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*Research Paper*

# Muslim Population Share, Religious Demography, and Development Patterns in Muslim-Majority Countries: A Cross-Country Exploratory Study

Lathif Hanafir Rifqi[a,1*], Musahadi[a,2], Muchlis Yahya[a,3], Ana Zahrotun Nihayah[a,4], Tanjeel Ahmed[b,5], Siti Mujibatun[a,6]

[a] Faculty of Islamic Economics and Business, UIN Walisongo, Semarang, Indonesia
[b] Department of Economics, Aligarh Muslim University, India
[1] lathif.hanafir.rifqi@walisongo.ac.id*, [2] musahadi@walisongo.ac.id, [3] muchlisyahya@walisongo.ac.id, [4] ana.zahrotun.nihayah@walisongo.ac.id, [5] tanjeelahmad88@gmail.com, [6] mujibatun@walisongo.ac.id

*Corresponding author

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the relationship between Muslim population share and selected development indicators in Muslim-majority countries through a non-causal, exploratory cross-country approach. Using secondary data from 44 Muslim-majority countries (2019–2024), this study examines statistical associations between religious demography and three development indicators: per capita income, income inequality (Gini index), and Human Development Index (HDI), using data obtained from the Pew Research Center, the World Bank, and United Nations Development Program (UNDP), ensuring comparability and reliability across countries. The data were analyzed through Pearson correlation to determine associations among variables. The findings reveal moderate negative associations between Muslim population share and both per capita income and HDI, whereas the relationship with income inequality appears weak and statistically insignificant. However, the results do not support causal interpretations, as considerable heterogeneity exists across countries with similar religious demographic compositions. These findings suggest that development outcomes in Muslim-majority countries are shaped more by institutional and structural factors than by religious demography alone, emphasizing the importance of a broader macro-level understanding of religion–development linkages.

## Introduction

The relationship between religion and economic development has long attracted scholarly attention across economics, sociology, and political economy because religion is often viewed as a social institution capable of shaping behavioural norms, collective values, and institutional arrangements. Contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that religion does not influence development through direct causal mechanisms; instead, its effects tend to operate indirectly through ethical orientations, social trust, social capital formation, and institutional behaviour that shape economic interactions and public life (Bénabou & Tirole, 2016; Mirola et al., 2022; Öhlmann et al., 2020). Nevertheless, empirical findings remain fragmented and far from conclusive. While some studies associate religious values with higher levels of cooperation, stronger work ethics, and greater social cohesion (Judijanto et al., 2024; Kimani, 2024), other research suggests that religious dominance may coexist with weak governance, limited institutional adaptability, or persistent rent-seeking practices, particularly in contexts characterized by institutional fragility (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2023a; Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Rodrik, 2018). Such inconsistency highlights the continuing need for more conceptually rigorous and methodologically transparent investigations into how religion intersects with broader development processes.

This debate becomes particularly important in Muslim-majority countries, where Islamic ethical principles emphasize justice, welfare, collective responsibility, and ethical economic conduct. In principle, such values may be expected to support inclusive economic development and social well-being (Fuad et al., 2025; Nurdiana et al., 2025). Yet empirical realities reveal considerable variation in development outcomes across Muslim-majority societies. Wealthy economies such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates coexist alongside lower-income countries facing persistent challenges related to poverty, inequality, and limited human development, as reflected in global income classifications and human development indicators (UNDP, 2024; World Bank, 2024). This substantial heterogeneity suggests that economic and human development trajectories in Muslim-majority countries cannot be understood solely through religious affiliation or demographic dominance (Elshobake, 2025; Kuran & Zulfiqar, 2026). Rather, they must be interpreted within broader historical, institutional, and political-economic contexts that mediate how religious norms interact with governance structures, resource endowments, and policy effectiveness (Kuran, 2018; Luciani & Moerenhout, 2021).

A central conceptual issue in the religion–development literature concerns the distinction between individual religiosity and religious demography, two concepts that are frequently conflated despite representing different analytical levels. Individual religiosity refers to personal beliefs, moral commitments, religious practices, and subjective spiritual experiences, commonly operationalized through survey-based indicators such as worship attendance, prayer frequency, and perceived religious importance (Haerpfer et al., 2022; Saroglou, 2020). Such indicators have been widely employed in micro-level analyses examining labour participation, economic preferences, and social behaviour (Sinding Bentzen, 2019; Storm, 2018). However, while these measures are theoretically valuable for understanding behavioural mechanisms, their use becomes considerably limited in large-scale cross-country research due to inconsistent availability, methodological incompatibility, and uneven data coverage, particularly among developing and Muslim-majority countries. Consequently, existing macro-level research frequently struggles to

reconcile conceptual precision with empirical feasibility when examining religion-related influences on development outcomes.

By contrast, religious demography, measured through the proportion of a population adhering to a particular faith tradition, represents a macro-level contextual characteristic rather than an indicator of individual belief or practice. Religious demographic composition may shape dominant social norms, political discourse, symbolic systems, and institutional arrangements by influencing the cultural environment within which economic and political decisions are made (Basedau et al., 2016; Cesari, 2018; Fox, 2018; Kozak et al., 2025). Nevertheless, a high proportion of religious adherents should not be interpreted as evidence of uniformly high personal religiosity or behavioural conformity to religious teachings (Garenne, 2026). The presence of religious majorities may instead reflect historical trajectories, political identities, or constitutional arrangements that vary substantially across countries. Despite these conceptual limitations, cross-country studies continue to employ religious demographic indicators when harmonized measures of individual religiosity are unavailable, particularly in comparative analyses involving large samples of developing countries (Antonov & Karpora, 2025; Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2020). This methodological tendency raises important concerns regarding conceptual clarity and interpretation.

