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HAJARE EL HADRI, RÉDA MARAKBI

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CRESE

30, avenue de l'Observatoire
25009 Besançon
France
<http://crese.univ-fcomte.fr/>

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The Quest for Freedom and Migration Aspirations: Evidence from the MENA Region

Hajare EL HADRI¹ Réda MARAKBI²

¹ Université Marie et Louis Pasteur, CRESE (UR 3190), F-25000 Besançon, France

² *Corresponding author*, Univ. Artois, CNRS, IESEG School of management, Univ. Lille, LEM (UMR 9221), F-62000 Arras, France / Email: reda.marakbi@univ-lille.fr.

Abstract: This article develops and empirically tests a theory of migration under repression. It argues that migration aspirations are shaped by perceived freedom repression and that such perceptions can make exit more attractive when voice appears blocked, risky, or ineffective. The theoretical framework yields four hypotheses, which we test using Arab Barometer data from 2021–2024 covering about 34,000 respondents in twelve Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries. Empirically, we construct a Freedom Repression Index and examine how perceived repression shapes migration aspirations across different freedom dimensions and migration routes. Four findings stand out. First, perceived repression significantly increases migration aspirations, with substantive effects comparable to standard economic push factors. Second, the association is strongest for personal liberties, especially freedom of expression and freedom of religion, whereas restrictions on collective political rights such as protest are less strongly associated with migration aspirations. Third, repression shifts intentions toward irregular rather than regular migration routes. Fourth, this relationship is context-dependent: it is strongest in stable yet restrictive settings and weakens in conflict-affected contexts where insecurity dominates. By disaggregating freedom dimensions and distinguishing regular from irregular intentions, the article connects exit-voice theory to micro-level evidence and clarifies when, which, and how perceived repression shapes migration aspirations in the MENA region.

Keywords: freedom; repression; migration aspirations; irregular migration; MENA.

1. Introduction

Despite extensive research on the determinants of migration, the role of repression and freedom in shaping migration aspirations remains under-theorized. Existing approaches tend to treat political constraint as relevant only in cases of refugee flight, overlooking how everyday experiences of unfreedom influence ordinary citizens' desire to emigrate. This article develops a theoretical framework centered on perceived freedom repression, understood as individuals' subjective assessment that key freedoms are not guaranteed in their daily lives. Integrating Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice logic, Gurr's (1970) relative deprivation theory, and the aspirations-capabilities approach in migration studies (Carling 2002; De Haas 2021), we conceptualize emigration as an individual behavioural response to perceived repression when collective voice is blocked. Using harmonized microdata from the Arab Barometer's 2021-2024 surveys, covering roughly 34,000 respondents across twelve MENA countries, we construct a Freedom Repression Index through multiple correspondence analysis and estimate survey-weighted probit and multinomial probit models with country and wave fixed effects. Results show that perceived repression significantly increases emigration aspirations — particularly through irregular channels — and that restrictions on personal liberties (speech, religion) exert stronger effects than those on collective political rights.

The MENA region offers a revealing context to examine this mechanism. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, initial hopes for reform gave way to renewed authoritarian consolidation. As political space closed, surveys documented a sharp rise in emigration aspirations in countries where expectations of freedom were most visibly disappointed (Arab-Barometer 2022; Tsourapas 2019). This regional dynamic illustrates a broader transformation in the politics of agency: when collective mobilization (voice) becomes risky or futile, migration (exit) may emerge as an alternative channel through which individuals pursue autonomy. Understanding this substitution between voice and exit is essential to explain why, even outside cases of overt persecution, perceptions of repression can shape mass aspirations to leave.

Classical models of migration have long emphasized economic and demographic push-pull factors (income differentials, employment prospects, and conflict) while political conditions were often treated as background context. Likewise, research on authoritarianism has primarily examined how repression affects protest, participation, and regime stability, rather than the individual decision to emigrate. These two literatures have thus evolved in parallel, leaving the micro-mechanisms linking perceived repression to migration largely untested. Recent comparative work in the MENA region (Etling et al. 2020; Kırkıç 2024) suggests that political dissatisfaction may correlate with emigration intentions, but it remains unclear which freedoms

matter most, how they translate into distinct forms of migration aspiration, and under what political conditions their effects hold.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we review the theoretical and empirical literature and identify gaps that our study addresses. Section 3 lays out our theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the data. Section 5 details the empirical methodology. Section 6 presents and discusses the results. Section 7 concludes.

2. Literature

2.1 Exit, voice, and the politics of constraint

Albert O. Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* remains a foundational framework for understanding how individuals respond to decline or constraint (Hirschman 1970). His framework theorized that when people face deteriorating conditions in an organization, a polity, or a state, they may either attempt to repair it through voice or withdraw through exit. Although formulated abstractly, the model carried powerful implications for political behavior under authoritarianism: if repression suppresses collective voice, exit becomes an alternative mode of agency.

Subsequent research extended this logic but rarely examined its microfoundations. Political scientists applied Hirschman's typology to regime stability and dissent (Lichbach 1994; Przeworski 1991), and sociologists analyzed how repression redirects protest into quiescence or "everyday resistance" (Scott 1990; Kuran 1995). Yet migration research largely ignored the political dimension of exit, often treating mobility as a demographic or economic response rather than a political act. As a result, the disciplines diverged: studies of authoritarianism explored why citizens stay and protest, while migration studies focused on why they leave — each overlooking the other's mechanism. Hirschman's intuition that individuals substitute exit for voice has therefore remained rarely tested at the micro level, where perceptions of constraint and freedom shape both dissent and migration desire.

2.2 From authoritarianism to migration: a missing connection

Comparative research on authoritarianism provides substantial evidence that repression alters patterns of political participation, but not how it shapes migration. A long line of studies finds that coercion generally demobilizes voice, by reducing protest, lowering trust, and encouraging private withdrawal rather than collective challenge (Davenport 2007; Carey 2006; Francisco 1996). Some regimes even instrumentalize emigration as a safety valve to export dissent, a pattern observed in Latin American dictatorships and socialist Europe (Roniger 2014; Tsourapas 2019). These insights establish the plausibility of a repression-

exit link but stop short of testing it: they remain focused on regime outcomes rather than individual motivations.

Migration studies, in contrast, have long emphasized materialist explanations — economic opportunity, labor demand, and conflict as push or pull factors — while political freedoms are treated as peripheral or binary (refugee vs. non-refugee). Aggregate cross-national analyses confirm that severe human-rights abuses and civil wars produce refugee outflows (Davenport 2007; Neumayer 2005). However, these studies rely on objective country scores (Freedom House, Polity) that mask how repression is experienced. Not everyone in an unfree country feels equally unfree; some adapt, others rebel, others exit. As a result, macro-level correlations risk conflating national characteristics with individual motives.

Beyond cases of forced migration, the role of freedoms in more voluntary forms of mobility has been examined only sporadically, and mostly at the macro level. In an early gravity-model analysis of migration flows to North America, Karemera et al. (2000) find that political rights and civil liberties in origin countries significantly shape bilateral migration flows, alongside standard economic determinants. In the same vein, Ashby (2010) finds that economic freedom (defined in terms of market openness and property rights) correlates positively with immigration inflows, while political freedom does not exert a significant effect once economic variables are controlled for. However, these studies remain at the national level and cannot capture heterogeneity in individuals' lived experiences of (un)freedom.

A smaller but growing set of micro-survey studies now examines political dissatisfaction and migration aspirations. Recent evidence suggests that youth disillusioned by political exclusion are more likely to express emigration intentions (Etling et al. 2020; Kırkıç 2024). Yet these analyses remain fragmentary: they do not disentangle which freedoms matter, nor how repression affects forms of migration (regular versus irregular). In short, while political unfreedom has been observed as a correlate of migration desire, its mechanisms and dimensions remain conceptually underspecified and empirically under-tested.

2.3 The Arab Spring as a natural laboratory for the collapse of voice

The Arab uprisings dramatized the transition from voice to exit within a single historical sequence. In 2010-2011, millions across the MENA region mobilized for dignity and freedom — the paradigmatic exercise of voice. When these mobilizations were defeated or co-opted, the very publics that had once demanded reform increasingly expressed a will to leave. Survey evidence documents sharp post-uprising rises in emigration intentions, particularly among young, educated cohorts in countries where hopes for freedom were most visibly betrayed (Arab-Barometer 2022; Tsourapas 2019). The sequence offers

a revealing lens into the micro-politics of agency under repression: it shows that exit can be the individual continuation of a collective struggle once voice collapses. But it also underscores an unresolved question: what kind of freedom do people seek through migration, whether political, personal, or existential?

Recent micro-level studies have begun to move in this direction. Using pooled data from the 2012-2020 Arab Opinion Index, Kırkıç (2024) finds that individuals who perceive restrictions on freedom of speech or on fair elections are significantly more likely to express emigration intentions. Her analysis provides one of the first empirical demonstrations of a repression-exit link in the MENA context. However, the operationalization of “freedom” remains narrowly political: it captures only two dimensions (speech and electoral freedom) both associated with formal political participation. The study does not consider personal or civil liberties such as freedom of religion, lifestyle autonomy, or everyday expression, nor does it differentiate between regular and irregular forms of migration.

2.4 Conceptual and empirical gaps in the existing literature

Three limitations emerge from this body of work.

First, most studies evaluate the freedom-migration nexus using aggregate democracy scores, neglecting how individuals perceive repression. Yet it is precisely these subjective perceptions that shape behavior. Micro-level data allow for variation within authoritarian settings and capture how people feel unfree, not merely whether their regime is so classified.

