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Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-option, and Contention

Frederic Wehrey, editor

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Introduction

FREDERIC WEHREY

Across the Arab world today, regimes are increasingly intervening in Islamic institutions and establishments. Broadly defined, these include religious ministries, seminaries, universities, mosques, charities, *awqaf* (Islamic endowments, such as financial or property assets), Sufi *zawaya* (religious schools, lodges, or orders that play an important social role in their surrounding communities), youth organizations, media platforms, and other entities. Undertaken through appointments, purges, new laws, administrative reorganization, financial monitoring, and other means, these processes of control and co-optation are hardly new: since their creation, many modern Arab states have either expanded or continued the bureaucratization of Islam that they inherited from European colonial rule and, before that, the Ottoman Empire.¹ In some sense, then, the institutionalization of Islam has proceeded in parallel with the penetration of the Arab state into citizens' everyday lives.

And yet, the process is hardly unidirectional. Pro-state Islamic figures and organizations often have more agency and leverage than is commonly assumed, stemming from their role as intermediaries with society. Depending on their popularity and social capital, they can sometimes negotiate a quid pro quo in exchange for keeping quiet about politics, such as retaining some authority to speak on personal and social matters (though regimes have often encroached on these issues as well). Yet religious figures who have fallen under government control also have to manage their moral authority, straddling the perception that they are serving as mouthpieces for the worldly agendas of politicians rather than focusing on matters like faith and piety.

Beyond this, the line between official and unofficial Islam is often blurred and fluid. A range of actors with varying degrees of proximity to the state make pronouncements about Islam, ranging from trained, official clergy to judges and lawmakers to media personalities who have substantial followings but whose formal knowledge of Islamic legal matters is often shallow.² In some instances, the state has created, paid, and sustained new social and political constituencies whose role is to lobby and campaign for so-called Islamic reforms via legal and administrative changes.

This current phase of state intervention in the Islamic sphere is significant in its scope, pace, and sophistication, reflecting in part the immense political, social, and economic challenges Arab regimes have faced in the years since the 2011 Arab Spring—which have been accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic. In responding to the public health crisis and its economic fallout, many states' Islamic establishments, through control of public messaging, mosques, and distribution of welfare and services, have been mobilized as tools to burnish a government's legitimacy in front of anxious publics and sometimes deflect culpability through scapegoating.³

State led co-option and control of Islamic institutions also stems from domestic military threats from radicalized Islamists and, especially, pressure from Western allies and patrons to tackle these threats as part of a broader rubric of countering violent extremism. This latter driver has created a useful incentive for Arab governments allied with the United States to package their oversight and regulation of Islamic institutions and discourse as reforms.

These reforms, which in some cases are targeted toward nonviolent Muslim critics of the regime, amount to a sleight of hand. Based on the faulty assumption that a supposedly incorrect interpretation of Islam is a primary driver of radical violence, the adjustments create the appearance for Western audiences of progress on counter-extremism while ignoring the more proximate sources of militancy, like Arab regimes' human rights violations, judicial and prison abuses, and corruption—all of which have in many instances worsened in Arab states. Put differently, for Arab rulers, the promotion of an allegedly moderate Islam through institutionalization and formalization means an Islam that presents no threat to their political survival rather than, as Western policymakers hope, an Islam that defangs violent radicalism.

At the other end of the spectrum and in contrast to the interventionist policies of strong Arab regimes, Islamic institutions in conflict-wracked Arab states have either fragmented or become prizes for competing political and military factions. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the path of Islamic ministries, schools, youth camps, endowments, and charities has followed the state collapse and territorial dissolution wrought by civil wars in these countries. In their respective zones of control, rump governments and opposition groups have set up parallel and rival religious bodies, which are sometimes more localized and autonomous because their political overseers lack sufficient resources to co-opt them. Islamic institutions in such conflict settings are often far more susceptible to foreign economic and ideological influences, both by

regional powers waging war-by-proxy and also Western states.

In contrast to the interventionist policies of strong Arab regimes, Islamic institutions in conflict-wracked Arab states have either fragmented or become prizes for competing political and military factions.

Western aid agencies and governments have identified that religious figures in conflict and postconflict states can be partners in mediation and community-level development.⁴ As with practices of countering violent extremism, there are

complications to Western outreach to Islamic actors and institutions in conflict settings: Islamic partners are often politicized and factionalized after years of war, and their claim to speak on behalf of fractured societies or act solely as ethical and organic interlocutors may not be as strong as they claim. On top of

this, additional Western attention could inadvertently inflate their role, entrench identity-based divisions, and elevate the religious drivers of civil wars to the exclusion of socioeconomic and political factors.⁵ Finally, the effectiveness of such engagement has been difficult to track.

“US [countering violent extremism] initiatives often give cosmetic focus to Islamic institutions with nary a look at outcomes,” noted a longtime U.S. development expert with more than a decade of experience in Middle East and Central Asia. “And governance-focused donor programs invite ‘local religious leaders’ in for [a] conflict resolution workshop or two, disembodied from a deeper engagement with the underlying structural causes of grievance.”⁶

How Islamic Institutions and Arab States Interact

To date, the fluid and complex relationship between Islamic institutions and Arab governance has received far less scholarly and analytical attention than Islamist party politics and Islamist militancy and extremism.⁷ The compilation of papers in this volume, covering Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco, aims to fill that gap. Drawing on two years of research, including fieldwork and interviews with Arab officials and Islamic figures, it sheds light on the processes that define relations between Islamic institutions and governmental entities, ranging from strong formal regimes in relatively stable Arab countries to informal, substate, and nonstate political actors in conflict or post-conflict Arab states. The goal is not to present a scorecard on the balance of power or on winners and losers. Nor are there definitive predictions or policy prescriptions. Instead, the papers offer detailed context for an oft-neglected aspect of Arab governance that has ramifications for several Western policy priorities—including countering extremism, promoting conflict resolution, and, more broadly, promoting the future political, economic, and social stability of Arab states.

