



How Syria's Regime Used Local Clerics to Reassert Its Authority in Rural Damascus Governorate

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INTRODUCTION

During the Syrian conflict, reconciliation agreements have become a frequent method for returning opposition-held areas to regime control. This process has been particularly visible in Rural Damascus Governorate, where local clerics have played an instrumental role in pushing for resolutions with the state.

“Reconciliation” has been an ambiguous term that denotes efforts for besieged opposition-controlled communities to negotiate with the regime. Local clerics proved to be influential participants in such negotiations, both in official committees formed within rebel-held areas and through informal contacts with the regime or its supporters outside any formal framework. These connections, along with the state resources provided during the negotiations, helped clerics maintain influence both within their local communities and with the regime.

However, recent regime efforts to reimpose central government control over Syria's religious field, particularly through the passage of Law 31 in October 2018, could threaten the position of clerics in former opposition-held areas. The legislation is meant to empower the state to root out extremism in the religious establishment. But in actuality, it could further erode the regime's local legitimacy if it is used to punish popular clerics for their previous connections with the opposition.

SYRIA'S RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT AND THE REGIME BEFORE 2011

For a long time, the Syrian regime viewed religion as a vital security issue and controlled the religious sphere by regulating its access to state resources. The regime adopted a hybrid strategy of co-opting some actors and providing them a platform in state institutions and media in return for their support, while marginalizing others. By establishing partnerships with individuals or institutions



historically sympathetic to the ruling Baath Party, or sufficiently weak enough to abide by its rules, the regime was provided social legitimacy and ensured its grip over the religious establishment and society overall.

After assuming the presidency in 2000, Bashar al-Assad initiated a limited liberalization of Syria's religious policy. As a result, a wider range of actors within the country's **Islamic scene** was permitted to establish religious institutions and charities. The process continued throughout the decade as the regime sought to reinforce its religious legitimacy with an increasingly devout society amid regional upheaval—including growing sectarian violence in Iraq and instability in Lebanon. Benefiting from increased resources and methods of outreach, Syrian clerics were able to enhance their influence in society as a whole and within their local communities in particular.

The Sunni religious establishment in Syria has typically trained clergy through state-run religious schools, or through informal institutions (jama'at) where instruction is based on a master-disciple relationship. These bodies were nominally under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, but they possessed varying degrees of autonomy depending on their historical reputation and connections to the regime. Though most religious educational institutions are situated in urban centers, they attract many students from the countryside. For example, the **Fatah Islamic Institute**, a state-backed Sunni institution established in Damascus in 1965, gained influence in Rural Damascus Governorate by training local clerics, particularly after opening a specialization section for higher education studies in 1991.

Regardless of where they obtained their education, religious figures in Rural Damascus affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Endowments enjoyed a special status within their communities. They often hailed from notable families traditionally involved in the religious field that were wealthy, enjoyed a respected

lineage, and inherited religious authority. In addition, there were clerics trained in the 2000s who gained a significant following in Rural Damascus among the younger generation by preaching about everyday life topics.

As Syria fractured into government- and opposition-controlled areas after the 2011 uprising, the religious sphere also suffered significant divisions. Most established religious figures relocated to regime-held areas, leaving behind a vacuum that was filled by more radical ideologies. However, some traditional clerics stayed and declared they were with the opposition. Among these opposition clerics, several showed a willingness to shift their positions to align with local popular opinion during the conflict.

Through formal or informal communications addressing reconciliation during the conflict, the state was able to maintain indirect links with communities outside its control. Local notables or religious figures who had left for regime-held territory often initiated contacts by reaching out to popular religious figures inside besieged opposition areas and communicating regime conditions and demands. These communications served to reconnect rebel clerics to official institutions in Damascus, which leveraged their desire to retain influence within their local communities and gradually push for the return of state resources and control to opposition areas.