Second, civil and political liberties are multidimensional, but the literature rarely distinguishes between personal freedoms (speech, belief) and collective political rights (voting, protest). Each may matter differently for the propensity to exit.

Third, migration aspirations are not binary. They vary not only in intensity but also in form between regular mobility through legal channels and irregular mobility through clandestine routes. Repression may not only increase the desire to leave but also shape how people imagine leaving.

By addressing these gaps, the present study offers a multidimensional, micro-level analysis of how perceived repression across different freedoms translates into differentiated forms of migration aspiration.

3. Theoretical framework

At its core, our argument is that migration aspirations are shaped by perceived freedom repression, understood as the subjective experience that important freedoms are not guaranteed in everyday life. This subjective dimension matters because individuals respond not only to institutional conditions as such, but also to how those conditions are lived, interpreted, and evaluated. When restrictions on freedom are experienced as sufficiently severe, and when voice appears ineffective or dangerous, migration may become a salient form of exit. Our framework therefore combines Hirschman's exit—voice logic (Hirschman 1970; Hirschman 1978) with insights from relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1970) and the aspirations-capabilities approach to migration (de Haas 2021). From this perspective, we derive four interrelated hypotheses linking perceived freedom repression to migration aspirations across different dimensions of freedom, forms of migration, and contextual conditions.

3.1 Perceived freedom deficits as drivers of migration aspirations

At the most fundamental level, our theory posits that individuals who perceive their basic freedoms to be repressed are more likely to want to emigrate. This can be viewed as an extension of classic relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1970), which holds that discontent arises not just from absolute conditions but from a gap between expectations and reality. People who feel entitled to personal and political freedoms will experience acute frustration if those freedoms are denied. Psychologically, this breeds an impulse to improve one's situation. Hirschman's framework suggests two main avenues for such improvement: voice (try to change the system) or exit (leave the system). In repressive environments, voice often carries high risks or low chances of success; protesting can lead to jail or worse, and voting might be futile if institutions are rigged. Migration, by contrast, is an individual action that does not require coordination or regime concession, making it an attractive alternative form of "agency" when collective action is blocked.

The focus on perceived repression is important. Two individuals living under the same regime might have different thresholds for tolerance: one may feel intensely stifled, another indifferent. It is the person's subjective evaluation — "Do I feel free here or not?" — that we hypothesize drives their inclination to leave. This approach aligns with the aspirations-capabilities model in migration studies (Carling 2002; de Haas 2011). In that model, aspirations to migrate form when an individual perceives better opportunities or conditions elsewhere relative to home, but whether those aspirations translate into actual migration depends on capabilities (resources, networks, legal access). Here, we focus on the aspiration stage: feeling unfree at home can create a powerful aspiration to

seek freedom abroad. Realizing that aspiration may still be constrained by practical barriers (money, visas, etc.), but the desire to leave has profound significance for understanding migration trends (particularly the burgeoning number of people who express interest in emigrating, even if not all will actually do so).

Formally, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. *Perceived repression of freedom increases individuals' migration aspirations.*

3.2 Differential impact of individual versus political freedoms

We theorize that not all freedoms shape migration aspirations in the same way. In particular, we distinguish between individual freedoms tied to expression, belief, and everyday autonomy, on the one hand, and more collective and episodic forms of political participation, on the other. The former include freedoms that bear directly on how individuals speak, believe, and live in ordinary life, such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and broader forms of personal autonomy. The latter concern participation in organized public contestation and institutional political life, such as the right to protest, to vote meaningfully, or to engage in collective political action. Authoritarian regimes often constrain both dimensions, but individuals may not weigh them equally when deciding whether to stay or leave.

Our core expectation is that perceived repression of freedoms related to expression, belief, and everyday autonomy will exhibit a stronger association with migration aspirations than restrictions on more collective political rights. This argument does not imply that political freedoms are unimportant. Rather, it suggests that some freedoms may be more continuously experienced in daily life and may also be more foundational to the broader exercise of agency.

This intuition can be understood through two complementary lenses. The first is drawn from modernization theory and the sociology of individualization. Over the past half-century, many societies, including in the MENA region, have undergone transformations linked to education, urbanization, and globalization that have increased the salience of individual agency, self-expression, and autonomy (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Inglehart and Welzel 2010; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). As values shift away from pure survival and deference to authority toward self-determination and quality of life, constraints on freedoms that touch personal identity and self-expression may be experienced as especially costly. In this sense, restrictions on what one can say, believe, or express in everyday life may weigh more heavily on migration aspirations than limits on political acts that are more intermittent and concern a narrower subset of individuals.

A second and complementary lens follows from Hirschman's broader conception of voice. In *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, voice is not reducible to formal

political activism alone; it encompasses the various ways through which individuals express dissatisfaction and attempt to improve their condition from within. From this perspective, freedoms related to expression and belief are not external to voice. They shape the social and communicative space in which grievances can be formulated, shared, and coordinated. When these freedoms are repressed, the issue is not only that overt political action becomes riskier. It is also that the arenas in which dissent can emerge and circulate become narrower. Daily self-censorship, hidden preferences, and the fear of speaking openly can inhibit the transformation of private discontent into communicable claims and collective contestation (Kuran 1995; Scott 1990). In such contexts, exit may become comparatively more attractive as an individual strategy of agency when internal avenues of expression appear constrained.

This reasoning also helps explain why freedoms that are experienced in ordinary life may matter especially strongly for migration aspirations. The average individual does not engage regularly in protest or organized political action, and in many authoritarian settings such acts may already be perceived as highly risky or ineffective. By contrast, restrictions on speaking freely, discussing sensitive issues, practicing religion openly, or living in accordance with one's beliefs may be encountered repeatedly in everyday life. Their repression can therefore generate both a persistent subjective cost and a heightened sense that meaningful self-determination is unattainable at home.

Importantly, we do not claim that personal freedoms and political freedoms are fully separable spheres. Some freedoms, especially freedom of expression, are simultaneously personal in their lived experience and political in their implications. Our point is therefore not to oppose a purely private domain to a purely political one, but to suggest that freedoms differ in how directly, continuously, and broadly they are experienced, and in how central they are to the wider exercise of voice. This may help explain why some dimensions of repression are more strongly associated with migration aspirations than others.

We therefore expect:

Hypothesis 2. *The effect of perceived repression is stronger when it concerns freedoms tied to expression, belief, and everyday autonomy than when it concerns more collective and episodic forms of political participation.*

3.3 Repression of freedoms, regular and irregular migration

Migration aspirations do not all take the same form. Many people who say they want to migrate envision doing so through legal channels (applying for a work visa, a scholarship, or family reunification). Others, however, are willing to leave by any means necessary, including clandestine routes without proper documents. What determines this difference? We argue that the intensity of push factors, such as perceived repression, not only increases the desire to

migrate in general but also tilts individuals toward riskier, irregular migration plans.¹

The logic here builds on the idea of substitution in the face of constraints and on risk tolerance under desperation. Repressive regimes often make legal emigration difficult, especially for those they suspect might be dissidents. They may restrict the issuance of passports, impose exit visa requirements, or politically vet applicants for overseas travel (as seen historically in the Soviet bloc and still in some MENA states). Even if the origin state doesn't directly block exit, potential destination countries may have strict visa policies, especially for citizens of countries known for human rights abuses or instability. A person driven by persecution or repression might find the pathways for regular exit (securing a visa) effectively closed off. However, irregular pathways (like being smuggled across a border) often remain accessible through underground networks. Drawing on the aspirations-capabilities framework, we can hypothesize that people with strong freedom-driven aspirations will seek alternative means if their legal capabilities are constrained (Carling 2002; de Haas 2011). For example, an activist banned from travel by her government may attempt to cross borders irregularly. In this sense, irregular migration can be a direct fallout of repression, a means of escape when official channels are barred.

Additionally, from a behavioral economics perspective, individuals facing severe repression may exhibit higher risk-taking propensity. According to prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), when people feel they are in the "loss" domain (suffering under adverse conditions), they become more willing to gamble to change their situation. Life under a repressive regime can be conceptualized as a state of loss (loss of rights, opportunities, dignity), which might make the uncertain gamble of irregular migration, with its known dangers, psychologically acceptable compared to the certainty of continued oppression. Moreover, repression often comes with an unpredictable, threatening environment (arbitrary arrests, harassment), which might induce present bias and hyperbolic discounting (O'Donoghue and Rabin 1999): the individual values immediate relief from an oppressive environment much more heavily than future benefits that might come through a lengthy legal migration process. Irregular migration, while dangerous, offers the prospect of immediate exit (e.g., hopping on a boat next week), whereas legal migration might be a years-long paperwork process that is far from guaranteed.

¹ Throughout the paper, we follow the standard terminology of migration research and international organizations: regular migration refers to movement through legal, authorized channels (e.g., with a visa, work permit, or other required documentation), whereas irregular migration refers to movement undertaken without the authorization or documents required under the regulations of origin, transit, or destination countries.

Empirically, we thus anticipate:

Hypothesis 3. *The effect of perceived repression of freedom on irregular migration aspirations is expected to be larger than on regular aspirations.*

3.4 The case of fragile and conflict-affected states

Our discussion so far presumes a context where political grievances and dissatisfactions play a discernible role in shaping behavior. However, we must consider extreme cases where basic order breaks down. In situations of active conflict, civil war, or severe state failure, the link between freedoms and migration might change in character or strength. We theorize that in such contexts, the decision to migrate becomes nearly ubiquitous and is driven predominantly by immediate security and survival concerns, thereby diluting or overriding the effect of variation in perceived freedoms.