Parallel to debates on religion, contemporary development scholarship increasingly identifies institutional quality and governance effectiveness as central determinants of long-term economic and human development outcomes. Political stability, rule of law, bureaucratic capacity, and corruption control consistently emerge as critical predictors of sustained income growth and social welfare improvement (Acemoglu et al., 2024b; Besley & Persson, 2021; Fukuyama, 2016). Within Muslim-majority countries, institutional trajectories have evolved through diverse historical experiences, including colonial legacies, patterns of state formation, dependence on natural resources, and varying relationships between religion and political authority (Hoque, 2025). Consequently, countries sharing similar religious demographic compositions often display markedly different development outcomes due to differences in governance capacity and institutional arrangements. Recent empirical scholarship increasingly suggests that development challenges in many Muslim-majority countries are more plausibly linked to institutional weaknesses and governance failures than to religious doctrine itself (Bhattarai & Yousef, 2025; Kuran, 2018). This perspective cautions against deterministic or reductionist interpretations that attribute development performance primarily to religious characteristics.

Despite the expanding body of literature examining religion and development, several important limitations remain insufficiently addressed. First, much of the existing scholarship focuses predominantly on micro-level religiosity, emphasizing personal beliefs and practices, while systematic macro-level comparative analyses of Muslim-majority countries remain relatively scarce. Second, studies employing religious demographic indicators frequently lack conceptual precision, often treating demographic dominance as equivalent to personal religiosity or advancing implicit causal claims unsupported by empirical design. Third, many studies overlook the broader institutional and structural conditions through which religion-related variables may interact with development outcomes. These limitations generate an important research gap, particularly regarding how religious demography should be conceptualized and interpreted in macro-comparative studies. Consequently, there is a strong need for carefully framed exploratory analyses that

explicitly distinguish religious demography from individual religiosity and interpret statistical associations cautiously within broader institutional and structural contexts (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018).

Responding to these limitations, this study adopts a non-causal, exploratory macro-level approach to examine the association between Muslim population share and selected development indicators, namely per capita income, income inequality (Gini index), and the Human Development Index (HDI), across 44 Muslim-majority countries. Unlike much of the existing literature that either emphasizes micro-level religiosity or employs religious demographic indicators without clear conceptual boundaries (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Haerpfer et al., 2022; Saroglou, 2020), this study explicitly conceptualizes Muslim population share as an indicator of religious demography rather than individual religious commitment, thereby avoiding conceptual conflation. Furthermore, rather than advancing causal explanations, this research deliberately adopts a descriptive and exploratory design to identify broad association patterns while recognizing the institutional and historical complexity underlying development outcomes (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018). The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by clarifying the analytical distinction between religious demography and religiosity, methodologically by offering a cautious framework for interpreting religion–development linkages, and practically by informing policymakers that development performance is more plausibly shaped by institutional quality, governance effectiveness, and structural conditions than by religious demographic composition alone.

## Method

### *Research Design: Cross-Country Exploratory Quantitative*

This study employed a cross-country exploratory quantitative research design to examine the empirical association between religious demographic context and selected macroeconomic and human development indicators across Muslim-majority countries. Rather than testing causal relationships or confirming predetermined hypotheses, the study sought to identify and describe broad statistical association patterns between Muslim population share and development-related outcomes at the macro level. An exploratory design was considered particularly appropriate given the conceptual complexity surrounding religion–economy relationships and the limited availability of harmonized individual religiosity measures across a large number of developing countries, especially within Muslim-majority contexts (Gerring, 2006; Goertz, 2017; Grzymala-Busse, 2019). Consistent with methodological perspectives emphasizing exploratory inquiry in contexts characterized by theoretical ambiguity and data constraints, this study prioritized descriptive mapping and contextual interpretation over causal explanation or formal hypothesis testing (Gerring, 2006; Deaton & Cartwright, 2018). Consequently, the findings were intended to provide descriptive evidence that may inform future hypothesis-driven, multivariate, and longitudinal investigations. By adopting this approach, the study positioned itself within the macro-comparative tradition of development research, in which exploratory analysis served as an important preliminary step toward more advanced causal inquiry.

### *Analysis Unit and Sample Selection*

The unit of analysis in this study was the country, reflecting the study's macro-comparative focus on development outcomes across Muslim-majority societies. The sample comprised 44 Muslim-majority countries, defined as countries in which Muslims constituted more than 50 percent of the total population (see Appendix A). This threshold has been widely adopted in cross-national research to identify Muslim-majority contexts and was used to capture religious demographic dominance rather than individual religiosity (Pew Research Center, 2020). The selection of countries was guided by two principal criteria: (1) the availability of comparable and recent data on Muslim population share, per capita income, income inequality, and human development indicators, and (2) classification as Muslim-majority according to internationally recognized demographic sources. Countries were excluded when key variables were unavailable, incomplete, or inconsistent for the selected period of analysis. Although this sampling approach may have introduced a degree of selection bias by limiting the sample to countries with complete data coverage, it enhanced the reliability and comparability of cross-country analysis and was consistent with established methodological practices in comparative quantitative research (Gerring, 2006; Teorell et al., 2019). Consequently, the final sample provided a sufficiently diverse representation of Muslim-majority countries, encompassing varying levels of economic development, institutional capacity, and human development performance.

### *Variables, Data Sources, and Time Frame*

This study examined four national-level variables to capture religious demography and selected development outcomes across Muslim-majority countries. As presented in Table 1, the variables were selected to represent distinct yet interrelated dimensions of development that are widely employed in comparative development research. The first variable, Muslim population share, was measured as the percentage of Muslims in the total population and was explicitly conceptualized as an indicator of religious demography rather than a proxy for individual religiosity. Economic performance was represented by per capita income, measured using gross national income (GNI) per capita adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), which facilitated more meaningful comparisons across countries with different price levels and economic structures. Income inequality was measured using the Gini coefficient, where higher values indicated greater inequality in income distribution. Meanwhile, human development was assessed using the Human Development Index (HDI), a composite indicator encompassing health, education, and standard-of-living dimensions. To ensure conceptual clarity, transparency, and measurement consistency, the operational definitions and sources of all variables are summarized in Table 1.

The study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from internationally recognized institutions, including the Pew Research Center, the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The use of harmonized international datasets enhanced data reliability, cross-country comparability, and research replicability, which are fundamental requirements in macro-level quantitative analysis (Teorell et al., 2019; UNDP, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Data were drawn from the 2019–2024 period, depending on the most recent year of availability for each indicator. This timeframe was selected to capture contemporary development conditions while accommodating the reporting lags and

uneven publication schedules commonly associated with international datasets on income, inequality, and human development. Furthermore, the selected period reflected post-2019 global economic dynamics, including the consequences of recent economic disruptions, while maintaining adequate data coverage across the sample. In cases where annual observations were unavailable, the most recent data point was utilized, consistent with established practices in exploratory cross-sectional research (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2019).

