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Localism, War, and the Fragmentation of Sunni Islam in Syria

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Summary

Syria's conflict has fragmented the country's Sunni Islamic religious landscape, so that competing Islamic identities exist today. For now, the regime has relied on trusted local religious actors to reassert its authority in areas it has retaken, while also introducing institutional measures to ensure the state remains at the center of the religious field. Only time will tell if it can implement a more permanent system of control, unifying Sunni Islam to enhance its own power and legitimacy.

Key Themes

- Over the past four decades, the Syrian regime has viewed Islam primarily as a security matter. This continued throughout the uprising and will likely continue after.
- Islam used to be shaped primarily in Syria's main cities, but since the 1990s it has become increasingly localized, with families in smaller urban areas increasingly shaping religious institutions and practice.
- Expressions of Sunni Islam became more radicalized in rebel-held areas. However, local and family structures often successfully resisted this, so that rebel groups had to adapt and pursue their aims through them.
- The regime has not yet instituted clear-cut, long-term policies to reintegrate into the state religious institutions located in former rebel-held areas. However, in recaptured areas it has tended to work through trusted local religious figures or institutions rather than impose top-down control.
- While relying on localism, the regime has also strengthened the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which has primary authority over the religious field.

Findings

- Religion has become highly politicized in Syria, which has compelled religious figures to think about expanding beyond the specific networks to which they belong and try developing a more nationwide vision for Islam's role in Syria.
- Today, there is tension between large cities and smaller urban areas in terms of who will have the strongest voice in shaping Islam in Syria down the road. To avoid further conflict on this front, Islamic figures will have to look beyond their own regions and toward building broader sets of interests.
- The wave of radicalization during the Syrian conflict could create a new generation of youth that is immersed in radical ideologies. Local clerics who have a more traditional religious education and are inclined to resist radicalism will need to be supported to counter such a trend.

Introduction

The uprising in Syria, which began in March 2011, fundamentally altered the country's Sunni Islamic religious landscape. It led to a territorial and ideological separation between the Islam practiced in areas under regime control and outside of them. In places under its authority, the Syrian state under President Bashar al-Assad maintained and consolidated a security-based version of Islam, promoting individuals and religious interpretations it deemed acceptable. In opposition areas, in turn, more radical teachings became common.

Traditionally, religious figures in Syrian cities, smaller urban areas, and villages had interacted with and depended upon regime officials and local elites in a variety of matters relating to the religious field. However, during the 1990s more independent local preachers began emerging in the lesser urban agglomerations of Syria and were tolerated by the state and religious training institutes outside its purview. These changes were gradual, however, rather than representing a sudden break with previous patterns of state control over religion.

For the Syrian regime, Islam has always been a national security issue. Syrian government officials have long been involved in the bureaucracy of Sunni religious institutions, particularly since the 1990s when ideologies of political Islam began gaining prominence. Security figures with ties to the presidential palace were appointed to oversee the religious field alongside the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Practically everyone from among the senior leadership of major religious institutes down to local imams were handpicked by these security officials. The government even intervened to shape educational curricula. As a result, Islam in Syria prior to the uprising, from its religious hierarchies to its doctrines, was largely controlled by the state.

Historically, the Syrian state has managed Islamic affairs through traditional centers of Sufi doctrine located in Aleppo and Damascus. Major religious schools had been based in these cities for centuries, and remained points of reference for surrounding areas until the late 1990s. At that time, however, new ideas associated with Salafism began entering Syrian society. They were brought by Syrians who had worked in the Gulf countries, where Salafism tends to predominate, or by religious satellite channels owned by these countries.

Conditions changed significantly after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising. As Syria became fragmented, the environment in which religious leaders operated changed and their linkages to urban centers were severed. Villages and towns fell under the control of opposition groups. In those areas, Islamic practices came to depend on local dynamics—namely which armed groups were in control, how religious authorities interacted with these groups, and the groups' ideological orientation. Gradually, secondary religious figures rose to power at the expense of the established leaders of prominent mosques and centers of religious jurisprudence who had been trained in Damascus and Aleppo. This created spaces for more radical doctrinal interpretations of Islam to take root.

The conflict, not surprisingly, reshaped Sunni Islamic identity in Syria. The situation prevailing today is characterized by multiple, competing identities rather than a single one. The Syrian regime is recapturing areas from rebel groups and, for now, reviving the old model of control through a renewed reliance on trusted local religious actors. At the same time, the state is also introducing institutional measures to ensure that it remains at the center of the religious field, able to control religious mobilization in the future. Only time will tell whether the regime is able to put in place a more permanent system.