Imagine a country in full-scale civil war: infrastructure is shattered, violence is widespread, the economy has collapsed, and people struggle to obtain food, water, or medical care. In these conditions, everyone may want to flee. The educated urban dissident and the apolitical rural villager alike are preoccupied with physical safety and basic needs. The concept of “freedom of speech” might momentarily lose salience if bombs are falling or if the government barely functions at all. In such extreme environments, we expect to see uniformly high emigration aspirations across the board, because push factors have reached a maximum. Here, the effect of perceived freedom repression is effectively overshadowed by sheer insecurity, attenuating its predictive power. Statistical correlation between perceived freedom and migration aspiration could thus attenuate or vanish because there is little variation to exploit: even those who might have felt relatively freer before are now also desperate to leave for reasons beyond repression (insecurity, poverty, etc.). This is consistent with findings that conflict intensity is one of the strongest predictors of mass displacement (Zolberg et al. 1989; Schmeidl 1997; Moore and Shellman 2004). When conflict is existential, it overshadows more nuanced grievances about rights.

Another mechanism at play in conflict settings is measurement and psychology. Survey responses about freedoms in a collapsing state might be less informative. On one hand, respondents could all converge on saying “no, freedoms are not guaranteed” because obviously in a war-torn place the government isn’t upholding rights (leading to a low-variance predictor). On the other hand, some might actually rally around any authority that promises order, exhibiting a rally-round-the-flag effect (Mueller 1973) or even nostalgically recalling times of better governance, which could paradoxically make them report slightly higher perceived freedoms than one would expect, due to wishful thinking or misinformation. In either case, the mapping from their genuine political discontent to their migration desire is blurred by the

overbearing weight of the conflict. We therefore anticipate that our earlier hypotheses (H1-H3) apply most clearly in contexts where the state, though repressive, is relatively stable. As a country descends into chaos, the motivational structure shifts.

Thus, we posit a scope condition:

Hypothesis 4. *The positive relationships outlined in H1-H3 are attenuated in contexts of intense conflict or state fragility. In countries experiencing widespread violence or collapse of authority, perceived freedom repression will be a weaker or negligible predictor of migration aspirations, because extreme push factors and uniform insecurity dominate decision-making.*

Together, these hypotheses outline the scope conditions of our framework linking perceived freedom repression to migration aspirations, as well as its expected boundary conditions.

4. Data

4.1 The Arab Barometer survey

This study uses data from the Arab Barometer, a nationally representative survey project that gathers public opinion from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Specifically, we draw on the Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021-2022) and Wave VIII (2023-2024) survey rounds, which together provide the most up-to-date snapshot of attitudes in the region.² These two waves cover twelve Arab countries. Our analysis draws on eleven of them: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), Sudan, and Tunisia.³

The combined dataset consists of 34,710 respondents, with sample sizes per country ranging from about 1,200 to 2,400. The Arab Barometer employs rigorous probability sampling techniques to ensure representativeness of each country's population. In these waves, a stratified cluster sampling design was used: enumerators first stratified populations by key administrative regions and urban/rural status, then randomly selected sampling points within each stratum. Households and individuals within households were subsequently chosen via random routes and Kish grids, respectively. This methodology yields a broad cross-section of respondents by age, gender, education, and other demographics, approximating the national distributions.

² Waves VII and VIII are repeated cross-sections drawing independent samples in each round, rather than a panel: the same individuals are not tracked over time. Our identification therefore relies on cross-sectional variation in perceived repression within countries and waves, with wave fixed effects absorbing common temporal shocks.

³ Although Kuwait is covered by the Arab Barometer, it is excluded from our analysis because the battery of questions on the perceived repression of freedoms was not fielded there.

All interviews are conducted face-to-face, in Arabic or the relevant local dialect, at respondents' place of residence. Respondents are therefore surveyed in their country of origin, before any migration decision has been acted upon: our data capture the pre-migration aspirations of individuals currently living in the region, rather than the retrospective accounts of migrants interviewed at destination.

4.2 Migration data

Our dependent variables come from two questions of the Arab Barometer survey. The first question relates to overall migration aspirations: "Some people decide to leave their countries to live somewhere else. Have you ever thought about emigrating from your country?". The second question deals specifically with irregular migration aspirations: "Would you consider leaving your country even if you didn't have the required papers?". Both questions generate binary variables with yes and no as modalities. To compare the effects of freedom on regular versus irregular migration aspirations, we collapse these items into a three-category outcome: No aspiration to migration, regular migration aspiration; and irregular migration aspirations.

Our dependent variables measure stated migration aspirations rather than observed migration behavior. Unlike realized migration, stated aspirations do not reflect revealed preferences: some respondents may express a desire to leave without ever acting on it, while others may migrate without having reported such intentions. Two considerations mitigate this concern. First, a growing body of evidence documents a strong and systematic relationship between survey-based emigration intentions and subsequent migration flows. Using data covering more than 160 countries, Tjaden et al. (2019) show that aggregate emigration intentions are strong predictors of recorded bilateral flows to industrialized destinations; similar conclusions emerge from Docquier et al. (2014) and Migali and Scipioni (2019). Second, within the aspirations-capabilities framework that underpins our analysis (Carling 2002; de Haas 2021), aspirations constitute a substantively meaningful outcome in their own right: they capture the demand side of migration, which materializes into flows only when capability constraints allow.

Figure 1 provides an overview of migration aspirations by country, showing the percentage of respondents per country who (a) have considered emigration, (b) would migrate only through legal channels, and (c) would migrate even without papers. Several noteworthy patterns emerge.

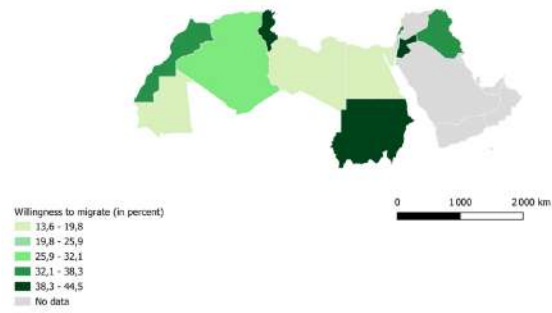
First, there is substantial cross-country heterogeneity in overall emigration desire. For instance, only about 17% of respondents in Mauritania say they have thought of emigrating, compared to over 40% in Sudan and Tunisia. Countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Iraq also exhibit high levels (around one-third or more). These differences likely reflect a combination

of factors: economic crises (e.g., Lebanon's collapse since 2019), political conditions (Tunisia's post-revolution disappointment), and demographic pressures (war and huge youth bulges in Sudan).

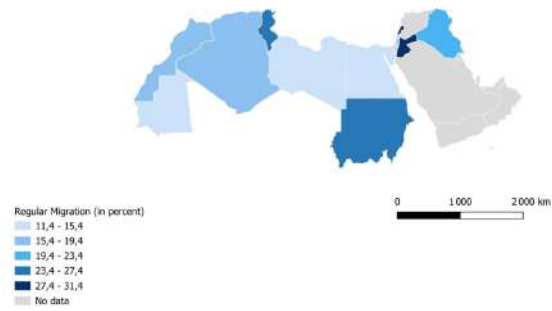
Second, in most countries, regular migration is the more preferred mode: the share of people willing to migrate without papers is typically smaller than the share willing to migrate if they can do so legally. For example, in Jordan, 39% considered emigration but only 8% would do so without papers; in Lebanon, 35% considered emigration but 6% without papers. This indicates that a significant number of potential migrants are selective: they want to move but not at any cost.

Third, some countries, however, buck this trend. Notably, in Morocco and Tunisia, the proportion willing to go illegally is almost as high as (or even higher than) the proportion willing to go legally. In Morocco, 18% of all respondents would migrate without papers, versus 17% with only legal means; in Tunisia, 16% without papers versus 25% with only legal means. Morocco's case might be explained by its geographic proximity to Europe (and a history of irregular migration across the Mediterranean), as well as limited legal pathways for Moroccans despite high unemployment. The fact that one out of six Tunisians in our sample would consider an irregular migration is striking, possibly reflecting frustration after years of political turbulence and economic stagnation post-2011.

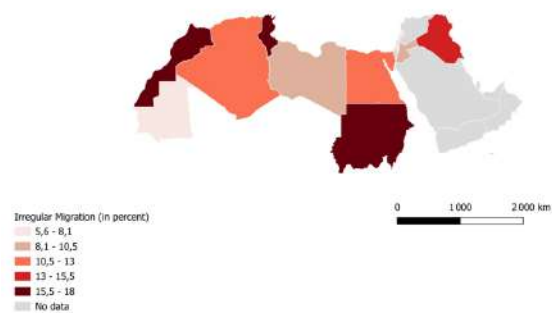
Overall, about 32% of the pooled sample has migration aspirations of some kind. Of the total, 20.6% have only regular migration aspirations, 11.2% would consider irregular migration. These figures underscore that irregular migration aspiration is not a fringe phenomenon: among those who want to migrate, roughly one in three would do so without authorization.



(a) Overall migration aspirations



(b) Regular migration aspirations



(c) Irregular migration aspirations

Figure 1: Migration aspirations at the country level

4.3 Freedom repression data

Our key independent variables are based on a series of questions in the Arab Barometer that gauge respondents' perceptions of various freedoms in their country: freedom of opinion, of the press, of protest, and of religion. For each of these freedoms, respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they think they are respected within their country. Four categories of answers are possible: not guaranteed, guaranteed to a limited extent, guaranteed to a medium extent, guaranteed to a great extent.