Table 1. Variables and Key Measurement

| Variables | Key Measurement |
|---|---|
| Muslim Population Share | Percentage of Muslims in total population; treated as religious demographic context (not religiosity). Source: (Pew Research Center, 2020) |
| Per-Capita Income | GNI per capita (PPP-adjusted) as proxy for economic performance. Source: (World Bank, 2024). |
| Income Inequality (Gini Index) | Gini coefficient; higher values indicate greater inequality. Source: (World Bank, 2024) |
| Human Development Index (HDI) | Composite index of health, education, and standard of living. Source: (UNDP, 2024). |

### *Data Analysis: Pearson Correlation Analysis*

The empirical analysis employed Pearson correlation analysis to examine the strength and direction of linear associations between Muslim population share and three selected development indicators: per capita income, income inequality (Gini index), and the Human Development Index (HDI). Pearson correlation is widely utilized in exploratory cross-country research when the primary objective is to identify general patterns of association rather than estimate causal relationships or structural effects (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2019). The technique was considered particularly appropriate for this study because it enabled the identification of broad empirical regularities across countries while remaining consistent with the exploratory nature of the research design (Hair et al., 2019). All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 25, which was used to calculate Pearson correlation coefficients and their corresponding significance levels. In line with the study's macro-comparative orientation, the analysis focused on describing the extent to which variation in religious demographic composition was associated with variation in economic and human development outcomes across the sampled countries.

All correlation coefficients were interpreted descriptively rather than causally. Although statistical significance levels were reported, they were not used as a basis for causal inference or hypothesis confirmation. Consistent with the exploratory design, the analysis did not control for institutional, political, historical, or other contextual factors, as such adjustments would require multivariate analytical techniques beyond the scope of the present study. Consequently, any statistically significant relationship identified should be understood as evidence of statistical co-movement between variables rather than proof of direct or indirect causation (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2024b). To ensure consistency in interpretation, the strength of the correlation coefficients was evaluated using commonly accepted thresholds in social science research, as summarized in Table 2. Following established methodological guidelines, coefficients closer to zero indicated negligible or

weak associations, whereas larger absolute values reflected stronger linear relationships (Hair et al., 2019; Schober et al., 2018). Statistical significance was assessed using conventional two-tailed tests, with p-values below 0.05 indicating significance at the 5 percent level and p-values below 0.01 indicating significance at the 1 percent level. Nevertheless, given the exploratory purpose of the study, statistical significance was treated as supplementary evidence that supported interpretation rather than as a basis for establishing explanatory relationships.

Table 2. Interpretation of Pearson Correlation Coefficients

| Correlation Coefficient | Interpretation |
|---|---|
| 0,00 | No correlation |
| 0,01 – 0,09 | Very weak correlation |
| 0.10 – 0.29 | Weak correlation |
| 0.30 – 0.49 | Moderate correlation |
| 0 0.50 – 0.69 | Strong correlation |
| 0.70 – 0.89 | Very strong correlation |
| 0.90 – 1.00 | Near-perfect correlation |
| +1.00 / −1.00 | Perfect positive/negative correlation |

Sources: Hair et al., (2019); Schober et al., (2018)

## Results

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, focusing on the descriptive characteristics of Muslim population share and its statistical associations with selected indicators of economic and human development. Consistent with the exploratory and non-causal research design, the analysis emphasizes descriptive patterns and correlation results rather than causal explanations. The findings are intended to identify broad empirical associations between religious demography and development outcomes across Muslim-majority countries, thereby providing a foundation for subsequent interpretation and discussion. Throughout the analysis, Muslim population share is conceptualized as a contextual indicator of religious demography rather than a measure of individual religiosity, ensuring consistency with the study's theoretical framework and analytical objectives.

### *Descriptive Data on Muslim Population in Muslim Countries*

Table 3 shows the descriptive characteristics of Muslim population share across the 44 Muslim-majority countries included in the study. Consistent with the study's operational definition, a Muslim-majority country refers to a country in which Muslims constitute more than 50 percent of the total population. The results indicate that the average Muslim population share across the sample was 88.1 percent, reflecting the strong demographic predominance of Islam in most countries under investigation. The Maldives recorded the highest Muslim population share at 100 percent, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibited the lowest share at 50.8 percent. A substantial majority of the sample (28 countries) reported Muslim population shares exceeding 90 percent, including countries such as Somalia, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. In contrast, five countries, including Uzbekistan and

Indonesia, fell within the 80–89 percent range, while four countries, such as Brunei and Kazakhstan, recorded shares between 70 and 79 percent. The remaining countries displayed Muslim population shares ranging from 50 to 69 percent. These findings demonstrate that, despite all countries meeting the threshold for Muslim-majority status, considerable variation exists in the degree of religious demographic dominance across the sample. Such variation may reflect differences in historical trajectories, state–religion relations, migration patterns, and demographic transitions that have shaped national population structures over time. Importantly, the observed differences should be interpreted as variations in religious demographic composition rather than as indicators of individual religiosity, a distinction that has been strongly emphasized in contemporary religion–development scholarship.