State Control and Localism Prior to the Syrian Uprising

While state control over Islam has long been present in Syria, the Sunni religious field had undergone change even before the uprising in 2011. In the first decade of the century, smaller urban areas, outside traditional urban centers of religion such as Damascus and Aleppo, gained autonomy from the state in religious matters. Religion became more localized as the initiative shifted to homegrown figures who built mosques or from whose ranks imams, or worship leaders, were named. The rising involvement of the business elite in religion helped transform it into a terrain for patronage and corruption, further weakening its bonds with the state. This growing localization of religion had a major impact after the uprising, helping to lay the groundwork for mobilization against the regime.

The State as Overseer of the Islamic Field

The state has routinely been involved in religious matters in Syria and has generally exercised its authority through three mechanisms. It has controlled the ownership and financing of religious institutions; it has exerted bureaucratic control over the appointment of religious figures, such as imams, in both larger and smaller urban areas; and it has had a final say over the curricula of religious schools. In 1992, for instance, about 5,000 mosques were under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments. In official propaganda it was said that no leader had supported the construction of mosques as had then president Hafez al-Assad following the “corrective movement” that brought him to power in 1970.¹ This claim contributed significantly to Assad’s legitimacy.

In the 1960s, the state set up the first state-run, pre-university level Islamic institutes in Syria’s history, as well as an institute of further education for clerics.² Religious affairs were centrally run by the state bureaucracy prior to the uprising—primarily through the Ministry of Religious Endowments and various local administrative bodies. Religious figures, whether in cities or villages, traditionally interacted with and depended upon elites and regime officials in Damascus and Aleppo. These cities were also home to Syria’s largest official religious schools, to which schools in the rest of the country were connected through personal ties among imams, employees of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, and security officers—with each security branch having an office for dealing with religious affairs. There were also ties based on ideology, namely with regard to the types of Islamic jurisprudence that schools practiced.

The Ministry of Religious Endowments owned Syria's largest mosques, which were mostly located in major cities. These places of worship were typically financed by wealthy Syrians as well as through donations collected from local communities, and only rarely by the ministry itself. Normally, construction of a mosque was preceded by the formation of a building committee, a process tightly controlled by the ministry. The committees had to apply to the Ministry of Religious Endowments for registration and specify the purpose of their fundraising activities, while also providing information on committee members.³

In September 1979, new regulations were passed by the ministry with the intention of gaining more control over members of committees. To become a member a candidate had to be Syrian and at least twenty years old, with no legal action pending against him or her. The Ministry of Religious Endowments checked the information and then allowed the committee to begin working.⁴ When a mosque was completed, the ministry would administer it.⁵

The state was also in charge of appointing imams. In the mid-1960s, the prime minister was designated as the official who named mosque employees, an authority retained to this day.⁶ In smaller urban areas the state would appoint imams from Aleppo or Damascus, on the condition of approval by the security services. Generally, they were selected on political grounds or as a form of reward. For example, in al-Tall, a town near Damascus, the Great Mosque is the property of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and its imam is Badr al-Khatib. He inherited control over the mosque from his father, a prominent imam who had remained loyal to Hafez al-Assad's regime during its crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁷

The United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked a turning point in terms of state control over Syria's religious institutions. At first, the threat that Washington might seek to pursue regime change in Syria led the authorities to be more tolerant of Salafi-jihadi combatants crossing into Iraq to fight U.S. forces.⁸ However, this approach had a boomerang effect. Some of the militants gradually returned to Syria, especially following the spike in sectarian killings in Iraq in 2007. At that stage the regime began cracking down on newly radicalized preachers and instituted stricter supervision over religious education.

The history of the Hosari institute demonstrates how the tightening control of Syria's security apparatus over religious institutions played out during this period. In 1962, Sheikh Ahmad al-Hosari established the Imam al-Nawawi Institute of Jurisprudence in Idlib Governorate.⁹ Initially part of a charity organization that aimed to help the poor, the institute had the authority to issue certificates allowing students to become imams or *khatibs*, meaning those entitled to deliver sermons in mosques.¹⁰ Yet the Hosari institute faced increasing oversight from the security agencies during the first decade of this century.

The man leading this effort was Assef Shawkat, Bashar al-Assad's late brother in law. From 2005 to 2009 he served as director of Military Intelligence and was effectively in charge of religious affairs. During his tenure, the priority was to counter the rise of Salafi ideologies by controlling religious curricula and overseeing religious institutes. Under Shawkat's guidance, the Ministry of Religious Endowments interfered extensively in the Hosari institute's curriculum, insisting that it devote many more hours of instruction to "universal subjects," such as math and physics. Members of multiple security services, including Military Intelligence, State Security, and Political Security, would visit the institute to receive reports on its actions, and its leading figures had to meet with the religious endowments minister every Tuesday.¹¹ Lessons were prohibited after evening prayer without the prior approval of the security services.