THE POLITICS OF INFLUENCE DURING SIEGES

In Rural Damascus Governorate, several respected religious figures became influential players in opposition-held localities during the conflict. Initially helping with opposition governance, these clerics gained prominence by negotiating relief from regime sieges and access to supplies and other resources. This was visible in the suburbs south of Damascus and in the town of al-Tall, northeast of the capital. Meanwhile, the town of Kfar

Batna in East Ghouta, a Damascus suburb, showed how divisions within the opposition allowed the state to reestablish connections with the local community outside any formal reconciliation framework through contacts with a respected local cleric.

By providing resources and guarantees to communities through popular religious figures, the state attempted to establish a degree of continuity with the systems of rule that had been in place before the conflict and to incentivize residents to return to the state. This served to empower local clerics at the expense of armed groups, as some clerics broke with the rebels and backed rapprochement with the regime.

The Southern Damascus Suburbs

In the besieged towns of Babila, Yalda, and Beit Sahim in the southern Damascus suburbs, three clerics aligned with the opposition came to play a leading role in negotiating the return of state control to the area.

The first, Anas al-Taweel, came from an influential family that was historically part of Babila's religious establishment. A charismatic and eloquent preacher at the Karim Mosque, Taweel enjoyed immense popularity within his community, with his Friday prayers attracting worshippers from across southern Damascus. The second, Salih al-Khatib, was from a well-known family and had studied under Sheikh Abu al-Nour Khourshid, one of the founders of the Fatah Islamic Institute in Damascus. Khatib preached at the Salhien Mosque in Yalda. The third, Mohammed Nouredin al-Hindi, hailed from an influential merchant family and managed two mosques in Beit Sahim with his father and brother. During the first two years of the uprising, these clerics played a prominent role in the area's civil and military governance. They took the lead in establishing military units, local councils, and sharia courts, and they helped obtain relief supplies for displaced persons through their charitable networks.

In July 2013, the southern Damascus suburbs were besieged by regime forces. The area suffered severe hardship due to aerial bombardments and a government-imposed siege, which cut off the delivery of food and medical supplies. The regime then initiated contacts with Babila, Yalda, and Beit Sahim through other clerics who had left the towns at the beginning of the uprising. These figures reached out to Taweel, Khatib, and Hindi, due to their local popularity, to discuss terms for lifting the siege. Although Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the major armed groups in the area, initially declared that anyone engaging with the regime would be considered a traitor, pressure for negotiations mounted after over 200 residents died of starvation.¹ As a result, armed groups were eventually forced to accept the formation of reconciliation committees.

Taweel, Khatib, and Hindi were chosen as the lead representatives for their town's reconciliation committees. In February 2014, the clerics negotiated a ceasefire for the area. Although their engagement with the regime soured their relations with armed groups, it reinforced their popularity among residents due to the clerics' ability to provide goods and services. During the negotiations, the clerics brokered aid deliveries, the release of detainees, the transfer of sick people, and even residents' access to official government documents. These concessions served to reinforce the local communities' dependence on the clerics and, by extension, on the regime for survival amid the siege.

The clerics, despite their affiliation with the opposition, began to use their religious platforms to support the merits of negotiations. Their Friday sermons would cite the sunna, the customs and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, in favor of reconciliation. They also claimed that accommodating the regime was necessary to preserve the area's Sunni character against the specter of Shia expansion from the adjacent Sayyida Zeinab suburb, a prominent base for [Shia militias](#).² The clerics further emphasized that the final decision on reconciliation with the state should be made solely by residents, not by armed groups composed of non-local



members. The clerics communicated regime guarantees to their followers, including promises to not engage in punitive measures or conscript residents to the army for a set period if the towns returned to state control.

Armed groups finally agreed to negotiations in 2017, and they joined members of the reconciliation bodies to form a political committee for the three towns. However, Khatib was removed as Yalda's representative after disagreements with the armed factions and was replaced by Sheikh Abu Rabia al-Bokai, a young Fatah Islamic Institute cleric from a notable family. In May 2018, the armed factions unilaterally surrendered the area to the regime after Russian mediation efforts.