Table 3. Descriptive Data on Muslim Population in Muslim-Majority Countries

| Object | Number | Information |
|---|---|---|
| Number of Muslim countries | 44 Countries | The percentage of the Muslim population is more than 50% |
| Average percentage of Muslim population | 88,1% | |
| The highest percentage of the Muslim population | 100% | Maldives |
| Lowest percentage of Muslim population | 50,8% | Boznia and Herzegovina |
| Percentage of Muslim population >= 90% | 28 Countries | Examples : Somalia, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey |
| Percentage of population between 80% - 89% | 5 Countries | Uzbekistan, Palestine, Indonesia, Tunisia, Guinea |
| Percentage of population between 70% - 79% | 4 Countries | Brunei, Kuwait, Bahrain, Kazakhstan |
| Percentage of population between 60%- 69% | 4 Countries | Malaysia, Qatar, UEA, Lebanon |
| Percentage of population between 50%- 59% | 3 Countries | Oman, Albania, Boznia and Herzegovina |

Source: World Population Review (2024)

### *Muslim Population Share and Per Capita Income*

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics of per capita income and its correlation with Muslim population share across the 44 Muslim-majority countries included in the analysis. The results indicate substantial variation in economic performance, with an average per capita income of USD 9,950 and a standard deviation of USD 14,969, suggesting considerable disparities in income levels across countries. Qatar recorded the highest per capita income at USD 70,070, whereas Afghanistan reported the lowest at USD 360. Based on the World Bank's income classification, seven countries (15.9%) were categorized as low-income economies, predominantly located in Sub-Saharan Africa, while 15 countries (34.1%) fell into the lower-middle-income category. Another 15 countries (34.1%), including Indonesia and Turkey, were classified as upper-middle-income economies, whereas the remaining seven countries (15.9%), largely concentrated in the Middle East, were categorized as high-income countries. The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a coefficient of –0.55, indicating a moderate negative association between Muslim population

share and per capita income, and the relationship was statistically significant at the 5 percent level. At the aggregate level, this finding suggests that countries with higher Muslim population shares tended to exhibit lower per capita income. However, the existence of several high-income countries with very high Muslim population shares demonstrates substantial heterogeneity within the sample. This pattern indicates that religious demographic composition alone is insufficient to explain cross-country income differences and that broader structural factors, including natural resource endowments, governance quality, institutional effectiveness, and economic diversification, are likely to play a more influential role in shaping economic performance.

Table 4. Per Capita Income of Muslim-Majority Countries and Correlation to Muslim Population Share

| Object | Number | Information |
|---|---|---|
| Average per capita income | USD 9,950 | |
| Highest per capita income | USD 70,070 | Qatar |
| Lowest per capita income | USD 360 | Afghanistan |
| Standard deviation of per capita income | USD 14,969 | |
| Lower income ( < USD 1.086) | 7 countries (15.9%) | Examples: Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Niger, Mali, Sudan, Gambia |
| Lower middle income (USD 1.086 - USD 4.256) | 15 (34,1%) | Examples: Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal, Egypt, Bangladesh, Palestine, Tunisia, Pakistan |
| Upper middle income (USD 4.257- USD 13.025) | 15 (34,1%) | Examples: Maldives, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkmenistan |
| High income ( > USD 13.205) | 7 (15,9%) | Examples : Saudi Arabia, Brunei, Kuwait, Bahrain, Uni Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman |
| Correlation Value of Muslim Population Percentage with Per Capita Income | -0, 55 | Strong negative correlation<br>Significant (0.00 < 0.05) |

Source: UNDP (2024); World Bank (2024)

### *Muslim Population Share and Income Inequality (Gini Index)*

Table 5 depicts the descriptive statistics of income inequality, measured by the Gini index, and its correlation with Muslim population share across the 44 Muslim-majority countries included in the study. The results show that the average Gini index was 36.7, indicating a moderate level of income inequality across the sample. Considerable variation was observed among countries, with Gini values ranging from 26 in the United Arab Emirates to 55.9 in Libya, while the standard deviation of 8.0 further reflected substantial dispersion in income distribution patterns. The majority of countries (72.7%) fell within the moderate inequality category, with Gini coefficients ranging between 31 and 50. Meanwhile, nine countries (20.5%), including the Maldives, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates, exhibited relatively low levels of income inequality, whereas only three countries (6.8%), Libya, Brunei, and Oman, were classified as having high income inequality. These findings suggest that extreme inequality was not a predominant characteristic of most Muslim-majority countries, despite the existence of several notable outliers. The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a coefficient of –0.07, indicating a very weak negative association between

Muslim population share and income inequality. Moreover, the relationship was statistically insignificant (p = 0.641), suggesting that variation in religious demographic composition was not systematically associated with differences in income distribution across countries. This finding implies that income inequality in Muslim-majority countries is more likely influenced by structural and institutional factors, including fiscal capacity, redistributive policies, labor market dynamics, and governance arrangements, rather than by religious demographic dominance itself. Accordingly, within the exploratory framework of this study, Muslim population share should be understood as a contextual characteristic rather than an explanatory factor for inequality outcomes, a conclusion that is consistent with broader development literature emphasizing the central role of institutions and public policy in shaping income distribution patterns.

Table 5. Gini Index of Muslim-Majority Countries and Correlation to Muslim Population Share

| Object | Size | Information |
|---|---|---|
| Gini Index Average | 36,7 | |
| Highest Gini Index | 55,9 | Libya |
| Lowest Gini Index | 26 | Uni Arab Emirates |
| Gini Index Deviation Standard | 8 | |
| Low Gini Index (<30) | 9 countries (20.5%) | Examples: Maldives, Iraq, Kyrgistan, Algeria, Uni Arab Emirates, Albania |
| Moderate Gini Index (31 -50) | 32 countries (72.7%) | Examples : Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Mali, Egypt, Tunisia, Indonesia, Uzbekistan |
| Gini Index High (>50) | 3 countries (6.8%) | Libya, Brunei, Oman |
| Correlation Value of Muslim Population Percentage with Gini Index | -0,07 | Very weak negative correlation<br>Not significant (0.641 > 0.05) |

Source: UNDP (2024); World Bank (2024)

### *Muslim Population Share and Human Development Index (HDI)*

Table 6 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the Human Development Index (HDI) and its association with Muslim population share across the 44 Muslim-majority countries included in the study. The findings indicate that the average HDI score was 0.68, reflecting a moderate level of human development across the sample. However, substantial variation was observed among countries, with HDI values ranging from 0.38 in Somalia to 0.94 in the United Arab Emirates. The standard deviation of 0.15 further highlights considerable disparities in education, health, and living standards across Muslim-majority countries. Based on the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) classification, 27 countries (61.4%) were categorized as medium-HDI countries, 7 countries (15.9%) fell within the low-HDI category, and the remaining 10 countries (22.7%) achieved high-HDI status, including several Gulf states and upper-middle-income economies. This distribution indicates the diversity of development trajectories among Muslim-majority countries and cautions against treating them as a homogeneous group in development analyses. The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a coefficient of –0.56, indicating a moderate negative

association between Muslim population share and HDI, and the relationship was statistically significant. At the aggregate level, this finding suggests that countries with higher Muslim population shares tended to exhibit lower HDI values. Nevertheless, within the exploratory and non-causal framework of this study, the observed association should be interpreted as a broad descriptive pattern rather than evidence of a direct relationship between religious demography and human development outcomes. Notable exceptions were evident within the sample, as several countries with very high Muslim population shares also recorded high HDI scores. These cases suggest that human development performance is more strongly influenced by institutional capacity, governance effectiveness, and sustained public investment in education and health than by religious demographic composition alone. Consequently, the findings reinforce the argument that structural and policy-related factors play a more decisive role in shaping human development outcomes across Muslim-majority countries.