As interlocutors between regimes and society, Islamic actors and institutions—and the broad spectrum of mechanisms through which Arab rulers engage with them, from dialogue and co-option to contention and outright coercion—are important windows into the structural inequalities of Arab states and the legitimacy deficit of Arab regimes. Regimes that are confident in their own political and social support have historically given more leeway to Islamic actors and institutions, even if to better monitor them, while insecure, paranoid rulers have constricted the maneuverability of their religious establishments, which sometimes drives dissent underground and toward violence. Understanding such bellwethers will become all the more critical as Arab regimes confront what Carnegie scholars have called “a decade of Arab decisions,” in which declining oil prices and diminishing global demand for oil will deprive many Arab rulers of time-tested means of buying off social dissent.⁸ This dawning era creates particular challenges for relations between Islamic institutions and regimes in the so-called rentier states, in which rulers have long deployed oil revenues to secure fealty from clerics and to manage sprawling religious bureaucracies.⁹

This collection’s opening paper deals with the most consequential of these rentier states in the Arab world—Saudi Arabia, which, by virtue of its vast wealth, claim to Islamic leadership, and powerful media and proselytization machinery, has exerted an outsized influence on religious matters far beyond its borders. The purportedly reformist agenda of the ambitious and authoritarian Crown Prince Muhammad

bin Salman has received widespread media coverage. But Yasmine Farouk and Nathan J. Brown find that the Saudi monarchy's much-hyped changes to religious structures amount to a remodeling rather than an abolition. To be sure, this surge of top-down policies toward clerics and Islamic institutions is significant and nearly unprecedented in the history of the modern Saudi state, yet a closer examination reveals them to be focused mostly on technical and procedural matters rather than on real doctrinal shifts. In addition, all of the changes are reversible. Even so, the long-term effects of this state-led religious intervention—on clerical loyalty and on popular perceptions of the monarchy's Islamic legitimacy at home and abroad—remain uncertain.

Neighboring Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country and home to one of the world's worst man-made humanitarian catastrophes in decades, has long been a recipient of Saudi religious influence via the conservative Islamic current known as Salafism. Yet Yemeni clerics and seminaries have also had a significant impact outside of Yemen, often challenging Saudi Salafist doctrine in ways that are not always recognized. In the wake of Yemen's civil war starting in 2014 and exacerbated by the 2015 Saudi and Emirati military interventions, Islamic institutions—especially schools, institutes, and camps affiliated with Salafists, Zaydi Shias, Sufis, and the Muslim Brotherhood—have become sites of military and political contestation and foreign influence. In mapping this factional struggle, Yemeni scholar Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen avoids attributing too much weight to identity- and sect-based drivers in the war. Still, she finds that religious education in this fragmented country is widely perceived by local and foreign actors to be an important tool for ideological mobilization, socialization, and recruitment. The violent civil war, in turn, is reshaping the character of both traditional and more contemporary Islamic schools and institutes in ways that will be felt for generations.

Beyond the Arabian Peninsula, Syria has also been devastated by a long-running civil war, territorial and political fragmentation, and proxy intervention by foreign powers. The sum total of these developments, as Thomas Pierret and Laila Alrefaai show in their paper, had profound consequences for the contentious relationship between religious institutions and political actors, especially in enclaves outside the control of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Here, they identify three modes of religious governance, each with a distinctly local character reflecting the dominant opposition faction but also foreign, and especially Turkish, patronage. Meanwhile, as the Syrian regime expands its grip over more than two-thirds of the country, it is securitizing and nationalizing Sunni Islamic institutions as a governing strategy. In many respects, this continues a trend of top-down intervention in religious affairs that Assad had begun on the eve of the 2011 uprising. And, despite an initial flourishing of bottom-up self-management, even Islamic institutions in opposition areas are increasingly subject to similar heavy-handed interference by local political actors who enjoy the advantage of military force. The authors conclude that friction resulting from this imbalance is likely to be the norm in both regime and non-regime areas for the foreseeable future.

Like Syria, Libya is a war-wracked Arab state that has witnessed territorial fragmentation, institutional dissolution, and foreign meddling since the 2011 overthrow of dictator Muammar Qadhafi. My paper examines how Libya's awqaf have become a magnet for intense and often violent competition between Libya's Islamist currents, especially so-called Madkhali Salafists; political factions; armed groups; local municipalities; and foreign powers; whose influence has often been exaggerated. Designated at various

times as a ministry or an authority, the awqaf office's supervision of vast property assets and its role in appointing mosque imams—and thus communicating to the public—has meant that Islamists and non-Islamists alike have long viewed it as an important source of economic power and status. In tracing the turbulent path of this institution post-2011, I account for the fraught legacy of Qadhafi's rule, which saw the appropriation of awqaf real estate holdings as part of his collectivization policies, and, further back, the Italian colonial period, which was marked by similar instrumentalization. I conclude that after more than a decade of violent rivalry, politicization, and rapid turnover in awqaf leadership, public perceptions of the institution have been irrevocably altered, offering insights into Libya's endemic afflictions of elite contestation, corruption, and center-local tensions.

Egypt has long been an intervener in Libya's affairs, especially in the Islamist field, in part because of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's concerns about domestic and transnational challenges to his rule from the Muslim Brotherhood. As Nathan J. Brown and Michele Dunne unpack in their paper, that fear has been one of the motives for Sisi's expansive campaign to consolidate regime control over Egypt's Islamic institutions, ranging from local mosques and prayer circles to the venerated Islamic scholarship center of al-Azhar. Applauded by some in the West as an exemplar of Islamic reform against violent extremism, this consolidation—undertaken with bureaucratic, legal, fiscal, and repressive tools—has had an ambiguous impact on the actual drivers for violence, given the government's human rights abuses and worsening socioeconomic problems like unemployment and poverty. Moreover, these authors challenge the notion of omnipotent regime control over Islamic affairs: while many clerics and institutions have certainly fallen under presidential direction or been shuttered altogether, others, like al-Azhar, have been fiercely protective of their autonomy. The contest over Islamic authority is also more multisided than is commonly assumed: the Egyptian president is but one contender alongside the parliament and multiple rivals within Islamic institutions themselves. The chapter concludes that while religiosity remains an important facet of Egyptian public life, the net effect of the regime's interventions and constriction of Islamic spaces is having a negative impact on societal trust in religious authorities, especially among Egyptian youth.

