

OFFICIAL ISLAM IN THE ARAB WORLD: THE CONTEST FOR RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

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All Arab states have large, official Muslim religious establishments that give governments a major role in religious life. These establishments have developed differently, according to each state's historical experience. Through them, the state has a say over religious education, mosques, and religious broadcasting—turning official religious institutions into potent policy tools. However, the complexity of the religious landscape means they are rarely mere regime mouthpieces and it can be difficult to steer them in a particular direction.

Religious Institutions in the Arab World

- Official religious institutions in the Arab world, though generally loyal to their countries' regimes, are vast bureaucracies whose size and complexity allow them some autonomy.
- Arab regimes hold sway over official religious structures. However, their ability to bend these religious institutions to suit their own purposes is mixed.
- The evolution of official religious establishments is rooted substantially in the process of modern state formation.
- Official religious institutions play multiple roles. These include involvement in endowments and charity, advice and scriptural interpretation, education, prayer, family law, and broadcasting.
- Increasingly, the authority of official religious voices has been challenged by unofficial actors. Some of these actors stand wholly outside official structures, but others may find shelter in more autonomous parts of official religious institutions, adding to the complexity of the religious landscape in many countries.
- International actors would like to see official religious representatives oppose violent extremism. However, religious officials have limited ideological tools to confront radical Islamists, and their priorities are different than those of actors from outside the region.

Regimes' Relations With Religious Establishments

- By acting intrusively in religious affairs and seeking to increase their control, regimes risk making religious officials appear to be mere functionaries, undermining their credibility. They also risk pushing dissidents into underground organizations.
- By allowing official religious institutions some autonomy, regimes can enhance their monitoring ability and the integrity of religious officials. However, it also means they lose some control and indirectly create spaces for their critics to organize.
- Western states should know the size and complexity of religious institutions means they are not always effective at fighting extremism as Western actors may wish. The regimes controlling them often have broader agendas than just combating radical groups.
- For those seeking to defeat radical ideologies, aligning with authoritarian regimes and their religious establishments is attractive. However, by placing unrealistic expectations on what regimes and their establishments can and are willing to deliver, and by replicating an often self-defeating strategy of relying on authoritarian controls to combat nonconformist movements and ideas, this approach may offer only the illusion of a solution.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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