The regime's behavior in this case was symptomatic of Syrian state behavior toward the religious sphere. However, there have also been periods when the state has loosened its control over religion, depending on political circumstances. This was particularly true in smaller urban areas starting in the 1990s, as a more conservative approach to Islam gained ground in Syria, and beyond that the Middle East. This development created space for a rising form of religious localism, one that would have a significant bearing after 2011.

The Rise of Religious Localism in Syria's Smaller Urban Areas

Throughout the 1990s, the role of mosques and religious authorities in Syria changed radically, particularly in urban areas with a population of under 100,000 people. These towns emerged as important hubs of Islam, complementing cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama.

Several things characterized these smaller urban areas. Extended families were an important component of such localities, organizing their social, political, and religious hierarchies. In addition, mosques in these towns had become more than mere places of religious worship. They were institutions with social and political relevance, around which families and communities could gather and organize. Although the activities of imams and mosques still required the approval of the security services, because imams mainly came from prominent local families they enjoyed heightened legitimacy to undertake their roles.

The role of important families in financing the construction of mosques was a key factor in creating a more decentralized religious environment outside major cities. In many towns certain mosques came to be known as "family mosques" because they were built, financially supported, and run by families. For instance, the Serhan, Amin, and Hindawi families all contributed to building the Eastern Mosque in the town of Ehsim in northwestern Syria, which also had a Western Mosque, controlled until 2011 by the Ministry of Religious Endowments.¹²

Because of the increasingly central role of mosques in defining the social life of these towns, major families would frequently vie for control over them. At times the state would make appointments to reflect social and political realities on the ground. For example in the town of Nahta in Daraa Governorate, the Ministry of Religious Endowments faced successful public pressure to name a member of the prominent Qadari family as imam instead of its customary choice of a member of the Hariri family. In other words the state's top-down control over the religious sphere was being reshaped by local dynamics to which the state had to adapt.

The example of Berwa also illustrates the expanding role of local imams and how their appointment was driven by local realities. The town is located in Rural Aleppo Governorate and is inhabited by around 7,000 people of Sunni tribal and nomadic background. Traditionally, the state would appoint an imam from Aleppo City to serve in Berwa's sole mosque, as it was difficult to find locals who had studied Islamic law. But in 2004, a Berwa native was appointed for the first time. He had obtained a diploma in Islamic law and was named after prior approval of the local *mukhtar*, or local administrative official, and the security services in Aleppo. The imam was young and had limited experience, but built up his credibility after the *mukhtar* tasked him with resolving local disputes.¹³

The example underlines how, in the first decade of the century, mosques in many smaller urban areas similar to Berwa had acquired the elements needed to turn them into laboratories of political Islam in Syria. Sustained by local communities, they could carve out a certain degree of autonomy from state control, because towns could favor the naming of certain imams over others or because there was latitude to innovate in religious sermons. The selection of imams from prominent local families transformed mosques into rare examples of local institutions relevant to the community, beyond their religious functions. Most importantly, they provided an avenue for figures with little or no connection to the state to be appointed to positions of authority, solely on the basis of their local appeal.

The case of Salam al-Arnous, a member of a prominent family from al-Tall, provides an example of this process. Arnous was twenty-six when he gained a certificate as an imam from a religious school in Lebanon, and another from the Nour Mosque in Damascus. Although Arnous's mosque in al-Tall was smaller than the Great Mosque in the town, it attracted hundreds of people to listen to his fervent Friday sermons. Arnous addressed social issues that were of special interest to his audience, such as the problems of youth. He had additional credibility because, in spite of being from a prominent family, he had chosen to be the imam of a minor mosque. His life trajectory added charm to his character. Arnous was rumored to have transformed himself from a young man with loose morals into someone who had repented and become an upstanding person.

In contrast, Badr al-Khatib, the imam of al-Tall's Great Mosque, was perceived as a Baath puppet, parroting the regime's narrative and displaying little charisma in his Friday sermons. In highlighting Khatib's ties to the regime and the predictability of his sermons, people would joke that Islam itself had become an "achievement of the Corrective Movement," a reference to the political episode that had brought Hafez al-Assad to power.¹⁴

The fact that the religious authorities in small urban areas were able to speak to their communities outside of state control also allowed some imams, particularly young and charismatic figures, to evade official narratives in their preaching. Often, their sermons were more heavily influenced by the austere Salafi interpretation of Islam. Salafism had been steadily growing in Syria, as in many other countries, after the September 11 attacks against the United States and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and because Syrians were increasingly working in the Gulf. Syrians also returned from the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, bringing with them religious texts reflecting Wahhabi methods of prayer and other activities. In Ehsim, one of the thirty villages in Jabal al-Zawiya in Idlib Governorate, Sufi traditions were historically dominant, as they were in other villages in Syria. However, when Salafism made inroads into the community, a debate took place in Ehsim's mosques in 2000 over the correct path to follow. The regime took note of these discussions, and eventually began confiscating Salafi texts at Aleppo airport beginning in 2005 in order to stem Salafi influence.