The final two papers in this collection shift to the Maghreb, addressing relations between Arab states and Sufi actors and institutions. As a historic and deeply embedded part of social, spiritual, and political life in the Maghreb, Sufism has often been viewed by outsiders in the West as a pacifist and moderate form of Islam and an ideological counterweight to militant Salafist jihadism. In their analyses of Algeria and Morocco, Anouar Boukhars and Intissar Fakir, respectively, explore how regimes in each country have been quick to exploit this perception, deploying Sufism as a resource for domestic governance and foreign policy toward the West and other countries in Africa. This utility is not wholly new: Sufis have long wielded influence in the Maghreb over temporal authorities, including colonial powers like the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France, and Italy, presenting themselves as intermediaries and allies but also, at times, acting as military challengers.

Situating his inquiry against this historical backdrop, Boukhars finds that the Algerian regime has used economic, political, and media tools to elevate Sufism in Algerian public life, burnish its historical legacy among citizens, and co-opt it to fill a vacuum in the provision of welfare services and to counterbalance militant Salafism. In turn, Sufi institutions and figures engage in a careful calculus about the reputational

trade-offs that accompany this patronage from and cooperation with the state. Echoing themes in other papers, Boukhars finds that Algeria's movement of grassroots political mobilization, embodied in the pro-democracy Hirak movement, has presented dilemmas and choices for many Sufis, who are suffering, he argues, from their entanglement with unpopular political elites.

Regarding Morocco, Fakir examines how the ruling monarchy, which has long claimed religious and political legitimacy based on descent from the Prophet Muhammad, is undertaking similar processes of controlling, formalizing, and popularizing Sufism as a vehicle for state patronage. In many respects, this reverses a trend of Sufism's declining social significance in Morocco and reflects, in part, the monarchy's wish to be seen in the eyes of Western patrons as a center for the propagation of a moderate Islam, at home and across the African continent. For the latter, the promotion of Sufism acts as an important soft-power facilitator of the regime's economic and political outreach to African states to the Sahelian south. As demonstrated in other papers, though, the balance sheet of this state-led intervention is mixed and often accompanied by legitimacy costs to Sufi institutions and actors.

When taken together, these papers reveal a complex picture of the dynamic interactions between Islamic institutions and Arab governments—one that is not solely religious in nature but rather is embedded in society, with far-reaching political and economic implications.

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Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything

YASMINE FAROUK AND NATHAN J. BROWN

Introduction

Since Saudi Arabia was founded almost a century ago, the doctrines and structures of the country's religious institutions have evolved in unusual and distinctive ways. Wahhabi interpretations of Islamic texts and teachings—pursued and enforced by bodies like the religious police, the Ministry of Education, and a judiciary trained in sharia (Islamic law) that retains general jurisdiction—have given the Saudi state a religious character with no real parallel in the region. But these characteristics are not timeless or immutable, and they may be changing.

The country's governing structures are being centralized, remolded, and reined in. Its religious doctrine is no longer “committed blindly” to the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, or to any “certain school or scholar,” as the man championing these changes, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, stated on April 27, 2021.¹⁰ The trend began a few years ago, even before he became crown prince, and now it is accelerating. The Saudi governance system has been undergoing a rapid and radical restructuring, perhaps the most far-reaching alterations since its formation a century ago. A combination of procedural shifts, personnel changes, bureaucratic restructurings, and changes in jurisdiction are revolutionizing the role of Islam in the Saudi state—and in public life.

But for all the potentially radical, cumulative effects, most of these changes are technical adjustments, redistributions of duties, or changes in appointment patterns. Rhetoric and tone are also shifting in ways that suggest more radical moves could come at some point. Most of the changes are not wholly new but began under the previous king, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. And because these alterations amount to reshufflings rather than redesigns, they may be reversible or may simply be the endgame in themselves. There have been some suggestions of marginalizing but no frontal assault on Wahhabi teachings; long-standing structures have survived, apparently immune and adapting to existential challenges, at least for

now. Nothing is being wholly dismantled, but everything is being changed. Previously powerful actors are being overruled, and their structures are being remolded but not abolished. The consequences of these changes are affecting the kingdom itself and Saudi diplomacy abroad too.

Even as Saudi religious institutions are being restructured, their tools are being pruned, ostensibly to increase governing efficiency but likely for political reasons.

Even as Saudi religious institutions are being restructured, their tools are being pruned, ostensibly to increase governing efficiency but likely for political reasons as well. As is usually the case in Saudi Arabia, the change started at the top. To help sell these changes to Saudi society while

maintaining credibility and easing tensions, the royal family has enlisted the support of figures within the religious establishment who are open to its new political vision, whereby the monarchy-led state, not the religious establishment, defines public order.

The motivations behind these changes seem clear: greater centralization of the state; removal of impediments to intended political, social, and economic changes; and consolidation of the regime. And the short-term effects are also clear. Prevailing Wahhabi (as non-Saudis call it) religious doctrine (with its strong emphasis on obedience to the ruler) and Saudi religious structures (with their wide spheres of authority and extensive bureaucracies) have evolved over decades into vital and influential parts of the state apparatus. But those same features have rendered them unable or even unwilling to resist these changes.

In a sense, the processes underway in Saudi Arabia today are unprecedented at home, but they have strong parallels in other historical political systems (such as the Ottoman Empire and Egypt) more than a century ago. These changes are happening in Saudi Arabia not simply later but also so rapidly that judicious calibration seems unlikely. And the possibility remains that these shifts will leave strong pockets of resistance and resentment, given the leadership's parallel strategy of holding on to some of the distinctive features of exclusionary and radical state doctrine and especially because the ultranationalist and political motivations behind some of the changes are sometimes quite clear.

This paper analyzes the changes in the Saudi state's religious establishment by first examining its historical evolution. Second, it examines the several ministries and other structures that employ ulema (religious scholars), effectively affording their voices not merely the force of their own learning but also their own small slice of state power. Yet assessing the changes in the Saudi religious establishment requires paying attention not only to bodies that are headed by and dominated by ulema but also keeping in mind other state institutions where they play influential roles without necessarily leading.

The bulk of the paper is thus devoted to analyzing two groups of institutions: those that are supposed to shape the religious identity of the country and those that operationalize that vision. The first group includes the Council of Senior Scholars and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The second group includes the Ministry of Justice, the Committee for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice, the Ministry of Education, and Islamic charitable entities. This second group also includes the World Muslim League due to the prominent role its secretary general is playing in relaying this new Saudi religious discourse overseas.