To provide an initial overview of the perception of freedoms in the MENA region, Figure 2 shows the proportion of individuals who feel that the various freedoms are guaranteed to a moderate or great extent in their country.

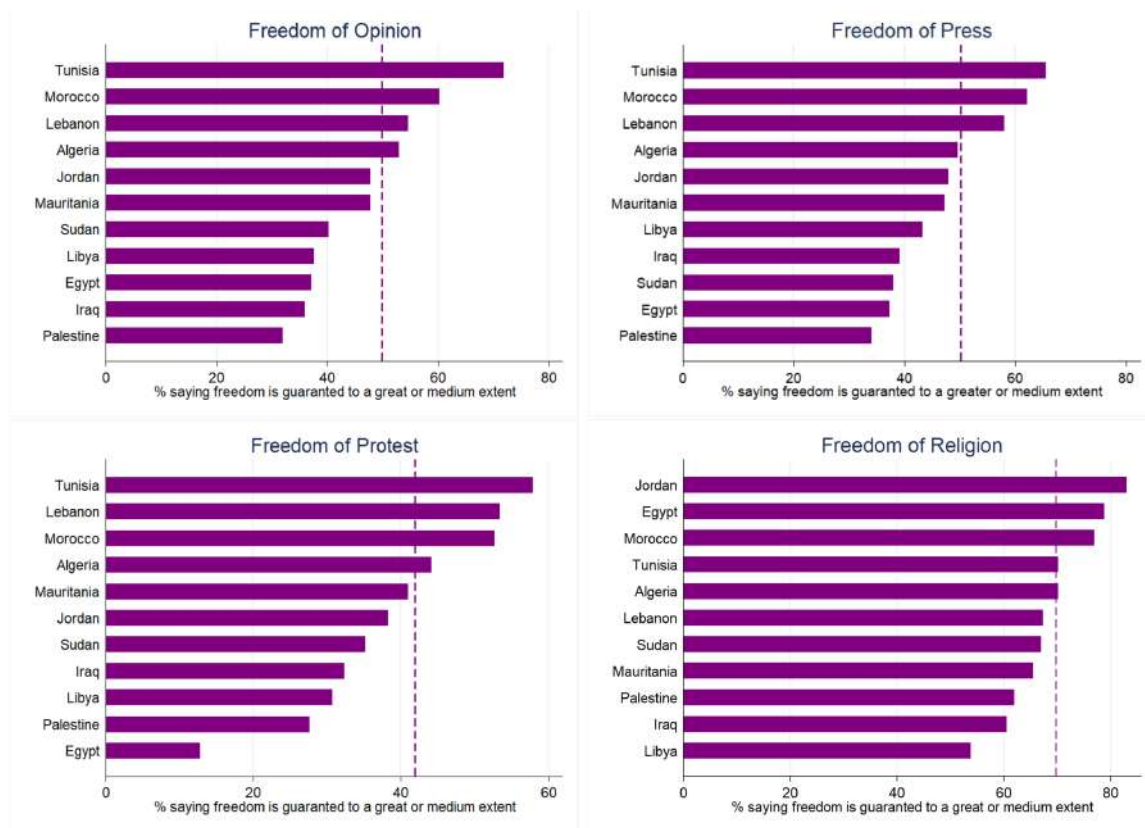


Figure 2: Perception of Freedom in Arab Nations

Note: Broken vertical line indicates the mean for all countries combined.

While freedom of religion seems to be safeguarded for over 68% of the population, the freedom to protest appears to be more fragile, with only 42% of those questioned considering that it is secured to a greater or lesser extent. However, there is considerable variation between countries: while the proportion seems higher for Tunisians, reaching 59%, it plummets for Palestinians, where only 28% state that this freedom is ensured to a large or medium extent.

There is also considerable heterogeneity in the perception of press freedom. Once again, Tunisia (68.52%) has the highest percentage of people who believe that the press is free. The podium is completed by Morocco (63.40%) and Lebanon (58.30%). The bottom of the ranking is once again occupied by Palestine (35.56%), as well as Sudan (39.86%) and Iraq (39.31%). These are three countries experiencing serious economic and political crises.

Finally, an almost similar observation can be made for the perception of freedom of expression. Once again, the Tunisians (72.36%) are the most confident about their freedom of expression, followed by the Moroccans (60.57%) and the Lebanese (54.94%). And the most skeptical are still the Palestinians (32.32%), followed by the Iraqis (35.99%) and the Libyans (38.24%).

For our purposes, we employ two ways of using these freedom perception measures. To capture an individual's overall sense of being repressed or unfree, we construct a composite index — the Freedom Repression Index — that synthesizes the information from all four freedom perception items. This index is built using a data reduction technique (described in the next section) and is scaled from 0 to 1, where 1 indicates maximal perceived repression (i.e., the respondent feels none of the freedoms are guaranteed at all) and 0 indicates minimal perceived repression (feels all freedoms are guaranteed to a great extent). In some analyses, we include the four freedom perception items separately to see their distinct effects. We also consider an interaction with the respondent's religious affiliation for the freedom of religion item, as the importance and interpretation of religious freedom might differ for a Muslim and a Christian in a Muslim-majority country.

Figure 3 provides average values of the Freedom Repression Index by country. There is notable cross-country variation. Morocco has the lowest average repression index (0.324), meaning Moroccans on average report relatively more freedoms guaranteed. This aligns with the earlier descriptive: Morocco scored comparatively high on press and expression. Lebanon (0.373) and Tunisia (0.361) also have relatively low repression scores on average, reflecting pockets of openness or at least pluralism in those societies. On the high end, Iraq scores 0.588, probably a legacy of years of chaos, sectarianism, and weak rule of law. Palestine (0.566), Libya (0.541), and Sudan (0.516) follow, all understandable given occupation, conflict, and political turmoil respectively. Algeria, Jordan, and Mauritania cluster around 0.42-0.45 in the middle. These

differences are accounted for by country fixed effects in our regressions; our focus is on within-country variation, but it is useful to know that someone in Iraq rating their country as “quite free” might still be experiencing more restrictions than someone in Morocco rating theirs as “not free.” In other words, perceptions are somewhat relative.

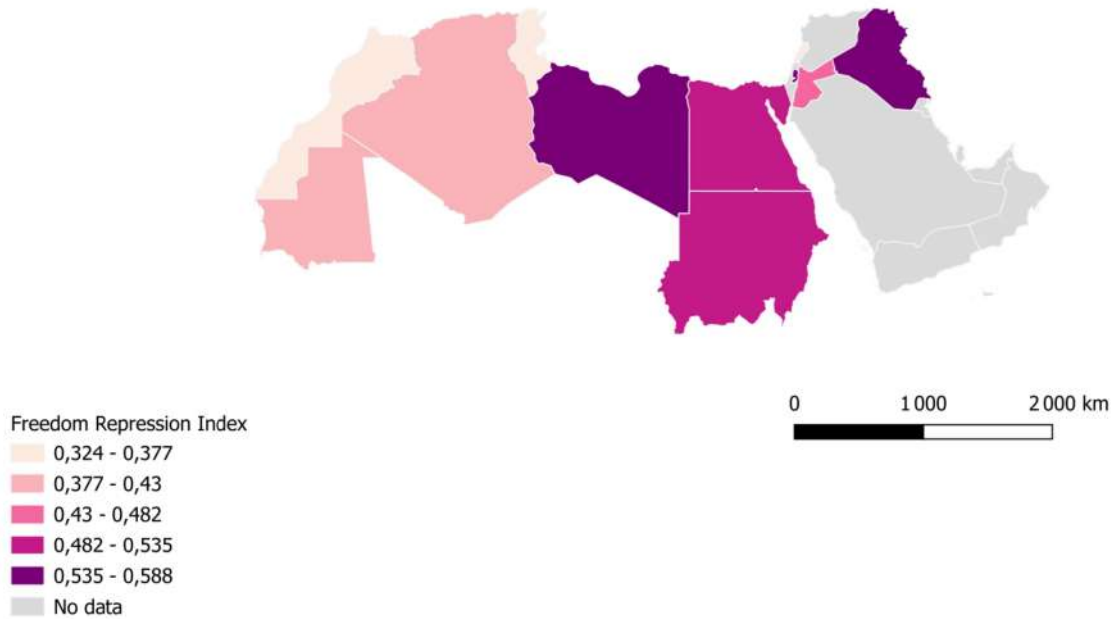


Figure 3: Freedom Repression Index by country (on a 0-1 scale)

Although the perception variable is, by definition, subjective, its relativity does not imply a complete disconnection from the country’s objective political reality. Individuals’ perceptions do not emerge out of nowhere: they are rooted in lived experiences and in the institutional environment to which they are exposed. The cross country differences described above already suggest that individuals’ responses are shaped by the institutional contexts in which they live. To further document this link, we compare our perception based indicator with an objective measure of the political environment, namely Freedom House’s democracy score. This composite indicator captures several key dimensions of freedom. As shown in Figure 4, perceptions of repression are strongly correlated with the objective level of freedom (correlation coefficient: -0.749), confirming that individual reports of repression largely reflect actual political conditions.