By the time the Syrian uprising began, therefore, the heightened localism of Islamic institutions outside Syria's major cities had to an extent reduced central state control over the religious field. Mosques came to serve a wider social role than simply as places of worship, while the influence over religion of local figures or families was also enhanced, based on their local legitimacy. However, localism was not the sole factor that lessened the state's sway over the Islamic field. Individuals close to the regime would also contribute to that erosion.

Regime-Linked Businessmen and the Religious Sphere

The state's monopoly over the appointment of imams and its tight handle over their activities were also loosened by the increasing involvement of regime-linked businessmen in religious activities. Under Bashar al-Assad, such businessmen became more active in Syrian social and economic life, and this extended to religious institutions. Because of their close ties to the regime, the businessmen were able to expand their influence and patronage power in the religious field, which also allowed them to gain financially.

The efforts of one such businessman, who built a mosque in the city of Idlib in 2007, demonstrates this process.¹⁵ The businessman, who belongs to a prominent local family, completed work on a mosque that he had started building in 2003. During the construction phase he was allowed to import material without paying taxes, including chandeliers, carpets, and Italian marble. Like others in similar situations, he took advantage of this exemption to import more than he needed and sell the surplus at a profit. When the mosque was finished, an imam was appointed who was regarded as relatively unqualified in terms of his scholarly training. However, he was chosen because of his strong ties with the businessman. Therefore, the businessman leveraged his connections to the regime and the religious establishment to increase his influence and wealth.

The businessman's behavior showed how agreement over religious matters can deepen ties among Syria's economic, political, and religious elites. It involves the complicity of state officials in the security sector and religious establishment, and has become an avenue for corruption and the distribution of patronage. A former employee of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, who related the businessman's story, referred to the ministry's holdings as "looted treasure."¹⁶

The collective impact of these developments—the localization of religious institutions and imams, the concomitant loosening of state control over the religious sphere, mainly outside Syria's larger cities, and the arrival of Salafi influences from the Gulf—all contributed to a more decentralized Islam after 2000. This permitted a more conservative interpretation of Islam to take hold at the local level, due to the relative decline in the influence of state-sponsored Islam and, therefore, the ability of the state to push back against doctrines it considered threatening. This was particularly true in less populated areas, such as Idlib and Daraa Governorates. That is why when the uprising broke out in 2011, the religious environment in many parts of Syria favored the emergence of groups whose interpretation of Islam differed greatly from what had prevailed before.

The Islamic Sphere During the Syrian Uprising

The uprising accelerated the decentralization of the Islamic field in Syria. It broke the linkages between smaller and larger urban areas, between local religious leaders and formal religious institutions, and between major and minor mosques. As armed groups took territory, they further isolated localities from one another even as they were compelled to operate through existing family structures around local mosques. This fragmentation of the religious landscape would have major repercussions on the dynamics of conflict, creating spaces for outside actors to intervene through local armed groups with a religious identity.

Local Mosques and Armed Groups

When anti-regime protests began in 2011, they often were centered around locally supported mosques and religious figures. The reason is that young people felt more secure demonstrating there, while the imams of those mosques often served as spokespersons for their communities' demands. At the same time, this obliged the imams to take sides and decide whether to align with rebel factions.

For example, protesters in the town of al-Tall mobilized around the mosque controlled by the Arnous family, rather than the Great Mosque controlled by the Ministry of Religious Endowments. In May 2011 the protesters asked Arnous to convey three demands to the regime: that the security services cease arresting people; that the regime address ownership issues relating to the military takeover of local land in the 1970s and 1980s; and that information be provided about family members arrested in the 1980s for working with the Muslim Brotherhood and whose fate remained unknown. Arnous was unable to deliver on any of the protesters' demands and was also reluctant to oppose the regime.

These factors, and the harassment he faced from rebels for not adopting a stronger stance against the regime, pushed Arnous to move to Damascus in summer 2012, then later to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

While the driving force of the uprising tended to be local, it was gradually taking place in a context of broader regional rivalries. That is why religious networks based in the Gulf came to be heavily involved in the Syrian conflict, supporting such powerful Salafi rebel groups as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam.¹⁷ The funding they provided to armed groups allowed these groups to gain sway over local religious figures and control more mosques, although their influence typically remained confined to the restricted areas in which they operated. This imbued local religious institutions with a more Salafi outlook, disconnecting them from their Sufi past and breaking up the religious field. It was a stark contrast to the religious centralization previously imposed under the regime.