This division of labor between the two groups of institutions, however, is not that clear in practice. Political authorities often choose to bypass the first group of institutions and impose the new religious narrative through direct implementation and actions. The objective is usually to avoid direct confrontation and resistance from the first group of institutions as well as to gradually and publicly restrict their role in legitimizing public policies. As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice long have incrementally shaped the country's religious identity thanks to the room for maneuvering that their personnel have inside their courts and classrooms. By the same token, the World Muslim League is nowadays more than a mere tool to disseminate and operationalize the country's new religious discourse abroad, thanks to the closeness of its secretary general to the royal court.

In each institution, similar patterns arise: changes that are incremental and reversible but cumulatively significant. Lastly, the paper assesses the likely course of this incremental reform program and the ways Saudi Arabia's diplomatic actors might position themselves in a political system that is still in flux.

Saudi Arabia's Distinctive Path of State Formation

The twentieth-century Saudi state was built unlike most of its regional counterparts.¹¹ There was no period of European rule; Western oil companies have long enjoyed a far more extensive presence in the kingdom than any European military or diplomatic actor has. Ottoman institutions operated for a time but only in some parts of the country, and the kingdom's territory and borders emerged as the result of contests on the Arabian Peninsula (albeit with a heavy British hand in fixing some borders, including those with Iraq, Jordan, and Kuwait). Regional and Western influence on Saudi institution building was more limited and came mostly after the discovery of oil. The centrality of Islam in crafting a unique identity for the nascent political entity not only preceded state building but also established boundaries on external influence.

That distinctive history can be traced in many different areas. Saudi bureaucratic structures, for instance, were built later than elsewhere in the region and tended to be less coherent. Centralization proceeded far more slowly. And legislative processes eschewed parliamentary bodies, with limited consultative structures only, until the current (and still consultative) Majlis al-Shura (Shura Council), formed in 1992, became impressively active. In previous attempts to build a Saudi state, religious devotees had the double tasks of convincing and even coercing Saudi people to obey the state through the assumption of official religious and civilian (and, early on, even military) tasks such as conquest, control, and policing as well as collection of tax and zakat (mandatory annual charitable donations made by Muslims).¹²

The founder of the current Saudi state, Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, put an end to the extreme degree of overlap among various religious and state structures, yet a dialectical relationship between the clerics and the royal family continued throughout the process of state building. The strong overlap between the religious and legal realms remained the most visible sign of this interplay. The courts of general jurisdiction were staffed with judges trained primarily in Islamic sharia with no recourse to state law codes. (By contrast, while judges in Syria or Morocco might have taken a course on Islamic law in law school, the bulk of their training would have been in state-legislated law codes.) In the kingdom, public order was maintained not only by the regular police but also by the Committee for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice,

generally termed the religious police in English. In part, this translation stems from the fact that the committee long had strong policing powers—ones that grew over time rather than shrank, until more recently. Religion also infused almost all aspects of Saudi public life and state services from broadcasting to education.

Over the last half century, the influx of oil revenue has made possible a massive and rapid expansion in almost all aspects of the Saudi state: social welfare, education, construction, the media, and state bureaucracies. For all the magnitude and the rapid pace of this institutional and infrastructural development, Saudi state building has tended to build on past patterns rather than reverse them. There have been discontinuities to be sure, but the country never has been ruled by a self-styled revolutionary regime consciously working to undo the previous way of doing things.

It is not that Saudi Arabia remained frozen at some point in the past: the role of religion actually grew over time and took a more specific form, promoted by a range of official actors. So, while there was some general continuity, Saudi observers noticed a change—though when that change set in and what was responsible for it remain controversial. Some speak of the reign of former king Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (who ruled from 1964–1975) as a turning point, with his conservative orientation financed by growing oil revenues. But today those reveling in the very recent changes speak instead of the slowly radicalizing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1960s and of 1979 as a dramatic juncture. That is the year when the Saudi leadership, reacting to religious challenges—the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the Iranian revolution, and rising religiosity throughout the region—doubled down on its commitment to religion in public life inside the kingdom.¹³ Social restrictions increased, support for domestic religious institutions grew more generous, funding of religious activities abroad flowed more freely, and the country's religious leaders seemed to exercise a veto over areas of public policy.

The ways that some Saudi citizens refer to 1979 as a turning point are based on a genuine shift but are also partly tactical in nature: specifying such a recent date can be meant to suggest that Saudi Arabia's current institutions and practices are the product not of traditions deeply embedded in history and religion but of much more recent political calculations, as much external as internal. To move against these modern-day institutions and practices can thus be portrayed as a return to Saudi society's authentic roots, which were supposedly more pluralistic, tolerant, and socially liberal.

State-Sponsored Religion in Saudi Arabia Today

When outsiders refer to the Saudi religious establishment, they often see it as a product of the Wahhabi reform movement, which was born in the Arabian Peninsula nearly three centuries ago and which has been affiliated with the Saudi political cause since its beginning. This is for good reason. Official Islam under Saudi leadership has indeed always been Wahhabi in inspiration. But the Saudi leadership's Wahhabi character is not self-acknowledged, in part because the term Wahhabism is eschewed as inappropriate; for its adherents, Wahhabism is the only sound interpretation of Islam, not an idiosyncratic school of thought.

But whatever term is used, there are movement-like aspects to the long-dominant approach to Islam in the kingdom (anchored as it is in certain circles, regions, families, and informal networks). Wahhabism might alternatively be seen as a school of religious thought—one that insists on close adherence to original religious texts (a kind of Salafism), while also avoiding practices it sees as non-Islamic accretions (such as the veneration of tombs). While suspicious of some scholarly interpretations, Wahhabi scholars tend to follow the teachings of the movement's founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and other major Wahhabi figures. Handsomely bound copies of his fatwas (legal opinions on a point of Islamic law) adorn many Saudi religious bookshelves.

But Wahhabism, like Saudi Arabia itself, is not an unchanging or constant force. If the religious tendency was born as a movement, the construction of the Saudi

state not only greatly increased its influence but also gave it strong institutional form. What had been a school of thought was gradually woven into the fabric of an expanding Saudi state—one that became a large, complex, and often barely coherent set of structures that left religious institutions and officials with tremendous authority in many realms.