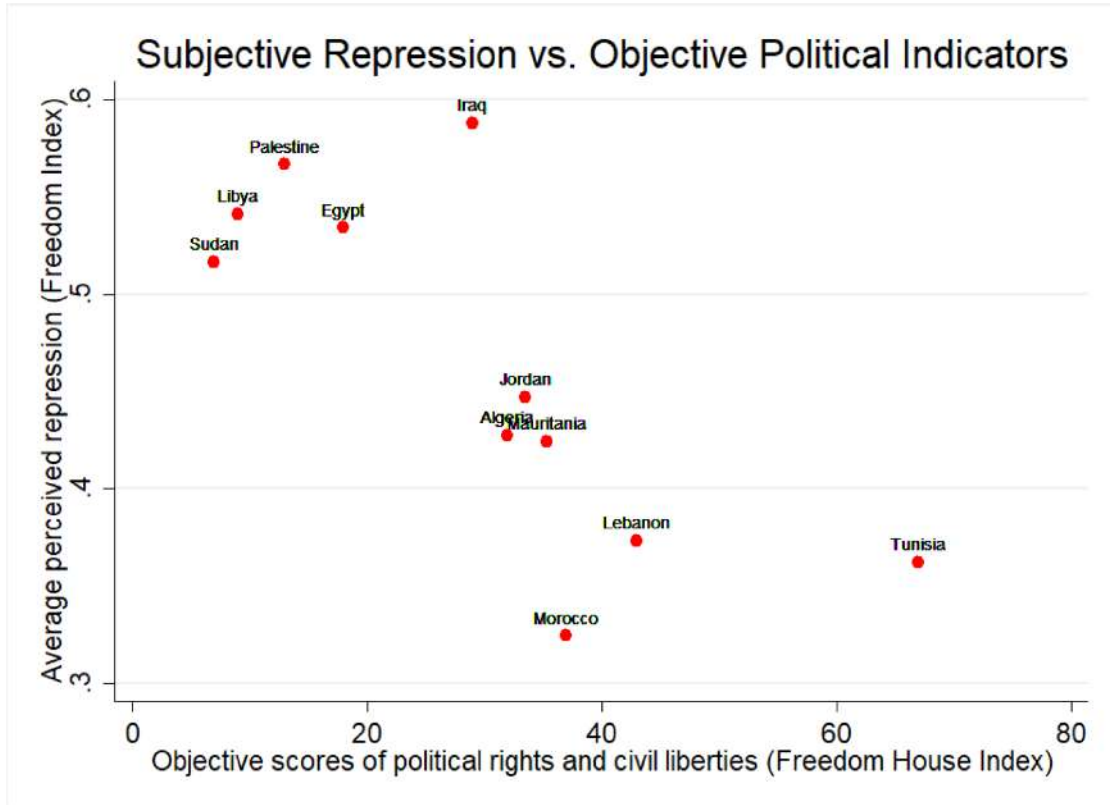


Figure 4: Perceived Repression vs. Objective Political Freedom

A related concern is that, in politically repressive settings, respondents may doubt the confidentiality of their answers and self-censor on sensitive items (Kuran 1995; Robinson and Tannenbergh 2019; Tannenbergh 2022). Arab Barometer interviews are conducted by independent, non-governmental research teams under strict anonymity protocols, and no identifying information is retained. Self-censorship cannot be ruled out entirely; note, however, that it would lead respondents to understate both perceived repression and — especially — irregular migration intentions. Such measurement error would attenuate our estimates toward zero, so that the associations we report are best interpreted as lower bounds of the true relationship. The high share of respondents who openly report that key freedoms are "not guaranteed" in their country further suggests a substantial willingness to voice criticism in the survey context.

4.4 Control variables

To reduce confounding in the models of migration aspirations, we condition on a set of control variables whose associations with emigration aspirations are well established in the literature. Demographically, younger respondents are systematically more likely to contemplate emigration than older cohorts, a gradient documented in cross-national evidence and replicated in MENA (Migali and Scipioni 2019; Etling et al. 2020; Dennison 2022). Moreover, sex differences persist, with men expressing higher propensities to migrate than women across a range of settings (Chort 2014; Migali and Scipioni 2019). In addition, married individuals tend to report lower intentions, consistent with family-binding costs and dual-career constraints observed in micro studies (Massey et al. 1993; Toma and Vause 2014). Education is also a key predictor of aspirational mobility as well — more-educated respondents are more likely to consider moving to match skills and returns, a regularity found in comparative work and within MENA samples (Dao et al. 2018; Dennison 2022; El Hadri and Marakbi 2025; Marakbi and Adedayo 2026). Finally, urban residence proxies information access and lower search/transaction costs and is positively associated with emigration consideration (Epstein and Gang 2006).

On the socioeconomic and opportunity side, we include employment status, an income proxy and household economic hardship, and forward-looking economic expectations, reflecting evidence that current economic stress and pessimism about future prospects elevate emigration intentions (Hiskey et al. 2014; Migali and Scipioni 2019; Dennison 2022). We also include perceived corruption/poor governance as migration-salient institutional push factors (Auer et al. 2020; Ivlevs and King 2012).

5. Methods

5.1 The construction of the Freedom Repression Index

Freedom is inherently polysemic, encompassing diverse dimensions including individual, political, and economic freedoms. In this study, our analytical focus is explicitly placed on individual and political freedoms, which, in contrast to economic freedom, have received relatively little attention in the existing literature.

Individual and political freedoms themselves cover numerous facets. To effectively capture how individuals perceive these freedoms, we construct a composite indicator based on responses to the following question: “To what extent do you think that the following is guaranteed in your country?”. Specifically, respondents evaluate four distinct dimensions: (i) freedom to express opinions, (ii) freedom to participate in peaceful protests and demonstrations, (iii) freedom of the press/media, and (iv) freedom of religion.

Each dimension was assessed categorically with four response modalities reflecting progressively diminishing degrees of perceived repression: “guaranteed to a great extent,” “guaranteed to a medium extent,” “guaranteed to a limited extent,” and “not guaranteed at all.”

To rigorously integrate these multiple categorical dimensions into a coherent analytical framework, we employ Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA). MCA is particularly appropriate for categorical data because it captures the association structure among response modalities without imposing arbitrary numerical distances between categories.

Following the methodological framework outlined by Asselin (2002), the construction of our composite freedom repression index unfolds in four sequential steps.

In the first step, the categorical responses on perceived repression are transformed into a binary indicator matrix. Each respondent’s answer is encoded, assigning a value of 1 if the respondent selects a particular response category and 0 otherwise.

$$b_{ij} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if respondent } i \text{ selects modality } j \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

In the second step, this binary indicator matrix is converted into a normalized profile matrix. The normalization standardizes responses across individuals, facilitating meaningful comparative analysis by expressing each respondent’s answer as a proportion of their total responses:

$$p_{ij} = \frac{b_{ij}}{\sum_{j=1}^J b_{ij}} \quad (2)$$

Third, MCA is conducted on the normalized profile matrix to distill the complex structure of perceived freedoms into a limited set of orthogonal dimensions. These dimensions encapsulate the principal axes of variation, allowing a nuanced interpretation of underlying patterns in respondents’ perceptions. Formally, each respondent’s MCA score along principal axes is computed as:

$$S_i = \sum_{j=1}^J p_{ij} w_j \quad (3)$$

where w_j represents the MCA-derived weights (coordinates on the principal axes) for each response modality.

Finally, to enhance interpretability and facilitate comparative analysis both within and across national contexts, MCA-derived scores are normalized onto a standardized scale ranging from 0 (indicating the highest perceived freedom) to 1 (indicating the highest perceived repression). This normalization facilitates interpretation and comparison across individuals.

$$Fi = \frac{Si - \min(S)}{\max(S) - \min(S)} \quad (4)$$

5.2 Empirical strategy

To empirically examine the relationship between perceived repression and migration aspirations, we sequentially employ two models: a binary probit model for overall migration aspirations, and a multinomial probit model to differentiate between aspirations for regular and irregular migration.

First, to assess whether perceived repression of freedom significantly affects overall migration aspirations, we estimate the following binary probit model:

$$\Pr(M_i = 1 \mid X_i, F_i, \mu_c, \lambda_t) = \Phi(\alpha + \beta F_i + X_i' \gamma + \mu_c + \lambda_t) \quad (5)$$

where M_i is a binary variable indicating whether individual i expresses an aspiration to migrate (1) or not (0), F_i is the Freedom Repression Index derived through MCA, X_i represents a vector of control variables including demographic characteristics (age, gender, marital status), socioeconomic status (education, employment, income), residential location (urban/rural), and institutional perceptions (corruption, government satisfaction). Additionally, μ_c and λ_t denote country and wave fixed effects, respectively, controlling for unobserved heterogeneity across countries and survey waves. Finally, $\Phi(\cdot)$ denotes the cumulative distribution function of the standard normal distribution.

Second, we estimate a multinomial probit model to distinguish between regular and irregular migration aspirations. We consider three mutually exclusive outcomes — no aspiration ($j = 0$), regular-only ($j = 1$), and irregular ($j = 2$). For each j , define the linear index

$$V_{ij} = \alpha_j + \beta_j F_i + X_i' \gamma_j + \mu_c + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{ij}, \quad (6)$$

where F_i is the perceived repression index, X_i is the control vector, and μ_c, λ_t denote country and wave fixed effects. The error vector $(\varepsilon_{i0}, \varepsilon_{i1}, \varepsilon_{i2})$ is assumed jointly normal with mean zero and covariance Σ .