However, the clerics' years of negotiations and lobbying within the community played an integral role in laying the groundwork for the surrender. As a result of regime guarantees certified by the clerics, only 300 residents chose to evacuate the area along with the armed groups.³ After the return of state control, Taweel, Khatib, and Hindi maintained their influential positions in their towns and reconnected their mosques to the Ministry of Religious Endowments. The clerics also continued to act as middlemen between the regime and their communities, assisting residents in gaining regime approval to remain or return to the area in a formal process known as "regularization of status" (taswiyet awda).

The Situation in al-Tall

In the mountain town of al-Tall, northeast of Damascus, young local clerics were popular before the uprising, and this continued throughout opposition control and regime reconciliation. In the 2000s, several new mosques were established there, led by youthful preachers. These mosques, sponsored by local wealthy families under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, attracted many worshippers who came to hear the clerics discuss everyday issues,

such as marriage, housing, prices, and inheritance. This stood in contrast to the preaching of older clerics, who focused narrowly on the Prophet Muhammad's life. One such young cleric was Sheikh Rabia Shammo, who gained a devout following through his popular Friday sermons at the Ikhlas Mosque.

During the early days of the uprising, al-Tall's young clerics, including Shammo, took a pro-opposition stance and participated in demonstrations against the regime. Again, this distinguished the younger generation of clerics from the older religious establishment, who argued for dialogue with the regime. As the country descended into conflict, al-Tall experienced a high influx of displaced persons, numbering half a million by some accounts, as a result of military campaigns in neighboring areas.⁴ Regime forces later encircled the town in early 2015. In response, representatives from notable families that had previously mediated with the regime in 2014 to negotiate the release of captured soldiers reached out to Damascus to discuss terms for ending the siege.

Shammo became an influential figure within al-Tall's reconciliation committee. Through talks with the regime, the cleric struck deals to temporarily allow supplies into the town and helped locals receive official documents. This marked the area's unofficial reconnection to the state and served to empower Shammo within the community. The reconciliation talks faced resistance from rebel groups, and they undermined proposals to allow the delivery of goods and evacuation of fighters, resulting in the resumption of shelling and siege conditions. Shammo continued advocating for reconciliation and met with armed factions at local mosques to persuade them to leave the town. In 2016, rebel groups agreed to do so in exchange for the regime's lifting the blockade. Clerics who had remained in the town and those who had left earlier were allowed to resume activities at their mosques after regularization of their status.

Sheikh Bassam Dafdaa and Kfar Batna

In the East Ghouta region outside Damascus, the religious establishment and armed groups by and large rejected any negotiations with the regime. However, in the town of Kfar Batna, Sheikh Bassam Dafdaa led early calls for the formation of a reconciliation committee, though his efforts were blocked by armed groups. Later, after major divisions emerged among opposition factions, Dafdaa was able to reemerge and head a local movement advocating for the return of state control.

Dafdaa, a popular preacher at the Omari Mosque who had taught at the Fatah Islamic Institute, remained in Kfar Batna after armed groups took control in 2012. When regime forces besieged East Ghouta in April 2013, rebel factions accused Dafdaa of maintaining contact with the state through clerics in Damascus. As a result, he was banned from giving weekly sermons, joining the local council, or working on humanitarian affairs.⁵

In April 2016, clashes broke out between armed groups in East Ghouta, pitting Failaq al-Rahman against Jaysh al-Islam, the dominant faction in the area. The infighting was partly due to rebel factions' resentment of Jaysh al-Islam's political and military dominance over East Ghouta, which the group had imposed through [harsh tactics](#). Religious institutions established by the opposition in the area also were divided as a result of rebel infighting, most notably the [Sharia Board of Damascus and Its Countryside](#) (SBDC).

The SBDC was formed in November 2012 by thirty-six local clerics. At its peak, the body administered forty villages and towns—running mosques, issuing fatwas, teaching Islamic law at local schools, and certifying imams and preachers—much as the Ministry of Religious Endowments once had.⁶ Initially an independent administrative authority, the SBDC grew closer to Failaq al-Rahman after Jaysh al-Islam attempted

to exert direct influence over the institution. The SBDC mobilized clerics to speak out against the attempted takeover, including Dafdaa, who was permitted to join the sharia authority and resume preaching.