The effect, however, was not merely to meld religion into the state and ensure its influence in many areas of public life but also to guarantee that Wahhabi Islam was presented to residents of the kingdom with the full authority of the state and to turn Wahhabi scholars and leaders into state officials. It was an offer of influence that those scholars could not—and did not—refuse. To be able to expand their geographic reach, enter new social realms, teach new generations, and place graduates in the various structures of the Saudi state was an attractive offer indeed. And this access to power gave the religious establishment enormous sway—even if it turned its members into civil servants on the state payroll.

Today, like before, rulers of the Saudi state are using the clerics' fear of losing this privileged status to push them to evolve and to tame them according to the dictates of political survival. Wahhabi scholars take pride in the authenticity and purity of their approach, but the movement has always historically evolved through interactions with other approaches and through internal competition. Today's changes, while instigated by the royal court, follow the same logic of political adaptation.¹⁴

Consequently, basic features of Saudi state structures—who reports to whom, from where various offices tend to recruit new employees, what training and qualifications they expect their members to have, and what their jurisdictions or competencies are—have been the very instruments, consciously deployed or otherwise, through which religion has shaped Saudi public life, society, and politics. Tinkering with those features of state structures and procedures, even with seemingly minor changes, could have significant religious and social effects.

What had been a school of thought was gradually woven into the fabric of an expanding Saudi state—one that became a large, complex, and often barely coherent set of structures that left religious institutions and officials with tremendous authority in many realms.

In the past few years, the Saudi religious space has been undergoing a systematic recasting and rearranging of the various structures in which Islam is taught, practiced, and enforced. These alterations have not been expressed as a formal program but instead as a set of administrative measures with two clear effects: to increase central control over religion (decreasing the autonomy of religious figures) and to shift authority to less clearly religious structures that are more directly linked to the royal court.

Yet there has been no formal program of transformation beyond rhetoric and no overt changes in religious doctrine, as dozens of technical amendments under the banner of reform emerge rather than wholesale abolitions or dramatic upheaval of key institutions. The overall effects of these changes will be clear only when they are viewed as a whole—and when it becomes clearer not merely how successful but also how long-lasting the changes are. But however incremental and provisional they may be, the changes are still attracting attention.

The Disempowered Shapers of Saudi Islam

One of the keys to understanding the changes in Saudi Arabia's religious establishment is to investigate the dynamics underway inside two institutional pillars of its religious establishment, the Council of Senior Scholars and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance (hereafter called the Ministry of Islamic Affairs). These two institutions supposedly act as initiators and diffusers of change in the religious space through several tools and affiliated institutions such as mosques and religious curricula.

The Council of Senior Scholars: An Old Body Speaks With Less Dissonance

Theoretically, some of the aforementioned changes in the Saudi religious sector, specifically those that revisit the established Wahhabi interpretations of religion, should not take place without the permission, or rather nowadays the *a posteriori blessing, of the Council of Senior Scholars*.¹⁵ The council, a committee of the country's most senior and respected religious scholars, is at the apex of Saudi Arabia's religious apparatus. Formed in the 1960s, it speaks collectively for the Saudi religious establishment. Presumably such an influential body would be deeply affected, even threatened, by the Saudi monarchy's far-reaching program of religious restructuring.

But there are no signs that the council is slated for major changes. There have been extensive personnel changes to be sure, but most of the council's new members have had conventional career paths.¹⁶ While the council consists of senior figures, its members are scholars who have moved up the ranks of state institutions; the dominant Wahhabi approach is to advise discreetly but also support the prevailing Islamic ruler. For such figures to denounce the country's rulers or question the nature of the state would be almost unthinkable.

So instead, the council has been adjusting to the Saudi leadership's new approach. When it became clear in 2018 that the country's political leaders were committed to allowing women to drive, for example, the council quickly issued an opinion supporting the move. Some cynical observers suggested this likely involved an almost overnight changing of minds for many council members, endorsing a step they likely would have opposed if asked, one that many of them had indeed opposed in the past.¹⁷ That cynicism is

likely justified in part but might miss the point: the council's place is not to be entrusted with discerning the public interest or to dictate terms to the country's rulers but to interpret religious teachings as experts in line with the demands of leading a religious society.

Similarly, the council has taken the lead in denouncing the Muslim Brotherhood, but it has done so only when senior regime figures (and other state institutions) have made clear that the movement is regarded as a terrorist threat. More generally, the council's own regulations suggest that its first and foremost task is to advise the ruler when requested, whereas taking the initiative to advise him proactively is a secondary concern.¹⁸

King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud has restored some figures that the previous king Abdullah had dismissed for their opposition to his timid program of social reforms. They include individuals like Saleh al-Luhaidan and Saad al-Shethri. Like in other areas, the Saudi leadership seems to be keeping the pillars of Wahhabism in place on the council but circumventing them to avoid any open confrontation.

Many actions support this interpretation. First, Salman continued Abdullah's policy of including on the council scholars who adhere to the three non-Hanbali Sunni schools, broadening its composition in a limited way—while diluting its influence by asking for its advice less frequently.¹⁹ Second, inside the Wahhabi establishment itself, figures like al-Luhaidan and al-Shethri coexist with progressive figures such as Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdulkarim al-Issa, the head of the Muslim World League and former minister of justice.

Third, keeping ultraconservative figures in their positions has allowed the state to maintain control of their followers. However, pushing them to reverse their old conservative narratives has damaged their credibility more than just replacing them with new figures who had never expressed opposition to social liberalization would have. Fourth, an October 2020 royal decree made the attorney general a member of the council.²⁰ While his appointment asserts the de jure centrality of religion to the kingdom's justice system, the fact that the attorney general is there more by virtue of his position than because of his religious learnedness amounts to a de facto downgrading in importance and a sign of increasing politicization.

And, indeed, the latest round of appointments to the council perhaps demonstrates most clearly the diffuse nature of this approach. Alongside the apparent loyalist attorney general, other appointments to the council include figures from other backgrounds. One notable example is Bandar al-Balila, who was rumored to have been briefly arrested as part of a crackdown on dissident scholars in 2018.²¹

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance: Controlling the Narrative on Change

This pattern of using incremental changes to cement a fundamental reorientation of the Saudi religious establishment extends to the Saudi ministry that stands at the center of official religion in the country. Changes inside the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs are crystallizing this reconfiguration of the country's religious sphere without altering its core doctrine. As is the case in other institutions, the changes started with a clear policy from the top and are now cascading down through the institutional ranks.