Reflecting such changes, when smaller urban areas fell out of regime control in 2012 and 2013, local religious figures had to establish relations with the new authorities in their areas, namely Islamist-inspired political and military factions. Yet these armed groups were only able to operate through existing social structures—namely mosques, the families that sustained them, and their imams. Indeed, the factions were rarely able to disrupt local families' control over mosques, the appointment of imams, and ideology. That is because these groups were often drawn from the local community and therefore accepted the mosque-family-imam relationship that had preceded the conflict. In fact by encouraging continuity, by permitting local imams to continue functioning, armed groups were better able to recruit fighters from the dominant families.

Relations between local religious leaders and militias in Ehsim, in the Jabal al-Zawiya area of Idlib Governorate, exemplified such dynamics. During the early phases of the fighting in 2012 and 2013, the rebel groups Jabhat Thuwwar Suriyya and Suqour al-Sham controlled the Western and Eastern Mosques in the town, respectively. The imam and *khatib* in each mosque was linked to the armed group controlling it. In the Western Mosque the relationship was especially close, because of tight connections among the Fadl family from which the imam hailed, the mosque itself, and the armed faction. By 2013, the more radical Ahrar al-Sham group had become increasingly active in Jabal al-Zawiya, without however daring to interfere in the family management of mosques.

It was sometimes a struggle for armed groups to spread more radical versions of Islam. The reason for this is that such ideologies could only take root where families and imams with local legitimacy were conduits for spreading them. Because of the tight connections between local social actors and mosques, armed groups preaching more radical Islam precepts could either make headway when leading families went along with them or if they altered the power balance among families to their own advantage. That is why there were limitations to how factions could use mosques to their benefit. Mosques were insulated to a great extent from the influence of actors not native to an area, such as foreign fighters, when they were tied to a network of local families and served as social institutions around which communities organized.

This pattern was evident in Ehsim. At the beginning of 2014 the hardline Jabhat al-Nusra and Jund al-Aqsa groups became active in the town, establishing guest houses for foreign fighters to gain influence. During that period, fighters from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere began arriving in Ehsim, but could only give sermons to local residents after obtaining prior permission from groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army. In November 2014, even after Jabhat al-Nusra had evicted Jabhat Thuwwar Suriyya from Jabal al-Zawiya, the broader region in which Ehsim is located, its interference in management of the Western and Eastern Mosques was limited. The imam of the Eastern Mosque remained in place, while Jabhat al-Nusra initially took over the Western Mosque as a spoil of war, removing it from the control of the Fadl and Fadil families. However, when the group later realized that this decision was unpopular, working against its desire to influence Ehsim's inhabitants, Jabhat al-Nusra returned the mosque in 2017 to the two families, who named an imam from their ranks.¹⁸

Even if local families represented an obstacle to more radical groups in places, religious figures with charisma and local legitimacy also served as powerful spokesmen for more radical versions of Islam. Mohamed Saadeddin al-Buraidi was an imam and *khatib* in the town of Jamla, west of Daraa. He opposed the regime and in 2009 was imprisoned for two years. In May 2011, Buraidi was released with other Islamists in what many believe was a deliberate regime ploy to Islamize and radicalize the popular uprising, thereby making the regime appear more palatable. Buraidi returned to Jamla and formed Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk with about 150 fighters, many from areas west of Daraa. The group began fighting the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham toward the end of 2014 in the Yarmouk basin west of Daraa, after it was alleged that Liwa Shuhada Yarmouk had pledged allegiance to the self-proclaimed Islamic State. In 2015 Jabhat al-Nusra announced that it had killed Buraidi. Subsequently, his group formed Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid with two other factions and the new group declared its loyalty to the Islamic State.¹⁹

The increased localism of the Syrian conflict would not only have an impact on groups opposed to the Syrian regime, but also on the regime itself. As government forces regained territory after the Russian military intervention in 2015, the regime faced a highly decentralized religious field. Yet the process of decentralization had begun modestly even before the uprising, in part because of the regime's own practices. This would shape its approach to religious institutions in areas it recaptured, whose outcome has yet to be fully determined.

The Return of the Syrian Regime and Religious Dynamics

As government forces began retaking areas from the rebels after 2015, they further fragmented the religious landscape. In opposition areas, religious figures who had gained prominence during the uprising continued to retain their role, while preaching more radical versions of Islam. In areas retaken by government forces, the regime was obliged to devise ways to reintegrate religious

institutions into the state. Until now the regime has not formulated clear-cut policies in this regard and devising a long-term solution remains a work in progress.

However, in the early stages of retaking territory the regime did show a willingness to reappoint trusted religious figures to their positions and return to a limited acceptance of localism. In many instances, the regime has given such individuals greater control over the appointment of other local clerics. Religious institutions close to the regime, once completely centralized in Damascus, have also been allowed to expand their presence locally throughout Syria. Therefore, the regime has decentralized authority into the hands of reliable local religious actors while also maintaining leverage over them.