For identification, we take no migration aspiration as the base and normalize $\alpha_0 = 0, \beta_0 = 0, \gamma_0 = 0$ together with a scale restriction on Σ . The outcome is determined by pairwise comparisons of the perturbed indices:

$$\Pr(y_i = j \mid F_i, X_i, \mu_c, \lambda_i) = \Pr(V_{ij} \geq V_{ik} \ \forall k \neq j), \quad (7)$$

which are multivariate normal probabilities evaluated by simulated maximum likelihood. We report survey-weighted average marginal effects, with PSU-clustered standard errors and country and wave fixed effects in all specifications.

6. Results

6.1 Perceived freedom repression and overall migration aspirations

We begin with the core relationship between the Freedom Repression Index and individuals' overall aspiration to migrate. The main results are summarized in Table 1, which presents average marginal effects (AMEs) from probit models for the binary outcome of having considered emigration (yes/no).

Across all specifications, we find a highly significant positive effect of perceived freedom repression on migration aspirations. Each entry in Table 1 is the change in the probability of aspiring to migrate associated with a one-unit change in the covariate. In the baseline model (Column 1), moving across the full range of the Freedom Repression Index is associated with a 10.7 percentage-point increase in the probability of aspiring to migrate. The association remains highly significant once controls are added: in the fully specified model (Column 3), the same full-range contrast corresponds to a 4.8 percentage-point increase.

Moreover, in the fully controlled model (Column 3), the marginal effect of the Freedom Repression Index exceeds those of most standard economic predictors. Its full-range effect (4.8 percentage points) is more than twice the earnings gradient (1.9 points for having an above-median income) and almost three times the effect of being employed (1.7 points). This suggests that perceptions of constrained freedoms are at least as salient as material conditions in shaping the desire to emigrate.

The final two columns of Table 1 examine destination preferences. We distinguish respondents who would migrate to Western countries (North America or Europe) from those favoring other Arab countries. The Freedom Repression Index exerts a large positive effect on choosing the West but has no significant effect on preferring Arab destinations. This pattern suggests that freedom-motivated migrants selectively target liberal democracies where they expect civil liberties to be protected, rather than moving to culturally similar environments which might be perceived as equally repressive.

Table 1: Freedom repression and migration aspirations (average marginal effects)

	To all destinations			To the West	To another Arab country
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Freedom Repression Index	0.107*** (0.012)	0.114*** (0.011)	0.048*** (0.012)	0.053*** (0.010)	0.004 (0.007)
Age		-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.006*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)
Gender					
Female		-0.094*** (0.007)	-0.089*** (0.006)	-0.077*** (0.006)	-0.013*** (0.004)
Location					
Rural		-0.044*** (0.007)	-0.043*** (0.007)	-0.043*** (0.006)	-0.012** (0.004)
Employment Status					
Employed		0.017** (0.006)	0.017** (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.015*** (0.004)
Education					
Secondary or tertiary		0.026*** (0.007)	0.022*** (0.007)	0.030*** (0.006)	0.008* (0.004)
University education		0.080*** (0.008)	0.072*** (0.008)	0.073*** (0.008)	0.025*** (0.005)
Income above median		-0.019** (0.007)	-0.019** (0.007)	-0.012 (0.006)	-0.014** (0.005)
Marital Status					
Single		0.066*** (0.008)	0.064*** (0.007)	0.053*** (0.006)	0.010* (0.005)
Economic expectations			0.020*** (0.002)	0.015*** (0.002)	0.003* (0.002)
Government satisfaction			0.028*** (0.004)	0.023*** (0.003)	0.003 (0.002)
Corruption			0.059*** (0.004)	0.051*** (0.004)	0.010*** (0.003)
Observations	34,710	32,766	26,877	26,877	26,877

Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. All specifications include country and wave fixed effects.

The control variables align with expectations and prior literature. Women, older respondents, rural residents, and wealthier individuals are less likely to report migration aspirations, whereas higher education, being single, and employment are positively associated with the desire to migrate. Perceptions of

the broader political and economic environment also matter: corruption is a particularly strong predictor, while economic pessimism and dissatisfaction with government performance are positively associated with migration aspirations.

6.2 Which freedoms matter most?

Having established the overall association between perceived restrictions on freedom and migration aspirations, we now examine whether some dimensions of freedom matter more than others. In particular, we ask whether specific forms of perceived repression are more strongly associated with individuals' propensity to consider emigration.

To address this question, we estimate separate specifications in which the composite freedom index is replaced by each individual dimension of perceived freedom. Estimating these dimensions in separate models allows us to isolate the association of each perceived restriction with migration aspirations while avoiding multicollinearity across closely related freedom indicators.

Table 2 shows that all freedom dimensions are positively associated with migration aspirations. In terms of magnitude, perceived repression of religious freedom and of freedom of expression display the largest marginal effects on migration aspirations, followed by press freedom, with the right to protest showing the weakest association.

To formally assess whether these differences are statistically significant, we compare coefficients across models using Wald tests of equality within a Seemingly Unrelated Estimation (SUEST) framework building on Zellner (1962). As emphasized by Mood (2010), coefficients from logit or probit models are not directly comparable across specifications because they are affected by rescaling. Estimating the models jointly allows us to account for cross-model covariance and to perform valid tests of coefficient differences.

Table 2: Which dimensions of freedom drive migration aspirations?

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Perceived repression	0.139*** (0.009)	0.103*** (0.009)	0.072* (0.009)	0.146*** (0.010)
Income above median	-0.018** (0.007)	-0.019** (0.007)	-0.019** (0.007)	-0.037*** (0.005)
Age	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.004*** (0.000)
Gender				
Female	-0.090*** (0.006)	-0.089*** (0.006)	-0.090*** (0.006)	-0.089*** (0.005)
Employment Status				

Employed	0.017** (0.006)	0.017** (0.006)	0.017** (0.006)	0.017** (0.005)
Education				
Secondary or tertiary	0.022** (0.007)	0.022** (0.007)	0.022** (0.007)	0.022** (0.007)
University education	0.071*** (0.008)	0.071*** (0.008)	0.072*** (0.008)	0.071*** (0.008)
Marital Status				
Single	0.064*** (0.007)	0.064*** (0.007)	0.064*** (0.007)	0.063*** (0.007)
Location				
Rural	-0.043*** (0.007)	-0.043*** (0.007)	-0.043*** (0.007)	-0.043*** (0.007)
Economic expectations	0.020*** (0.002)	0.020*** (0.002)	0.020*** (0.002)	0.020*** (0.002)
Government satisfaction	0.028*** (0.004)	0.029*** (0.004)	0.030*** (0.004)	0.027*** (0.004)
Corruption	0.058*** (0.004)	0.059*** (0.004)	0.059*** (0.004)	0.058*** (0.004)
Observations	27,718	27,388	27,509	27,548

Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. All specifications include country and wave fixed effects. Columns report perceived repression related to: (1) freedom to express opinions; (2) freedom of the press/media; (3) freedom to participate in peaceful protests; and (4) freedom of religion.

Table 3: Tests of coefficient equality across freedom dimensions (SUEST)

Coefficient comparison	χ^2	p-value
Expression vs Press	2.64	0.1039
Expression vs Protest	6.81	0.0091
Religion vs Protest	4.69	0.0303
Expression vs Religion	0.02	0.8798

Notes: Wald tests of coefficient equality using a Seemingly Unrelated Estimation (SUEST) procedure. All specifications include country and wave fixed effects. For brevity, the table reports only the most theoretically relevant pairwise comparisons across freedom dimensions.

The results reported in Table 3 reveal a clear hierarchy across freedom dimensions. Perceived repression of freedom of expression is more strongly associated with migration aspirations than perceived restrictions on the right to protest (p = 0.0091). Likewise, perceived repression of freedom of religion is also more strongly associated with migration aspirations than restrictions on protest (p = 0.0303). By contrast, the difference between freedom of expression and freedom of religion is not statistically significant (p = 0.8798), suggesting that these two dimensions form a common block of highly salient individual

liberties. The difference between freedom of expression and press freedom is only marginal ($p = 0.1039$). Overall, these tests indicate that restrictions on expression and religion are the dimensions of repression most strongly associated with migration aspirations.

These findings align with the theoretical argument developed above. They do not imply that collective political freedoms are unimportant, nor that personal and political liberties operate in entirely separate spheres. Rather, they suggest that certain freedoms may be more closely connected to migration aspirations because they are both more continuously experienced in everyday life and more central to the broader exercise of individual agency. Freedoms such as expression and religion shape ordinary interactions: they influence what individuals feel able to say, believe, disclose, or conceal in their relations with others. Their repression may therefore impose a more persistent subjective cost than restrictions on political acts that are more episodic and concern a narrower subset of individuals.

This pattern is also consistent with a Hirschmanian interpretation of migration as a form of exit. When freedoms that sustain everyday expression and belief are constrained, the social and communicative space in which grievances can be articulated becomes narrower. In such contexts, migration may operate as a form of exit when voice becomes structurally constrained.

6.3 Freedom and regular vs. irregular migration aspirations

We next examine whether perceived lack of freedom differentially affects the likelihood of aspiring to regular versus irregular migration. Table 4 presents the results of a multinomial probit where the dependent variable has three categories: no migration aspirations, aspirations for regular migration only, and aspirations for irregular migration. For robustness, we show two model variants: Model 1 includes the basic controls, and Model 2 includes the full set of controls. For each model, coefficients are given for both the regular and irregular outcomes relative to the base of “no migration aspirations.”