The reform agenda mixes the fight against extremism with political interventions and state modernization efforts, complicating any opposition to these changes that would be framed as opposition to the fight against extremism. The ministry is crucial to keeping the apolitical aspects of Wahhabi doctrine intact while actively legitimizing the implementation of the Saudi leadership's social, religious, and political agenda, which de facto challenges the ministry's own established interpretations.

The current minister of Islamic affairs, Abdullatif Al al-Sheikh, is one of the main figures of the new Saudi narrative on purported religious centrism. He portrays this path as one that fully conforms with Wahhabi doctrine and the "methodology of the righteous forebearers."²² According to his narrative, that methodology needs to be refined after decades of encroachment by Islamists. Even before his appointment as minister, he completely adopted the Saudi political leadership's religious discourse, adding political zeal to his dual credibility as a son of the official establishment and a member of the al-Sheikh family (of al-Wahhab).²³

Nationalist social media accounts widely believed to be state affiliated have occasionally gone so far as to generate hashtags to singly thank the minister for his efforts at harnessing "good citizenship" and "patriotism," "fighting terrorism," and promoting state policies and overcoming bureaucratic resistance.²⁴ For his own part, the minister does not shy away from tweeting to support state foreign and domestic policies, denounce conspiracies against the kingdom and its leadership, or reinforce to the Saudi public the idea that true Muslims leave discussions of politics to their rulers.²⁵

The trickle-down changes inside the ministry have been quite apparent. In 2018, the minister of Islamic affairs (then newly appointed) denied the existence of a "written" black list but confirmed that those "who don't fit with the new vision of the king and his crown prince of a moderate nation that rejects extremism" will not remain in their posts.²⁶ As a case in point, consider how Saudi political authorities have sacked or otherwise marginalized imams who oppose social liberalization; instigate strife by praying against specific individuals, countries, and sects; or discuss politics.²⁷

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has engaged in myriad activities to aid the regime's fight against unsanctioned political Islam and extremism.

Successive regulations have been adopted to limit preaching in the kingdom's mosques only to Saudi and full-time imams who have fallen under stricter supervision from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.²⁸ Prior to that, the stricter implementation of the decision to standardize Friday sermons and digitally monitor them across the kingdom were among other steps taken to control the religious narratives espoused by ultraconservatives.²⁹ Official and unofficial scholars face systematic pressure to religiously legitimize the socioeconomic and political transformations underway while also doubling down on demands of absolute obedience to Saudi rulers.³⁰

Most importantly, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has engaged in myriad activities to aid the regime's fight against unsanctioned political Islam and extremism. These activities include supervising mosques, preaching, and religious lessons; overseeing Quranic and charity associations; printing copies of the Quran and religious manuals; managing the king's special guests for pilgrimage visits; spearheading Islamic international cooperation; and organizing domestic and international public events.

Although the kingdom is supposedly going through religious reforms, the ministry is doubling down on Saudi adherence to the Wahhabi doctrine that is widely perceived among wider circles of Muslims and foreigners as exclusionary, radical, and even extremist. Despite the links between Wahhabism, as non-Saudis call it, or Salafism, as Saudis prefer to call it, and the doctrines of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State,³¹ the ministry is promoting an official narrative that denies any such links. The way the kingdom's ulema conflate any opposition to Wahhabi doctrine with opposition to *tawhid* (the oneness of God) itself—and any foreign attempts to target Saudi Arabia (not just violent ones) as tantamount to targeting Islam—is also an integral element of the ministry's narrative.

The ministry's overseas activities also have continued, though Saudi religious proselytism is being restricted. In 2016, the ministry suspended its overseas proselytism activities while it redefined their regulatory framework.³² Yet news about the ministry's ongoing charity activities and events hosted by Saudi and Saudi-sponsored Islamic centers abroad indicate that overseas religious outreach has not completely stopped.

Given how Wahhabi doctrine mandates proselytism, the Saudi system created to fulfill this duty has grown too complex and sophisticated to be under the total control of the ministry or any other single part of the state. An abrupt interruption of such activities would not only cost the Saudi leadership its considerable capital of transnational influence but also could erode support for the country's leadership within the religious establishment. Instead, the Saudi leadership is now relying on other institutions to relay its influence abroad, mixing in a new Saudi narrative that promotes ostensible moderation and openness toward others with the necessity for Muslim communities to integrate into their non-Muslim nations, while the Ministry of Islamic Affairs continues to spread the traditional narrative.

The Saudi State's Tools for Implementing Islam

Dawa (Islamic proselytization) is heavily emphasized in Wahhabi doctrine. Wahhabism not only insists that every Muslim—including Saudi state authorities as Muslim rulers—has the duty to promote Islam and to spread correct practice but also tends to be less than pluralistic, showing great confidence in Wahhabi teachings that emanate from followers of the movement. In Saudi Arabia, *dawa* is not merely a doctrinal position but a state bureaucratic function. This proselytizing function is mediated through several institutions furnished with financial and regulatory tools and staffed by ulema who act as state bureaucrats tasked with putting into practice Saudi Arabia's specific identity and what the authorities henceforth dub “moderation” into practice.³³

Saudi Courts: Enacting Islam in the Legal Sector

One of the most notable Saudi state structures—and perhaps the strongest bastion of the Wahhabi religious establishment's official role—is the kingdom's judiciary. The benches of the courts of general jurisdiction in Saudi Arabia are staffed with judges educated in Islamic jurisprudence, and these judges are encouraged to see their task as applying God's instructions for righteous conduct. They are meant to act under the political leadership of a legitimate ruler but derive their understanding of sharia from their specialized training.

Over the decades, the role of the Saudi judiciary has evolved. Its structures have been formalized, its procedures have been regulated, and its courts have become specialized, even as other quasi-judicial bodies have joined the judicial ranks. (Some, like the Diwan al-Mazalim's administrative courts, clearly are fully judicial in nature, but others appear just as much to be administrative bodies.)

Yet none of these gradual alterations have challenged the fundamental centrality or training of the sharia-based judiciary. And the various steps taken to curb or define its role often have been done so carefully that even the idea of codification of law proved to be too sensitive to pursue for a time.³⁴ As new judicial bodies have been added and new laws have been written and enacted, the sharia-based judiciary has marched on, resisting a regional trend for judicial models grounded in civil law and legal codes that allow limited, residual jurisdictions for Islamic sharia rather than the other way around.