Table 6. Human Development Index of Muslim-Majority Countries and Correlation to Muslim Population Share

| Object | Size | Information |
|---|---|---|
| Instalment HDI | 0,68 | |
| Highest HDI | 0,94 | Uni Arab Emirates |
| Lowest HDI | 0,38 | Somalia |
| HDI Deviation Standards | 0,15 | |
| HDI of Poor Countries (<0.5) | 7 countries (15.9%) | Examples: Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Niger, Mali, Gambia, Guinea |
| Developing Countries HDI (0.5 -0.79) | 27 countries (61.4%) | Examples : Maldives, Algeria, Djibouti, Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt, Palestine |
| HDI of developed countries (>0.79) | 10 countries (22.7%) | Examples : Uni Arab Emirates, Oman, Malaysia, Qatar, Brunei, Saudi Arabia |
| Correlation Value of Muslim Population Percentage with HDI | -0,56 | Strong negative correlation Significant (0.00 < 0.05) |

Source: UNDP (2024); World Bank (2024)

The findings from the preceding correlation analyses are consolidated and summarized in Table 7, which presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between Muslim population share and the three selected development indicators: per capita income, income inequality (Gini index), and the Human Development Index (HDI). The summary highlights the varying patterns of association across different dimensions of development, demonstrating that the relationship between religious demographic composition and development outcomes is neither uniform nor consistent. While moderate negative associations were observed for per capita income and HDI, no meaningful relationship emerged between Muslim population share and income inequality. These contrasting results underscore the heterogeneity of development experiences among Muslim-majority countries and suggest that the relevance of religious demographic context varies according to the development outcome being examined. Consistent with the exploratory and non-causal nature of the study, the results should be interpreted as descriptive empirical patterns that provide a basis for further investigation into the institutional, structural, and historical

factors underlying these associations, rather than as definitive explanations of development performance.

Table 7. Summary of Pearson Correlation Coefficient Results

| Variable Pair | Correlation Coefficient (r) | Statistical Significance | Exploratory Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Muslim Population Share – Per Capita Income | –0.55 | Significant | Moderate negative association with substantial heterogeneity |
| Muslim Population Share – Gini Index | –0.07 | Not significant | No consistent linear association |
| Muslim Population Share – HDI | –0.56 | Significant | Moderate negative association reflecting broad development patterns |

## Discussion

### *Interpreting Macro-Level Associations*

The findings reveal distinct patterns in the relationship between Muslim population share and selected development indicators across the 44 Muslim-majority countries examined in this study. The correlation analysis demonstrated moderate negative associations between Muslim population share and both per capita income and the Human Development Index (HDI), whereas no statistically meaningful relationship was observed with income inequality. These results suggest that the relationship between religious demographic composition and development outcomes is neither linear nor uniform across different dimensions of development. Rather than indicating a singular pattern, the findings point to considerable variation in how religious demographic contexts coexist with economic and social outcomes (Rodrik, 2018; Utami, 2025; Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025). Such variation is particularly important because it challenges simplistic assumptions that demographic religious dominance necessarily translates into either developmental advantages or disadvantages (Qizam et al., 2025). The differing relationships observed across income, inequality, and human development indicators indicate that development processes are influenced by multiple interacting factors that extend beyond religious composition itself (Rawi & Putra, 2026). Consequently, the results support a more comprehensive understanding of religion–development linkages in which demographic religious characteristics are situated within broader structural and institutional contexts.

The observed associations should not be interpreted as evidence that Islam, or religion more generally, constrains economic growth or human development. Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes religion as a cultural and social framework that shapes norms, values, and collective identities rather than as an autonomous force directly determining economic outcomes (Bénabou & Tirole, 2016; Mirola et al., 2022; Riani & Indra, 2026). From this perspective, Muslim population share functions primarily as a contextual indicator reflecting broader social and historical environments rather than a measure of individual beliefs, religious practices, or behavioural adherence (Mawardi & Risyad, 2025). Countries with similar levels of Muslim demographic dominance may differ substantially in governance quality, institutional effectiveness, educational attainment, and economic

structure, all of which exert direct influence on development outcomes (Paidi, 2026). Therefore, the negative associations identified in this study should be interpreted as descriptive patterns emerging within particular national contexts rather than as evidence of causal relationships between religion and development. Such an interpretation is consistent with contemporary approaches that emphasize the indirect and context-dependent nature of religion's influence on economic and social processes.

Cross-country variation provides additional support for this interpretation. Several countries characterized by very high Muslim population shares simultaneously achieved relatively high levels of income and human development, particularly among resource-rich economies and states with comparatively strong institutional capacity (Bulut & Dembele, 2026). These cases demonstrate that development trajectories cannot be adequately explained by religious demographic composition alone. Instead, factors such as governance quality, state effectiveness, economic diversification, and strategic public investment appear to play a more decisive role in shaping development performance (Kuran, 2018; Nuraeni & Anggara, 2026). The coexistence of high Muslim population shares and favourable development outcomes in some countries directly challenges deterministic interpretations linking religious demographics to economic performance. At the same time, countries with similarly high Muslim population shares but weaker institutional environments often experience lower income levels and poorer human development outcomes (Kianpūr et al., 2026). This contrast suggests that institutions and public policy mediate the relationship between demographic characteristics and development, reinforcing the importance of examining broader structural conditions rather than attributing outcomes to religious composition itself.