Both models are qualitatively similar, showing the robustness of our results to various specifications. In the fully controlled model (Column 3), the average marginal effect of the Freedom Repression Index on the probability of irregular migration aspirations is 8.6 percentage points over the range of the index — more than four times its effect on regular-only aspirations (2.0 points, significant only at the 5% level). Relative to a baseline prevalence of 11.2 percent, the effect on irregular aspirations is substantial: it corresponds to an increase of roughly three quarters of the baseline probability. This contrast suggests that perceived repression is especially associated with the willingness to consider irregular migration. People who perceive high repression are significantly more likely to be so desperate that they would leave without

papers, whereas those with moderate freedom concerns might only consider leaving if they can do so through legal avenues.

This difference supports the hypothesis that the most intense form of exit—irregular migration, which typically involves higher risk and cost—is especially driven by fear and lack of freedom. It suggests a scenario where some individuals, when pushed to the brink by repression, are not deterred by legal barriers — they will attempt to escape regardless. Conversely, those who feel only somewhat frustrated, or whose motivations are more balanced with economic reasoning, perhaps plan migration but via regular channels.

**Table 4: Freedom repression and regular and irregular migration aspirations
(multinomial probit, average marginal effects)**

	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	Regular	Irregular	Regular	Irregular	Regular	Irregular
Freedom Repression Index	0.030*** (0.008)	0.096*** (0.006)	0.021* (0.010)	0.068*** (0.007)	0.020* (0.010)	0.086*** (0.007)
Age			−0.004*** (0.000)	−0.003*** (0.000)	−0.004*** (0.000)	−0.003*** (0.000)
Gender						
Female			−0.007 (0.006)	−0.083*** (0.004)	−0.006 (0.006)	−0.082*** (0.004)
Employment Status						
Employed			0.025*** (0.006)	−0.006 (0.004)	0.025*** (0.006)	−0.006 (0.004)
Education						
Secondary education			0.037*** (0.006)	−0.010* (0.005)	0.035*** (0.006)	−0.012** (0.005)
University education			0.095*** (0.008)	−0.014** (0.005)	0.090*** (0.008)	−0.018*** (0.005)
Income above median			0.010 (0.007)	−0.027*** (0.005)	0.009 (0.007)	−0.027*** (0.005)
Marital Status						
Single			0.033*** (0.006)	0.029*** (0.005)	0.032*** (0.006)	0.028*** (0.005)
Location						
Rural			−0.038*** (0.006)	−0.007 (0.004)	−0.037*** (0.006)	−0.006 (0.004)
Economic expectations					0.014*** (0.002)	0.015*** (0.002)
Government satisfaction					0.016*** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.003)

Corruption		0.030*** (0.004)	0.027*** (0.003)
Observations	34,710	32,766	26,877

Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. All specifications include country and wave fixed effects.

The relative importance indicator we report is based on the contribution of each average marginal effect (AME) relative to the total sum of AMEs in the model. According to this measure, the “freedom” variable accounts for 17.6% of the total marginal effect, making it one of the most influential predictors of irregular migration aspirations, second only to gender. It thus outweighs traditional economic factors such as income, employment, or economic expectations. This reinforces the idea that the most intense forms of exit are not primarily driven by material considerations but by constraints on civil liberties. In other words, when institutional repression becomes salient, it can overshadow economic motivations and push individuals toward riskier, irregular migration strategies.

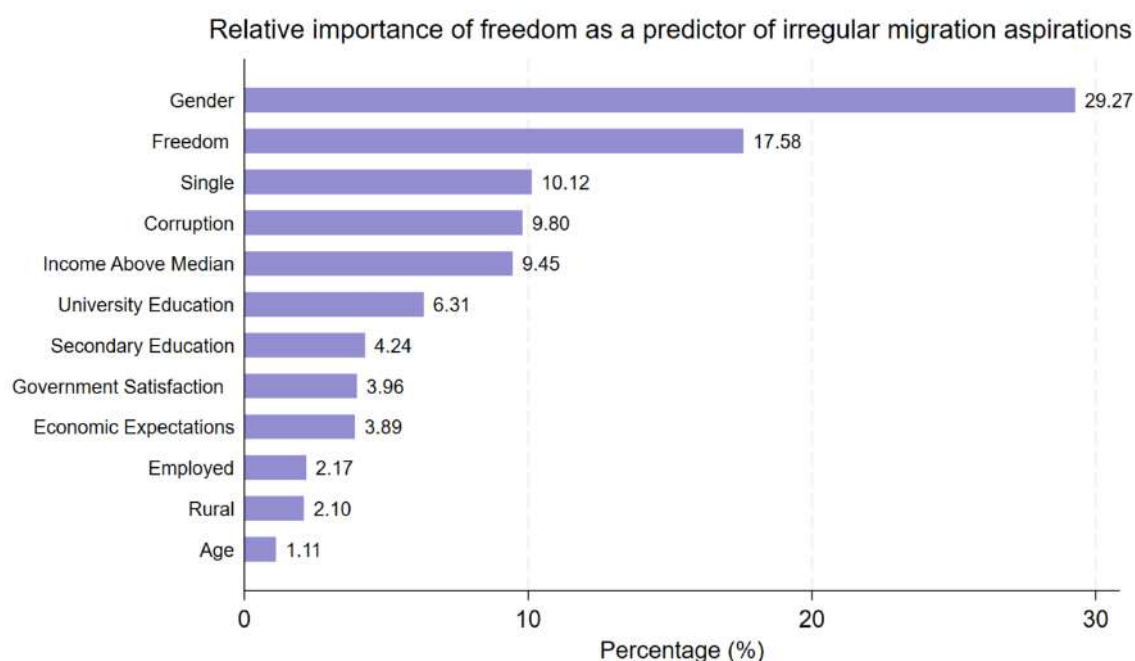


Figure 5: Freedom as a Key Predictor of Irregular Migration Aspirations

6.4 Cross-country variations and destination choices

While the overall pattern is clear that perceived freedom repression increases migration aspirations, one might wonder whether this relationship holds equally across countries or whether it is driven by specific political contexts. To investigate this issue, we estimate country-specific effects of the Freedom Repression Index on migration aspirations. Table 5 reports, for each country, the coefficient of the Freedom Repression Index from country-specific regressions of migration aspirations on the index and controls. We report these coefficients for overall migration aspirations, as well as for regular and irregular migration aspirations separately.

Table 5: The Freedom Repression Index and migration aspirations by country (average marginal effects)

	Overall migration (1)	Regular migration (2)	Irregular migration (3)
Algeria	0.222*** (0.036)	0.087** (0.029)	0.135*** (0.025)
Egypt	0.057 (0.031)	0.031 (0.029)	0.026* (0.012)
Iraq	0.058 (0.036)	0.005 (0.028)	0.053* (0.026)
Jordan	0.203*** (0.026)	0.113*** (0.025)	0.088*** (0.016)
Lebanon	0.086** (0.026)	0.031 (0.026)	0.053*** (0.012)
Libya	0.026 (0.037)	0.010 (0.024)	0.014 (0.025)
Mauritania	0.121*** (0.022)	0.074*** (0.021)	0.046** (0.017)
Morocco	0.371*** (0.034)	0.149*** (0.026)	0.219*** (0.025)
Palestine	0.121*** (0.023)	0.074** (0.021)	0.047** (0.018)
Sudan	-0.030 (0.041)	-0.087* (0.038)	0.053 (0.031)
Tunisia	0.079** (0.026)	0.011 (0.023)	0.066*** (0.018)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes

Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.

The country-specific results show that the relationship between perceived freedom repression and migration aspirations is positive and significant in most countries. The association is particularly strong in countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Mauritania, Palestine, and Lebanon. In several of these cases, the coefficient is larger for irregular migration aspirations than for regular migration aspirations, which is consistent with the broader finding that perceived repression is especially associated with riskier forms of exit.

However, this pattern should not be interpreted as a simple monotonic relationship between the average level of perceived repression in a country and the strength of the freedom— migration association. These two quantities capture different dimensions. Countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon may display comparatively higher average perceptions of freedom, but remaining restrictions on expression, belief, or personal autonomy may be especially salient precisely because they conflict with higher expectations of freedom and self-determination. In relatively stable and connected societies, individuals may also have clearer benchmarks of what freedom should look like, greater exposure to alternative political models, and stronger migration capabilities or information networks.

By contrast, in contexts marked by conflict or state fragility, such as Libya and Sudan, migration aspirations may be driven primarily by insecurity and survival concerns, thereby weakening the specific role of perceived freedom repression. These exceptions underline a broader scope condition of our argument: when a state still functions enough for restrictions on personal autonomy to be clearly experienced, perceived repression can become a powerful driver of exit; when the state collapses into generalized disorder, survival concerns tend to eclipse liberty as the decisive motive.

Overall, the country-specific evidence therefore supports a context-dependent interpretation of the freedom-migration nexus. Perceived repression appears most predictive of migration aspirations in settings that are restrictive but still sufficiently stable and connected for individuals to compare their situation with alternative political environments and to imagine migration as a feasible response. This finding reinforces the theoretical argument that migration can operate as a form of exit when voice is constrained, while also clarifying the boundary conditions under which this mechanism is most likely to operate.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the extent to which the quest for freedom shapes migration aspirations in the MENA region. Our theoretical framework and empirical analysis provide several contributions to the literature.

First, our findings offer strong support for an exit-voice model of behaviour under repression: perceived repression of freedoms is systematically associated with higher migration intentions, with effect sizes comparable to or exceeding canonical economic predictors.