The Saudi approach of subtle reorganization and rearrangement has not changed, but in the past few years the pace and boldness of previously incremental alterations have grown dramatically. Growing popular demands for a more efficient and regulated judicial sector have coincided with a political project to modernize state institutions, rein in state clerics, and fight corruption. The result is a judiciary that is no longer what it was—it remains formally unchanged but has been subdued and contained in a series of steps that have collectively remade the Saudi legal order without redefining it.³⁵

Legal codification, legislation, and judicial discretion. The Saudi state had long avoided the Arabic term *tashri* (legislation) until more recently, but skirmishes between sharia-based and state-based legal jurisprudence have been waged in other ways through a slow accumulation of efforts. Over some years, the Saudi Ministry of Justice began claiming the task of *tadwin* (compilation) rather than codification—not legislating a comprehensive code but ensuring uniformity of application by collecting, digitizing, and circulating previous court judgments to serve as models (informally but effectively as precedents) as new cases arise.³⁶ Yet in 2021, the crown prince decided that binding legislation, rather than mere compilation, will be the way forward. He then promised four new laws by the end of 2021: a personal status law, a civil transactions law, a penal code for discretionary sanctions, and a law of evidence.³⁷

As this happened, seasoned judges observed with concern that their junior colleagues would find it fairly easy to resort to meeting their caseloads by copying from such judgments and the upcoming laws, aware that if they did so, their task would be easier and their rulings were unlikely to be reversed on appeal since the reasoning would be endorsed by senior judges and officials. Even before codification was officially announced in February 2021, compilation seemed to its critics to amount to codification by stealth, though such rulings initially had no formal status as precedents or unified, established points of reference. In 2019, the minister of justice made clear that the controversial question of the legitimacy of codification had been resolved; the following year, he made known that he regarded compilation as binding, not merely advisory.³⁸ The objection that too many state-issued laws are edging out sharia has now been effectively marginalized.³⁹

While Saudi state structures avoided the Arabic term for legislation—*tashri*—until recently, the clearly legislative process that runs through the king through royal decrees has been ramped up over time. Consequently, large parts of Saudi law are increasingly dominated by state-issued texts rather than scholarly interpretations of religious injunctions. For instance, the abolition of the death penalty

for minors or the abolition of punitive lashing were accomplished through ministerial directives, not scholarly debate.⁴⁰

This is not necessarily a direct doctrinal challenge—the ruler, after all, is granted discretion in some criminal and many regulatory matters in dominant Sunni approaches. But this state-centered reorientation of legal texts is now occurring at a pace and scope that seem to increase each year. Since 2015, the Ministry of Commerce and Investment; the Ministry of Labor (reshaped six years ago as the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development); and the Ministry of Environment, Water, and Agriculture, for instance, have each issued literally over 300 regulations.⁴¹

Alongside the executive branch, the Supreme Court and the Shura Council (which forwards nonbinding decisions, recommendations, and draft codes to the king for approval) have significantly accelerated their pace and widened their scope. When developing such rules—or when launching into new legal subjects such as electronic transactions—there is no longer even an attempt to refer to any sharia-based guidance (on rules of evidence, for instance).⁴² Authorities claim they are never clearly violating or negating the tradition of basing these rules on Islamic sharia, to be sure, but they clearly no longer feel bound to be seen as hewing closely to conventional Wahhabi interpretations.

In addition to incremental codification and expanded legislation, the role for judicial actors to make decisions at their own discretion is gradually becoming more circumscribed. There is a growing emphasis on improving the governance of judicial institutions with a special stress on modernizing judicial structures and procedures. Reforms within the Ministry of Justice hence are coinciding with other similar projects across other state institutions as part of the ambitious Vision 2030 national strategy proclaimed five years ago and one of its objectives of increasing government efficiency.

These reforms include formulating procedures to file court cases; offering new technical trainings for judges; emphasizing the transparency of procedures, argumentation, and documentation of court decisions; and issuing decisions more quickly with a clearer division of labor between judges and administrative personnel and between different specialized courts.⁴³ New regulations have been adopted to regularize court inspections so as to “minimize differences” between them, whether in terms of the procedures for issuing a final verdict or the substance of some verdicts in a number of legal sectors.⁴⁴

Judicial recruitment and training. The recruitment and training of candidates for judicial posts—including for both judges and members of the judicial administrative corps—are being restructured.⁴⁵ Efforts are underway to make graduates from secular law schools eligible for judicial positions.⁴⁶ An attempt to open the door to hiring women for judicial positions has been turned back—for now.⁴⁷

These kinds of measures, facing judicial resistance for years, seem designed to expand the pool of recruits beyond the traditional clergy and require more competencies than just mastering sharia.⁴⁸ The construction of regional universities seems to offer the possibility of widening the pool of judicial job candidates to diminish the influence of al-Qasim Province, the region that has produced many of the most stalwart

Wahhabi jurists. Other ancillary bodies (such as judicial support structures) also seem to be working to draw a more diverse population into the legal system.

Royal oversight on high-priority and politically charged cases. Court cases on issues that are high political priorities for the king and crown prince have also come under scrutiny, such as those related to women's rights. The public debate on women's employment in the Ministry of Justice, for instance, has become politicized, including the very controversial discussion of their employment as judges and the gradual increase in the number of licensed female lawyers.⁴⁹ The debate on women's roles and issues in the ministry came under spotlight when women were appointed as criminal investigators in the public prosecution body for the first time ever in June 2020, even as stricter application of laws that protect women and children against domestic abuse was announced.⁵⁰

At times, Saudi leaders have steered broad categories of cases—and not merely politically inconvenient ones—away from the regular judiciary. The tactic of shuffling jurisdiction to centralize control is not entirely new. In an earlier era, there was open executive oversight over jurisdiction in individual cases; the administrative courts were directed not to accept cases against state bodies unless the case was referred to them by the king (as head of the cabinet).⁵¹

The kingdom's current leadership seems to be working in part by lavishing attention on, widening the competencies of, and increasing the discretion of the country's public prosecution, a structure that is more amenable to centralized direction than the judiciary has been in the past.⁵² By increasing prosecutorial discretion—and ensuring that the prosecution's views align with those of the leadership—the Saudi monarchy is circumscribing the role for judicial discretion without diminishing its formal independence.