The absence of a statistically significant relationship between Muslim population share and income inequality further reinforces the limited explanatory capacity of religious demography at the macro level. Income distribution is generally shaped by a complex combination of fiscal policies, labour market structures, welfare systems, redistributive mechanisms, and political bargaining processes rather than by demographic religious composition alone (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2023b; World Bank, 2022). The very weak correlation observed in this study suggests that countries with larger Muslim population shares are neither systematically more equal nor more unequal than countries with lower levels of Muslim demographic dominance. This finding is particularly important because it indicates that religious demographic composition has limited relevance in explaining how economic resources are distributed within societies. Instead, inequality outcomes appear to be more closely associated with institutional arrangements and policy choices that influence access to economic opportunities and social protection. Consequently, the results support broader development perspectives that place governance and institutional quality at the centre of explanations of distributional outcomes.

The findings are broadly consistent with institutional and political economy perspectives that regard governance quality, historical trajectories, and state capacity as central determinants of development outcomes. Within this framework, religious demography should be understood as a contextual characteristic that interacts with wider institutional and socio-political environments rather than as an independent explanatory factor. The correlations observed in this study therefore represent descriptive manifestations of deeper structural processes that shape economic and human development across countries. Such an interpretation is particularly important because it avoids both cultural

determinism and overly simplistic explanations of development performance. Instead, it recognizes that development outcomes emerge from the interaction of institutions, policies, historical experiences, and social contexts, within which religious demographic composition constitutes only one element of a much larger system. This perspective also reinforces the need for future research employing multidimensional religiosity measures, institutional indicators, and more robust causal designs to better understand the complex relationships between religion, governance, and development (Acemoglu et al., 2024b; Haerpfer et al., 2022).

***The Role of Institutions and Structural Factors***

A substantial body of contemporary development scholarship identifies institutions, governance quality, and structural conditions as the most reliable determinants of long-term economic growth and human development outcomes (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2023a; Acemoglu et al., 2024a; World Bank, 2022). The empirical patterns observed in this study are broadly consistent with this institutional perspective, particularly when explaining the considerable variation in development performance across Muslim-majority countries. Although the correlation analysis revealed moderate negative associations between Muslim population share and both per capita income and HDI, these relationships become less persuasive when viewed alongside the substantial diversity of development outcomes within the sample. Countries with comparable levels of Muslim demographic dominance often exhibit markedly different economic and social achievements, suggesting that religious composition alone provides limited explanatory power. Instead, the findings indicate that the institutional environments within which development occurs are likely to play a far more significant role. This interpretation aligns with contemporary development theory (Leaper, 2011), which increasingly views institutions as the mechanisms through which societies mobilize resources, formulate policies, and sustain economic and social progress over time.

Many Muslim-majority countries face structural constraints that continue to influence their development trajectories, including limited state capacity, weak institutional accountability, dependence on natural resource rents, and the enduring effects of colonial governance arrangements. These conditions shape the effectiveness of public policy implementation, the quality of economic governance, and the provision of essential public services such as education and healthcare, which are central components of human development (Chairawan et al., 2026; Ma & Abdul Hamid, 2026). Differences in these institutional and structural characteristics help explain why countries sharing similar religious demographic profiles often achieve vastly different development outcomes. For example, variations in bureaucratic effectiveness, regulatory quality, and fiscal capacity can substantially affect a state's ability to invest in human capital and support productive economic activity. Consequently, development disparities among Muslim-majority countries are more plausibly linked to differences in institutional performance than to differences in religious demographic composition. This perspective encourages a shift away from demographic explanations and toward a more comprehensive understanding of the structural conditions that facilitate or constrain development.

The negative associations observed between Muslim population share and selected development indicators should therefore be interpreted within the broader context of

institutional and structural diversity rather than as evidence of any influence arising from religious doctrine itself. Several countries within the sample illustrate this point clearly. Economies such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates maintain very high Muslim population shares while simultaneously achieving high levels of income and human development (Muhammed, 2025; Munir, 2025). These cases demonstrate that strong governance arrangements, strategic public investment, and effective state institutions can coexist with overwhelming Muslim demographic dominance and generate favourable development outcomes. Their experiences suggest that institutional quality can substantially moderate the impact of structural challenges commonly encountered in developing economies (Nuraeni & Anggara, 2026). Conversely, countries facing weaker governance structures often experience lower levels of economic and human development despite possessing similar demographic characteristics. The contrast between these cases indicates that development performance is shaped less by religious composition than by the capacity of institutions to formulate and implement policies that promote economic opportunity, social welfare, and sustainable development.

The findings further suggest that religion operates, at most, indirectly through the institutional and governance contexts within which economic and social processes occur. Religious demographic dominance does not appear to exert an independent or deterministic influence on development outcomes. Instead, institutions mediate the extent to which societies can translate available resources into improvements in income, education, health, and overall well-being. Inclusive institutions, effective public administration, and credible policy frameworks create conditions that support long-term development regardless of religious composition, whereas weak institutions often constrain economic progress and limit human development opportunities. This interpretation is consistent with the broader literature on comparative development, which emphasizes the importance of governance quality and state effectiveness in explaining cross-country variation in development outcomes. Consequently, the relationship between religious demography and development should be understood as indirect and contingent upon the institutional settings within which demographic characteristics are embedded rather than as a direct relationship between religion and economic performance.

This institutional interpretation is also consistent with recent political economy scholarship that cautions against cultural and religious essentialism in development analysis. Development outcomes emerge from complex interactions among historical legacies, institutional quality, policy choices, and integration into the global economy rather than from any single cultural or demographic characteristic. Within this broader framework, religious demography functions as a contextual feature of society that may interact with political and institutional processes but does not independently determine development trajectories (Bénabou & Tirole, 2016; Mirola et al., 2022). Such an interpretation provides a more balanced and theoretically grounded understanding of the findings by recognizing the multidimensional nature of development. It also avoids attributing economic success or failure to religious composition while acknowledging that demographic contexts may shape the environments within which institutions operate. Ultimately, the results reinforce the importance of focusing analytical attention on governance quality, institutional effectiveness, and structural conditions when seeking to explain differences in development performance across Muslim-majority countries.