A new pattern is being set in which the central authorities are reaching out to localities, rather than making these localities come to them. Syrian security agencies will very likely continue to act through these local communities in the future. And even if certain aspects of religious authority, such as religious curricula, are still being controlled from Damascus, more latitude is being given to certain religious institutions to expand education at the local level.

This approach has been made necessary for two primary reasons. First, the fragmentation of the Sunni religious sphere at the local level has led to a variety of approaches to Islam depending on location and outside influences that shaped developments in those locations.²⁰ This has obliged the regime to improvise and be flexible when addressing local realities in areas again under its control.

And second, the regime grasps its own limitations after years of war. The idea of imposing centralized control over all areas that have been taken back from the opposition is not realistic when the Syrian state and its security institutions are still suffering from manpower problems and are being rebuilt. At the same time, the experiences of recent years have shown the regime the frequent advantages to be gained from localism, which spawned local divisions and rivalries that it was able to exploit in recapturing rebel-held areas.

In opposition-controlled areas, broadly speaking, three strands of Islam competed with one another. These were Salafism, Sufism, and the approach of the Muslim Brotherhood, which combined political activism with charity work. The Brotherhood once had a presence in many of these areas, but steadily lost ground to Salafism. Moreover, as an urban phenomenon its class profile and organizational structures no longer resonated in Syrian towns and rural areas. These three approaches rose and fell depending on the groups wielding political and military power in particular areas, who themselves were influenced and sustained by often competing foreign backers. As a result of this, armed groups frequently entered into conflict with one another, creating valuable openings for the Assad regime.

In 2014, political dynamics in the region south of Damascus provided a good illustration of how the regime was able to use local rivalries to its advantage during the conflict.²¹ Many clerics in the region had at first sided with rebel factions and rejected calls for reconciliation with the regime, while others

played a more ambiguous game. One cleric, Anas al-Tawil, mediated a long truce with regime forces, even as others, by exploiting rifts among armed opposition groups, actually assisted it in reconquering territory.²²

A prime example of one such person is Bassam Dafdaa, a cleric in the East Ghouta town of Kfar Batna, where he was a preacher at the Omari Mosque.²³ A follower of the Sufi interpretation of Islam, Dafdaa was educated at the Fatah Islamic Institute in Damascus and made a failed bid to win a parliamentary seat in 2007. He remained in Kfar Batna after the uprising, while also maintaining ties to clerics who had left for regime-controlled areas. However, shortly thereafter local rebel groups restricted his ability to deliver sermons, accusing him of maintaining open channels with the authorities in Damascus. Dafdaa's efforts to run for the local council or become involved in humanitarian affairs were thwarted by the rebels.

A new phase in Dafdaa's involvement began when fighting broke out in 2017 between two major armed groups in Kfar Batna, namely Jaysh al-Islam and Failaq al-Rahman. As the fighting worsened, the ensuing divisions began affecting religious institutions established by the opposition. These were in charge of running mosques, issuing fatwas, and teaching Islamic law in local schools, as well as certifying imams and *khatibs*, much as the Ministry of Religious Endowments had previously done. As these institutions grew close to Failaq al-Rahman, they returned clerics such as Dafdaa to their pulpits.²⁴

As the fighting between the two opposition groups continued and regime forces advanced toward Kfar Batna, a number of civilians and armed rebels gathered around Dafdaa as he began communicating with the regime. He invited people to reconciliation meetings and was backed by demonstrations supporting his efforts. In March 2018, hundreds of fighters defected from Failaq al-Rahman and helped facilitate the Syrian Army's entry into Kfar Batna. Later, the name Dafdaa, which means "frog" in Arabic, was used by regime foes to describe opposition members who had switched sides.

The developments in East Ghouta showed the Assad regime that at a moment when its own capacities to act on the ground were limited, it could exploit local rivalries and dynamics to its advantage. Yet the regime later used localism to regain a measure of legitimacy. For instance, in May 2018, after the regime took back East Ghouta, the Endowments Department of Rural Damascus Governorate ordered local imams to pray for Bashar al-Assad during their services and ask God to help the president for the good of Syria.²⁵

If the example of East Ghouta showed how the regime exploited local dissensions to reconquer opposition-held areas, the example of al-Tall illustrated how the regime used religious figures in local reconciliations, allowing it to reimpose its authority. During the first decade of the century, the town saw a proliferation of new mosques built and sponsored by large families. These mosques featured young *khatibs*, many only in their twenties, and were built in neighborhoods dominated for the most

part by wealthier, well-known families. Each mosque had an official name given by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, but was known locally by the name of the family that had built it. These families also paid the salaries of the imams and *khatibs*.