Despite the growing public outcry at the clashes, attempts to mediate between armed factions were unsuccessful. The [Syrian Islamic Council](#) (SIC), established in exile in Istanbul in 2014 to serve as the opposition's chief religious authority, attempted to persuade armed groups in East Ghouta to form a united front. However, the council was weak, divided, and unable to play a meaningful leadership role after many armed groups withdrew from the body that same year. Nonetheless, the SIC attempted to mediate in East Ghouta, though a [short-lived](#) truce broke down in September 2017.

Amid increasing discontent over the intra-rebel violence and the regime's military advances in East Ghouta, civilians began to increasingly call for reconciliation with the state. Some gathered around Dafdaa, due to his stature as a Fatah Islamic Institute scholar and his connections with the regime through clerics in Damascus. In early 2018, Dafdaa began conveying regime guarantees to the local population and calling for demonstrations in support of reconciliation. Kfar Batna fell to the regime in March without a formal surrender agreement. However, it is alleged that Dafdaa, along with Failaq al-Rahman defectors, facilitated the Syrian army's entry into the area. Speaking to Syrian state television later, Dafdaa [said](#) the public had realized that the solution to the area's problems lay in returning to the state and in reconciliation.

Unlike the situation in the southern Damascus suburbs and al-Tall, the regime had not managed to rebuild influence in Kfar Batna by allowing the town access to resources in the lead up to its recapture. However, the state did advance its agenda in all three localities by exploiting the presence of popular clerics. The regime

leveraged contacts with the clerics, who calculated that they could best preserve influence within their communities by engaging with the government and eventually advocating for the return of the state.

A NEW ERA OF REGIME-CONTROLLED RELIGION IN SYRIA

Partly in response to the fragmentation of Syria's religious establishment in opposition areas, the regime passed Law 31 last October. The [legislation](#) grants sweeping powers to the Ministry of Religious Endowments and represents a new chapter of state control over religious life. Proponents of Law 31 say such measures are necessary to empower the ministry to combat religious extremism.

The new law applies strict standards for the appointment of mosque imams under ministry authority. Law 31 also gives the ministry greater oversight over religious schools, while the religious endowments minister will now head the Council on Islamic Jurisprudence in place of the grand mufti, and will even have a role in naming the mufti's successor. The law has effectively ensured that there is a powerful religious lobby in the state that seeks to centralize its authority over nearly all aspects of religion in society.

CONCLUSION

The centralization of religious authority in Syria calls into question the future relationship between local clerics and their communities. As was the case before 2011, the value of the clerical establishment was that it provided the regime with religious and social legitimacy. Under Law 31, the Ministry of Religious Endowments has begun replacing some clerics in former rebel-

held areas in Rural Damascus with regime loyalists.⁷ However, removing clerics who enjoy local support may undermine the regime's goal of enhancing its legitimacy.

This comes on top of the fact that the regime's use of clerics to regain control over opposition areas negatively affected the credibility of the country's religious establishment in the eyes of many Syrians. Thus, it remains to be seen whether the regime can regain its legitimacy and successfully reassert its authority over a fractured religious field, as well as over communities that have been transformed during the war.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

- 1 Author interview with a former resident of Babila, northern Syria, by telephone, June 2018.
- 2 Author interviews with former residents of Yalda, northern Syria, by telephone, June 2018.
- 3 Author interviews with former residents of Babila and Beit Sahim, northern Syria, by Skype, August 2018.
- 4 Author interview with former residents of al-Tall, Istanbul, June 2018.
- 5 Author interview with a former resident of Kfar Batna, Istanbul, June 2018.
- 6 Author interview with a former resident of Kfar Batna, northern Syria, by telephone, July 2018.
- 7 Author interview with a former resident of Yalda, Istanbul, March 2019.

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