Our results also shed light on an interesting form of self-selection in migration. Those who plan to leave Arab countries due to freedom considerations are overwhelmingly targeting Western democracies. This aligns with the idea of a “freedom-seeking migrant”. It is not that they simply want to leave a bad situation — they have a positive ideal in mind, often shaped by global media, diaspora narratives, or personal values.

Perhaps the most novel insight is the primacy of individual freedoms. We found that restrictions on personal liberties (such as the freedom to express one’s opinions or to practice one’s religion) are significantly associated with the desire to emigrate, whereas restrictions on collective political rights (like protesting) have much less impact. This suggests a profound sociocultural shift consistent with modernization theory: individuals in Arab societies are increasingly placing personal autonomy and self-expression at the center of their aspirations. In a sense, a form of what Charles Taylor calls “expressive individualism (Taylor 1991) is taking root — people believe they must be true to themselves and live freely in order to thrive. When their home country stifles that authenticity, when speaking out could land them in jail, or dissenting beliefs must be hidden, they experience a strong push to find a place where they can “determine the conditions of their own existence”. This is modernity’s imprint on the Arab region: a generation that is no longer willing to silently endure the role of loyal, voiceless subjects, yet finds direct political voice too dangerous or futile, so turns to exit.

The asymmetric impact on irregular vs. regular migration reinforces this narrative. Those most aggrieved by lack of freedom are not dissuaded by the absence of regular migration pathways; they are willing to take tremendous risks to escape. This is a worrying trend from a policy perspective, as it implies that crackdowns on civil liberties might fuel irregular migration flows.

We also found notable country differences. In relatively stable but restrictive states, the freedom-driven exit pattern is very strong—perhaps because people have the means and comparative safety to emigrate if they choose, and their patience with half-measures of reform has waned. In conflict-ridden or collapsing contexts (like Libya, Sudan), immediate survival might trump ideological considerations. Migration there may be more about fleeing

violence or poverty for anyone who can, regardless of personal beliefs about freedom. These nuances suggest that the freedom-migration link can be contingent on context: it may manifest most clearly in societies that have reached a certain threshold of education and connectivity (so that people know what freedoms they lack and where to find them) but still deny political change.

These contributions come with limitations. Our outcomes capture aspirations, not realizations; capability constraints might prevent many freedom-motivated individuals from moving. Future research should (i) link perceptions of freedom to observed outflows (including asylum claims), (ii) exploit longitudinal variation in domestic openings and clampdowns, (iii) extend analysis beyond MENA to assess cultural and developmental contingencies, and (iv) trace post-migration trajectories — whether freedom-motivated movers realize the liberties they seek and how they exercise voice from abroad (diasporic advocacy, remittances, transnational lobbying). These limitations delineate an ambitious research agenda to validate, extend, and contextualize the freedom repression-migration nexus across contexts and time.

Online Appendix A: Additional robustness checks

A.1 Alternative additive measure of perceived freedom repression

As a robustness check, we re-estimate our main specifications using an alternative measure of perceived freedom repression. Instead of relying on the MCA-based Freedom Repression Index used in the main analysis, we construct a simple additive index from the same freedom items. Each item is coded so that higher values indicate a higher level of perceived repression. The resulting score is then normalized between 0 and 1, as in the main MCA-based index, with higher values denoting stronger perceived repression. This additive measure gives equal weight to each freedom dimension and therefore provides a transparent robustness check against the weighting structure implied by the MCA procedure.

Tables 6 and 7 show that the main findings are robust to this alternative measurement strategy. The additive repression index remains positively associated with overall migration aspirations and with migration aspirations toward the West. It is not significantly associated with aspirations to migrate to a Muslim country. In the multinomial probit models, the association is especially strong for irregular migration aspirations, consistent with the main results.

Table 6: Freedom repression and migration aspirations using an additive repression index: average marginal effects from probit models

	To all destinations			To the West	To another Arab country
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Additive Repression Index	0.123*** (0.008)	0.117*** (0.008)	0.042*** (0.010)	0.047*** (0.009)	0.005 (0.006)
Age		-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.006*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)
Gender					
Female		-0.096*** (0.005)	-0.090*** (0.006)	-0.078*** (0.005)	-0.012** (0.004)
Location					
Rural		-0.044*** (0.005)	-0.041*** (0.006)	-0.042*** (0.005)	-0.012** (0.004)
Employment Status					
Employed		0.016** (0.005)	0.015* (0.006)	0.009 (0.006)	0.015*** (0.004)
Education					
Secondary or tertiary		0.027*** (0.006)	0.021*** (0.006)	0.030*** (0.006)	0.007 (0.004)
University education		0.079*** (0.007)	0.071*** (0.008)	0.074*** (0.007)	0.025*** (0.005)
Income above median		-0.019** (0.006)	-0.017* (0.007)	-0.011 (0.006)	-0.014*** (0.004)
Marital Status					
Single		0.069*** (0.006)	0.064*** (0.007)	0.056*** (0.006)	0.010* (0.004)
Economic expectations			0.020*** (0.002)	0.015*** (0.002)	0.003* (0.001)
Government satisfaction			0.028*** (0.003)	0.024*** (0.003)	0.004 (0.002)
Corruption			0.059*** (0.004)	0.050*** (0.004)	0.010*** (0.003)
Observations	34,710	32,766	26,877	26,877	26,877

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. All specifications include country and wave fixed effects.

Table 7: Additive freedom repression index and regular and irregular migration aspirations: average marginal effects from multinomial probit models

	(1)		(2)	
	Regular	Irregular	Regular	Irregular
Additive Repression Index	0.030*** (0.007)	0.092*** (0.005)	−0.008 (0.009)	0.050*** (0.007)
Age			−0.004*** (0.000)	−0.003*** (0.000)
Gender				
Female			−0.006 (0.005)	−0.083*** (0.004)
Employment Status				
Employed			0.023*** (0.006)	−0.007 (0.004)
Education				
Secondary education			0.034*** (0.006)	−0.012** (0.005)
University education			0.090*** (0.007)	−0.018*** (0.005)
Income above median			0.010 (0.006)	−0.026*** (0.004)
Marital Status				
Single			0.033*** (0.006)	0.028*** (0.005)
Location				
Rural			−0.037*** (0.005)	−0.004 (0.004)
Economic expectations			0.009*** (0.002)	0.011*** (0.001)
Government satisfaction			0.017*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.002)
Corruption			0.030*** (0.004)	0.028*** (0.003)
Observations	34,710		26,877	

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. All specifications include country and wave fixed effects.

A.2 Robustness to additional controls and alternative income measurement

This subsection examines whether our main results are sensitive to an expanded set of control variables and to an alternative measurement of income. In the baseline specification, we use a parsimonious set of controls in order to account for the main determinants of migration aspirations while minimizing the loss of observations due to item non-response. We now assess whether the results change when adding controls for children and subjective religiosity, and when replacing the binary above-median income indicator with a continuous logged income measure.

First, we add a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent has children, as an additional proxy for family attachment in the country of origin. Second, we include subjective religiosity, distinguishing between respondents who describe themselves as not religious, moderately religious, or very religious. Third, we replace the binary income indicator with the logarithm of monthly household income. To ensure cross-country comparability, reported income is converted into U.S. dollars before applying the logarithmic transformation.

The results are reported in Table 8. Column (1) replaces the binary income indicator with logged monthly income. Column (2) adds controls for children and subjective religiosity while retaining the binary above-median income indicator. Column (3) combines logged monthly income with the additional controls for children and subjective religiosity. Across all specifications, the coefficient on the Freedom Repression Index remains positive, statistically significant, and very close in magnitude to the baseline estimates. The inclusion of children and religiosity does not alter the main findings. Likewise, replacing the binary income indicator with a continuous logged income measure leaves the results qualitatively unchanged. These robustness checks confirm that our main conclusions are not driven by the baseline choice of income coding or by the exclusion of family-attachment and religiosity controls.

Table 8: Robustness to additional controls and alternative income measurement: average marginal effects from probit models

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Freedom Repression Index	0.050*** (0.011)	0.050*** (0.010)	0.052*** (0.011)
Age	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.007*** (0.000)
Gender			
Female	-0.087*** (0.007)	-0.085*** (0.006)	-0.082*** (0.007)

Location			
Rural	−0.046*** (0.006)	−0.041*** (0.006)	−0.044*** (0.006)
Education			
Secondary or tertiary	0.020** (0.007)	0.020** (0.007)	0.019** (0.007)
University education	0.066*** (0.008)	0.068*** (0.008)	0.063*** (0.009)
Employment Status			
Employed	0.020** (0.007)	0.016* (0.006)	0.019** (0.007)
Marital Status			
Single	0.062*** (0.008)	0.053*** (0.010)	0.054*** (0.011)
Income above median		−0.023*** (0.007)	
Log monthly income	−0.011*** (0.002)		−0.012*** (0.002)
Economic expectations	0.019*** (0.002)	0.019*** (0.002)	0.018*** (0.002)
Government satisfaction	0.028*** (0.004)	0.028*** (0.003)	0.028*** (0.004)
Corruption	0.060*** (0.004)	0.057*** (0.004)	0.059*** (0.005)
Children: yes		−0.016 (0.009)	−0.011 (0.010)
Subjective Religion			
Somewhat religious		−0.031*** (0.009)	−0.042*** (0.010)
Highly religious		−0.065*** (0.010)	−0.076*** (0.011)
Observations	23,013	26,294	22,563

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. All specifications include country and wave fixed effects.

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