The most prominent religious figures in al-Tall were Rabie Shammo, the *khatib* of the Ikhlas Mosque; the previously mentioned Salem al-Arnous, *khatib* of the Arnous Mosque; Mansour Mansour, the imam of the Bibeh Mosque; and Mohammed Hijazi, the *khatib* of the Basha Mosque.²⁶ With the exception of Mansour, all of these figures had enjoyed close ties with Damascus before the uprising. They attracted large crowds, many of them younger locals drawn by the clerics' willingness to address contemporary issues, unlike other mosques.²⁷ To accommodate the crowds, the Arnous Mosque even had to expand its facilities.

During the early months of the uprising, Shammo, along with Hijazi and Mansour, participated in demonstrations and appeared to support the uprising. Shammo later became close to Liwaa al-Ghorba, a local armed faction, and often visited its members in their hideouts in the Qalamoun Mountains after the regime's first campaign against al-Tall in 2013. In contrast, Arnous and the well-known pro-regime cleric Badr al-Khatib called on residents to reconcile with the regime and pleaded for calm.²⁸

As the uprising progressed, the regime imposed a harsh siege on al-Tall. Government forces continuously bombarded the town. Starting in 2014, efforts at negotiations were carried out by two councils, the Communication Committee and the al-Tall Family Council. Both entities included notables, members of prominent families, and merchants. A wealthy businessman, Ghazi Jamous, maintained good relations with the regime and rebel groups and acted as an intermediary, negotiating multiple truces between 2013 and 2016.

Toward the end of 2015, a Reconciliation Committee emerged from the Communication Committee and included Shammo and Rifai, in addition to al-Tall's mayor and notables from major local families. Shammo and Rifai started advocating for reconciliation with the regime and asked rebel groups to leave al-Tall, holding meetings with rebels in mosques to discuss this. The rebels resisted, which led to increased regime shelling. Thanks to his relations with the regime's security agencies, Shammo was also able to help bring individuals back into good standing with the state, in a process described by the authorities as a "regularization of status" (*tasmiyet awdaa*). Most of al-Tall's other clerics ended up fleeing early on. Arnous left for the UAE while Hijazi fled to Saudi Arabia. After the reconciliation and the rebels' departure in December 2016, these clerics were able to return—except for Mansour, who joined the Suqour al-Sham rebel group in Jabal al-Zawiyeh. Shammo, in turn, was killed in shelling in 2018.

One of the most prominent returnees was Badr al-Khatib, imam of the Great Mosque and regarded as a Baath supporter. His return showed how the regime would rely on local allies to reassert its authority. During the siege of al-Tall, local rebels did not harm him out of fear of provoking a dispute

with his family. Yet they did try to remove him from his mosque. Residents intervened to protect him, but he ended up fleeing to Damascus at the end of 2013. When the regime took back al-Tall, it appointed Khatib to his old position.²⁹ Today, he acts as the local mufti, and the regime relies on him to hire other imams in the area. This has turned him into a central figure in the regime's local networks of religious institutions and figures.

Al-Tall also provides an example of how, once the conflict had ended there, the regime expanded local religious networks in towns it had recaptured to consolidate its hold over religious institutions. Its dealings with the Qubaysiyat association in 2018 demonstrate this. The association, which focuses on the role of women in Muslim life, was established during the 1960s and named for its founder Munira al-Qubaysi. Before the uprising, the association's sole center was in Damascus, and it controlled a network of religious schools for educating females. Students in a location such as al-Tall would have had to go to Damascus to study in its institutions. In late winter 2018, however, the regime allowed the association to establish a branch in al-Tall, thereby introducing a less strict method of control as part of its expansion into local networks. As of early 2019, the Qubaysiyat was running its activities in three mosques in al-Tall—the Moaz bin Jabal, Fardus, and Noor Mosques.³⁰ This demonstrated how the regime has reasserted itself through friendly local institutions and families rather than by simply attempting to impose central authority over the religious sphere.

The importance of local actors does not mean the regime has no intention of tightening its control over the religious field. This was underlined on October 12, 2018, when the government introduced Law 31 redefining the prerogatives of the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Such legislation aims to prevent uncontrolled religious mobilization in the postwar period.³¹ The law expanded the ministry's presence and powers. It also identified the “correct” version of Islam; described the process for appointing individuals to religious positions, such as that of the grand mufti; and outlined the responsibilities of religious officials, their salaries, as well as penalties for violations of the law committed by such officials.

This combination of a reliance on localism and the strengthening of the Ministry of Religious Endowments' authority underlines that the regime is seeking a less hierarchical and centralized religious field, but also one that maintains Damascus firmly at the center of all developments. Rather than exercising control over religion through institutions and institutional methods, the regime's new approach depends more on relationships with individuals at the local level. This personalization of contacts marks a fundamental departure from the regime's previous method of doing things, and it is unclear whether it will be successful in the long run. In one sense, however, such a system is certainly less stable in that individuals are not permanent, so that relations with localities built on such figures are potentially more changeable. For a regime that has always been keen to avoid bad surprises, this approach may leave much to be desired.

