in 1988). In the first half of the twentieth century, Arab academia hesitantly accepted freedom along with other significant topics like Arab

⁵⁴ Matt Sheedy, ed., *Identity, Politics and the Study of Islam: Current Dilemmas in the Study of Religions* (Bristol: Equinox, 2018); Aaron W. Hughes and Abbas Aghdassi, eds., *New Methodological Perspectives in Islamic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

development and unity. They retreated into a drive for Islamic identity and polity that compromised freedom between the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s due to Islamist influence and disillusionment with Arab nationalism. The 1980s witnessed the rise of a generation of intellectuals and activists dedicated to political freedom as a result of the repression of Arab regimes, including in Islamist organizations. Later, under Western liberal influence and local aspirations, political freedom was solidified in the 1990s. During the Arab Spring (2010–2011), Arab scholarship supported and demonstrated growing indications of young movements that were anchored and used globalization, technology, and communication to demand freedom and human dignity.

* * *