***Comparison with Previous Empirical Studies***

The findings of this study are broadly consistent with an expanding body of comparative research that questions deterministic interpretations of the relationship between religion and development. Previous studies have produced mixed conclusions regarding whether religion promotes, constrains, or exerts no meaningful influence on economic and social outcomes (Basedau et al., 2016; Bulut & Dembele, 2026). Much of this inconsistency can be attributed to differences in analytical level, measurement strategies, and contextual conditions across studies. Micro-level research focusing on individual religiosity frequently reports conditional and context-specific effects on economic behaviour, labour participation, trust, and social attitudes, suggesting that the influence of religion varies considerably across societies and institutional environments (Elshobake, 2025; Haerpfer et al., 2022). These findings indicate that religion does not operate uniformly across contexts and that its effects are often mediated by broader social and political structures. Consequently, the interpretation of religion–development relationships requires careful consideration of analytical scale because variables that capture individual religious commitment may function differently from those that represent aggregate demographic characteristics.

A growing stream of macro-comparative scholarship has increasingly emphasized the distinction between individual religiosity and religious demography. Within this literature, religious population share is commonly viewed as a contextual characteristic reflecting the social, political, and historical environment in which development processes occur rather than as a direct measure of individual behaviour. Studies examining religious demographic composition have argued that demographic dominance often reflects historical state–religion arrangements, identity formation processes, and patterns of political organization rather than the intensity of personal religious commitment (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Judijanto et al., 2024). The present study is closely aligned with this perspective because Muslim population share was conceptualized as an indicator of religious demography rather than a proxy for religiosity. This distinction is particularly important because demographic dominance does not necessarily imply stronger adherence to religious values or greater compliance with religious norms. By maintaining this conceptual separation, the study provides a more precise basis for interpreting the observed associations and reduces the risk of drawing conclusions that extend beyond what the data can substantiate.

The negative associations identified between Muslim population share and both per capita income and human development are also consistent with strands of political economy research that attribute development disparities in Muslim-majority countries primarily to institutional and historical factors rather than to religious doctrine itself. Previous studies have documented how governance quality, state capacity, colonial legacies, and economic structures shape development trajectories across these countries, often producing divergent outcomes despite similarities in religious composition (Kuran & Zulfiqar, 2026; Kuran, 2018; Mirola et al., 2022). The findings of the present study reinforce this interpretation by demonstrating that countries with high Muslim population shares do not uniformly experience poor development outcomes. Instead, considerable variation exists across the sample, indicating that demographic religious composition alone cannot adequately explain differences in economic performance and human development. In this respect, the results depart from earlier culturalist arguments that implicitly linked economic outcomes to

religious values and instead support contemporary institutional perspectives that place governance and structural conditions at the centre of development analysis.

The absence of a statistically meaningful relationship between Muslim population share and income inequality further strengthens the argument that development outcomes are shaped primarily by institutional arrangements and policy choices rather than by demographic religious characteristics. Existing comparative evidence suggests that inequality is largely influenced by fiscal capacity, redistributive policies, labour market structures, welfare systems, and political bargaining processes, all of which operate independently of religious composition in many contexts (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2023b; Paidi, 2026; World Bank, 2022). The weak and insignificant correlation identified in this study is therefore consistent with previous research demonstrating that societies with strong religious identities may exhibit very different levels of inequality depending on the effectiveness of their institutions and public policies (Qizam et al., 2025; Utami, 2025). This finding provides additional support for the view that religious demographic composition has limited explanatory power when examining how economic resources are distributed within societies. Instead, inequality appears to be more directly shaped by governance arrangements and policy interventions that influence economic opportunities and social protection mechanisms.

By explicitly distinguishing religious demography from individual religiosity, this study contributes to ongoing debates within the religion–development literature and offers a clearer framework for interpreting religion-related variables in cross-country research. While previous studies have often focused either on individual religious behaviour or on aggregate demographic indicators, fewer studies have systematically addressed the conceptual differences between these levels of analysis. The present study contributes to filling this gap by demonstrating that religious demographic composition and individual religiosity should not be treated as interchangeable constructs. In doing so, it complements existing micro-level research while providing a macro-level perspective that emphasizes cross-country diversity and contextual complexity. This contribution is particularly important because it strengthens conceptual clarity within the field and encourages future research to adopt more precise measurement strategies when investigating religion–development relationships. By bridging different analytical approaches without conflating their underlying concepts, the study contributes to a more coherent and theoretically grounded understanding of the role of religion in development processes.

### *Implications for Development Policy and Research*

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the religion–development literature by reinforcing the importance of distinguishing religious demography from individual religiosity when examining development outcomes across countries. The results suggest that Muslim population share is better understood as a contextual demographic characteristic rather than a direct indicator of religious beliefs, practices, or behavioural commitments. This distinction has important implications for theory development because it cautions against attributing macro-level economic and social outcomes to religious composition alone. Instead, the findings support analytical frameworks that position religion within a broader socio-institutional context, where its influence is mediated by governance arrangements, institutional quality, and historical conditions. The study also

points to several avenues for future research. Incorporating multidimensional measures of religiosity, including religious practice, value orientation, and belief intensity, may provide a more nuanced understanding of religion's role at both individual and societal levels (Haerpfer et al., 2022). Furthermore, future studies would benefit from employing multivariate and longitudinal approaches capable of examining the interactions among religion, institutions, and development over time, thereby providing a more rigorous assessment of the mechanisms underlying observed development patterns (Acemoglu et al., 2024a).

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that development challenges in many Muslim-majority countries are more effectively addressed through improvements in institutional quality, governance effectiveness, and human capital development than through explanations centered on religious characteristics. The absence of a consistent relationship between religious demographic composition and development outcomes indicates that policymakers should avoid culturally deterministic interpretations when designing development strategies. Instead, greater attention should be directed toward strengthening state capacity, enhancing bureaucratic effectiveness, expanding access to quality education and healthcare, and improving the transparency and accountability of public institutions, all of which have been consistently associated with sustainable economic and human development (Acemoglu et al., 2024a; World Bank, 2022). Policy frameworks that encourage inclusive institutions, reduce rent-seeking behaviour, support productive economic diversification, and promote equitable public service provision are likely to generate more substantial development gains across diverse national contexts (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2023a). Consequently, the study encourages policymakers to view religious demography as a contextual feature of society rather than as a primary determinant of development performance, while focusing policy interventions on the structural and institutional factors that more directly shape economic prosperity and human well-being.