Conclusion

Today, both doctrinally and organizationally the Islamic sphere that existed in Syria before 2011 is gone forever. What remains is a deeply divided Sunni Muslim environment—between urban and rural areas, small and large cities, and pro-regime and non-regime clergy. Smaller urban areas were incubators of the Syrian uprising, however they were marginalized by the advent of more radical groups and ultimately were powerless to prevent a return of regime forces.

The reestablishment of regime control is likely to lead to dynamics that consolidate the changes in Syria's Islamic field—albeit ones the regime will seek to turn to its advantage. The state's continued advances will increase polarization among clerics. This, in turn, will lead to the emergence of different interpretations of Sunni Islam, which will be reflected in new religious schools, mosques, and imams that will be integrated into the regime's security networks.

Years of war have resulted in a stronger sense of Sunni identity among local religious actors than what had existed before the conflict. This will probably bring about the entrenchment of “state imams,” in other words clergy less able to engage with their own Sunni community, through the policy of normalization by force adopted by the regime in areas its controls. At the same time this will leave religious institutions in opposition areas outside the framework of Syria's official Islamic institutions, where they will remain more radical and isolated—their radicalism employed to discredit the official religious establishment. All this will make it much more difficult for the regime to use Sunni Islam as it had before—a unifier to enhance its own power and legitimacy.

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Previously Khaddour has been a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago. He has conducted independent research for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and has worked as an independent journalist for Reuters.

Notes

- ¹ Annabelle Boettcher, *Syria's Sunni Islam under Hafiz al-Asad* (Self-published, Kindle edition, November 2015), Chapter 2.4.1.
- ² Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Kindle edition, 2013) Chapter 6.
- ³ Author interview with a former employee in the Ministry of Religious Endowments, who served between 2005 and 2010, Istanbul, February 7, 2018.
- ⁴ Boettcher, *Syria's Sunni Islam*, Chapter 2.4.1.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Author interview with a local nongovernmental organization employee from al-Tall, Beirut, July 15, 2018.
- ⁸ See Peter Neumann, "Suspects Into Collaborators," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 7, April 3, 2014, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n07/peter-neumann/suspects-into-collaborators>.
- ⁹ See "Institute of Islamic law Imam al-Nawawi in Ma'arrat Numan," Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pg/m.almarrh/about/?ref=page_internal
- ¹⁰ Author interview with an imam who graduated from the Housari Institute, via telephone, February 8, 2018.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² This is based on several author interviews with former residents of Jabal al-Zawiya in Idlib Governorate, Istanbul, February and October 10, 2018.
- ¹³ Author interview with a young imam from Rural Aleppo Governorate, Istanbul, February 10, 2018.
- ¹⁴ This is based on several author interviews with Syrian activists from al-Tall, Beirut, February and October 2018.
- ¹⁵ Author interview with a former employee in the Office of the Grand Mufti, via telephone, August 3, 2018.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Thomas Pierret, *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending With People's Power*, edited by Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (London: Hurst, 2017), Chapter 9, https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/files/45620332/Thomas_Pierret_Syran_Salafists_at_war_final_draft_1.pdf
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Author interview with the media officer of an armed group in Daraa Governorate, via telephone, January 9, 2018.
- ²⁰ See Thomas Pierret, "Brothers in Alms: Salafi Financiers and the Syrian Insurgency," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/05/18/brothers-in-alms-salafi-financiers-and-syrian-insurgency-pub-76390>
- ²¹ This information and information in subsequent paragraphs is based on interviews Hadeel al-Saidwai conducted for "How Syria's Regime Used Local Clerics to Reassert Its Authority in Rural Damascus Governorate," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 27, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/27/how-syria-s-regime-used-local-clerics-to-reassert-its-authority-in-rural-damascus-governorate-pub-78692>.
- ²² Laila Rifai, "Syria's Regime Has Given the Fatah Islamic Institute Influence, but at What Cost?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 13, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/12/13/syria-s-regime-has-given-fatah-islamic-institute-influence-but-at-what-cost-pub-77949>
- ²³ The passage on Bassam Dafdaa is based on information gathered by Hadeel al-Saidawi.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Enab Baladi, "A Statement Asking the Preachers of the East Ghouta to Pray for Assad (in Arabic)," May 4, 2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/226117>
- ²⁶ Saidawi, "How's Syria's Regime Used Local Clerics."
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Author interview with local resident from al-Tall, via telephone, December 9, 2019.
- ³⁰ Author interview with local resident from al-Tall, via Skype, March 12, 2019.
- ³¹ See Azzam al-Kassir, "Formalizing Regime Control over Syrian Religious Affairs," *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 14, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77712>



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