## Conclusion

This study provided an exploratory macro-level examination of the association between Muslim population share and selected development indicators across 44 Muslim-majority countries. By explicitly conceptualizing Muslim population share as an indicator of religious demography rather than a proxy for individual religiosity, the study identified moderate negative associations between Muslim population share and both per capita income and the Human Development Index (HDI), while no statistically meaningful relationship was found with income inequality. These findings suggest that religious demographic composition alone offers limited explanatory power for understanding variations in economic and human development outcomes across countries. The results contribute to the existing literature by clarifying the analytical distinction between religious demography and individual religiosity and by demonstrating the importance of considering the broader institutional and structural contexts within which development processes occur. From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that development challenges in Muslim-majority countries are more appropriately addressed through improvements in governance quality, institutional effectiveness, and human capital development rather than through explanations centered on religious demographic characteristics.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, Muslim population share captures demographic composition rather than individual religious beliefs, practices, or levels of religiosity, thereby limiting the ability to assess the behavioural dimensions of religion. Second, the use of bivariate correlation analysis does not allow for controlling the influence of potentially important factors such as institutional quality, political stability, educational attainment, or natural resource dependence. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data restricts the analysis to contemporaneous associations and does not permit examination of developmental changes over time. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive rather than explanatory. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating multidimensional measures of religiosity derived from survey data, employing multivariate and longitudinal analytical approaches, and explicitly examining the interactions among religion, institutions, and governance. Such efforts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how religious contexts interact with structural and institutional factors in shaping development trajectories across Muslim-majority societies.

## Authors' Declaration

The authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of this study. The authors take responsibility for the data analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the results. The authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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## ORCID

Lathif Hanafir Rifqi https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3150-408X
Musahadi https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5217-9434
Muchlis Yahya https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2729-9567
Ana Zahrotun Nihayah https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1145-4804
Tanjeel Ahmed https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4198-1191
Siti Mujibatun https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9046-0492

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## Appendix A

List of 44 Muslim-Majority Countries used as Data in this study

| No | Countries | Muslim Population (%) | Gini Index | Per Capita Income ($) | Human Development Index |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Maldives | 100% | 29,3 | 10.880 | 0,76 |
| 2 | Mauritania | 99,9% | 32 | 2.150 | 0,54 |
| 3 | Somalia | 99,80% | 36,8 | 610 | 0,38 |
| 4 | Afghanistan | 99,70% | 41 | 360 | 0,46 |
| 5 | Iran | 99,40% | 34,8 | 4.680 | 0,78 |
| 6 | Western Sahara | 99,40% | 44,82 | 2.500 | 0,55 |
| 7 | Yemen | 99,07% | 36,7 | 820 | 0,42 |
| 8 | Algeria | 99% | 27,6 | 4.960 | 0,75 |
| 9 | Morocco | 99% | 39,5 | 3.700 | 0,70 |
| 10 | Niger | 98,30% | 32,9 | 600 | 0,39 |
| 11 | Comoros | 98,30% | 45,3 | 1.600 | 0,59 |
| 12 | Turkey | 98,14% | 44,4 | 11.650 | 0,86 |
| 13 | Iraq | 98% | 29,5 | 5.600 | 0,67 |
| 14 | Azerbaijan | 97,30% | 26,6 | 6.680 | 0,76 |
| 15 | Senegal | 97,20% | 36,2 | 1.660 | 0,52 |
| 16 | Jordan | 97,20% | 33,7 | 4.460 | 0,74 |
| 17 | Libya | 97% | 55,9 | 5.870 | 0,75 |
| 18 | Djibouti | 97% | 41,6 | 2.140 | 0,52 |
| 19 | Tajikistan | 96,99% | 34,4 | 1.440 | 0,68 |
| 20 | Pakistan | 96,46% | 38,6 | 1.500 | 0,54 |

| No | Countries | Muslim Population (%) | Gini Index | Per Capita Income ($) | Human Development Index |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 21 | Mali | 95% | 35,7 | 860 | 0,41 |
| 22 | Egypt | 94,74% | 31,9 | 3.900 | 0,73 |
| 23 | Gambia | 94,60% | 38,8 | 800 | 0,50 |
| 24 | Sudan | 94,51% | 34,2 | 980 | 0,52 |
| 25 | Turkmenistan | 93,02% | 40,8 | 7.080 | 0,74 |
| 26 | Saudi Arabia | 92,15% | 45,6 | 28.690 | 0,88 |
| 27 | Bangladesh | 91,28% | 33,4 | 2.860 | 0,67 |
| 28 | Kyrgyzstan | 90% | 28,8 | 1.700 | 0,70 |
| 29 | Palestine | 89,90% | 33,7 | 4.220 | 0,72 |
| 30 | Guinea | 89,10% | 29,6 | 1.360 | 0,47 |
| 31 | Tunisia | 89,02% | 33,7 | 3.770 | 0,73 |
| 32 | Indonesia | 88,25% | 38,3 | 4.870 | 0,71 |
| 33 | Uzbekistan | 87,90% | 31,2 | 2.360 | 0,73 |
| 34 | Brunei | 78,80% | 37,9 | 35.111 | 0,82 |
| 35 | Kuwait | 74,60% | 47,1 | 46.140 | 0,85 |
| 36 | Bahrain | 73,70% | 44,3 | 28.280 | 0,89 |
| 37 | Kazakhstan | 70,20% | 29,2 | 10.940 | 0,82 |
| 38 | Lebanon | 67,80% | 31,8 | 8.920 | 0,72 |
| 39 | Uni Arab Emirates | 65,52% | 26 | 53.290 | 0,94 |
| 40 | Qatar | 63,94% | 41,1 | 70.070 | 0,88 |
| 41 | Malaysia | 61,30% | 40,7 | 11.970 | 0,81 |
| 42 | Albania | 58,80% | 29,4 | 7.570 | 0,79 |
| 43 | Oman | 52,38% | 55,7 | 20.020 | 0,82 |
| 44 | Boznia and Herzegovina | 50,78% | 33,3 | 8.160 | 0,78 |