The ambitious Vision 2030 agenda gives special attention to the kingdom's legal environment as essential to attracting domestic and foreign private investments and top-flight foreign residents. Codification and the institutional capacities of the Ministry of Justice play a crucial role in reaching this objective. The ministry is expected to integrate and implement an increasing number of economic laws through its commercial courts, but it also must be flexible in applying foreign arbitration and court decisions against Saudi entities. Saudi judges also are expected to accept that there will be special jurisdiction in the country's special economic zones—such as the planned northwestern smart city of Neom, the Red Sea Project, and others—where commercial laws will answer to international, not local, standards and where social norms

are supposed to be more relaxed. (One attorney involved in drafting relevant tourism legislation even acknowledged the possibility of permitting alcohol in specific areas.)⁵³

The kingdom's current leadership seems to be working in part by lavishing attention on, widening the competencies of, and increasing the discretion of the country's public prosecution.

These changes have not always been smooth, but the trajectory is still clear.

Notably, a brief confrontation between the previous minister of justice and a significant body of judges—who organized a 2013 petition of protest, mostly on administrative matters—ended with the then minister decisively punishing (and even dismissing or jailing) some of the judges involved.⁵⁴ The minister himself since has been shifted to the position of secretary general of the Muslim World League and has

become a member of the Council of Senior Scholars and an influential adviser to the royal court—giving him less executive authority, perhaps, but far more visibility domestically and especially internationally. Most importantly, he has become a prominent international spokesperson for the leadership’s ideological and religious vision, practically in charge of openly promoting coexistence with non-Wahhabi Muslims and non-Muslims.⁵⁵

A new focus on training Saudi lawyers is meant to increase their numbers and further empower them within the legal system.⁵⁶ In 2017, the minister of justice inaugurated the Judicial Training Center to train “judicial and legal human resources,” albeit with fees.⁵⁷ The rules governing the work of lawyers are also expected to change, with job descriptions expected to expand into areas previously reserved for the judiciary, such as drafting and registering contracts.⁵⁸

The overall effect of all these legal and judicial changes is to remold the Saudi legal system by bypassing, diverting, and slowly remaking the judiciary. Through a host of evolutionary, indirect, and administrative steps, Saudi Arabia’s legal apparatus is losing its capacity to offer a sanctuary where clerics decide the limits of their own actions. In a sense, the country’s judiciary is becoming almost standardized, resembling other state institutions and, notably, judiciaries in other Islamic countries. This move to fold the judiciary into state structures more fully also includes arresting judges as part of the country’s wider political crackdown against dissent and in the wake of accusations of extremism and corruption.

The preambles of new regulations and legal decisions continue to assert that sharia is still the reference bedrock of Saudi regulations, and Vision 2030 still refers to the Quran as the state’s constitution. Yet a new legal doctrine seems to be materializing. As before, the public interest (as defined by the country’s rulers) will continue to govern the interpretation, application, and scope of religious teachings, but such determinations are now being made in such a way that the interpretation of sharia is effectively (though not doctrinally) defined by Saudi law.

These changes, taken cumulatively, are significant but have not wholly eliminated the capacities of the judiciary, Saudi society, and even the Shura Council to resist change. These alterations also will not necessarily lead to a judiciary solely reliant on texts emanating from the legislative process or the royal court. Saudi Arabia is still far from being governed by the rule of law, and noncodified political interventions from the royal court still prevail over legal verdicts. The way political and economic authority has become more centralized over the past three years and the way political authoritarianism has increased indicate that an independent judiciary is still out of the question for Saudi rulers. But the royal family will likely leave judges a certain amount of room for maneuvering within these new political limits to avoid a violent confrontation. The anticipated laws to be issued by the end of the year might offer an indicator of such limits.

The Religious Police: From Boldly Preventing Vice to Politely Promoting Virtue

Perhaps the most striking recent change in Saudi Arabia is one that has left only the slightest formal trace: the near disappearance from public life of the once-prominent religious police—or more formally, the Committee for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice.

The committee itself is a formal body that has grown along with the Saudi state to help Saudi rulers carry out the religiously sanctioned task of religious policing in the fullest sense of the word. At its peak, the committee oversaw public conduct to ensure orderliness and righteousness, as Saudi Islamic religious tradition has come to understand those terms. The committee takes its name from verses in the Quran about guiding Muslims in general to promote virtue and prevent vice. The Saudi interpretation drew on traditions that viewed this charge not simply as an individual duty but as a special state duty for Muslim rulers. While promoting virtue and preventing vice is a traditional religious understanding of the ruler's policing function, Saudi Arabia had been one of the few societies to devote a specific organization to that function and staff it with those willing to be trained and present themselves as stern enforcers of public morality.

And for a time, these officials did enforce Muslim religious sensibilities, often with compulsion. The committee ensured that women (and men, though with less severe strictures) were modestly dressed, that men and women did not mix socially, that shops were closed during prayer times, and that art was absent from public spaces. The committee was given a clear hierarchy and set of organizational regulations and guidance, but when it came to defining virtue and vice, its officials relied on their own religious understandings, guided by official religious scholars and convictions of their higher moral standing. They cajoled, scolded, patrolled, encouraged, and (if necessary) coerced, arrested, and detained potential rule breakers.

Then, in 2017, these last trappings of authority were taken away—or rather rerouted through other structures. Nowadays, if committee members find somebody who should be arrested or detained, they can no longer do so themselves. Instead, they are to refer the matter to the police or public prosecution—a way of seemingly harmonizing their operations with those of other state bodies.⁵⁹ But the effect in practice has been much more far-reaching.

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Very quickly, the committee nearly has disappeared from public life. Saudi citizens report seeing fewer of their distinctive SUVs and fewer on-foot patrollers; within a year, the strictures they had been enforcing began loosening greatly in practice: gender segregation, dress restrictions, and store closures are

still practiced but less rigidly enforced. And while the committee itself remains active to a degree, it seems to focus far more on promoting virtue nowadays—by distributing, for instance, copies of the Quran, holding advertising campaigns in the streets, and convening public talks—while leaving the definition and prevention of vice to other state bodies and social pressures.

As is the case with Saudi judicial reforms, efforts to rein in the religious police have taken place in waves when the role of this institution has become socially or politically problematic. The current push started under Abdullah when the state police actually arrested members of the committee for abuse of authority. The Ministry of Interior adopted a regulation as early as 2006 limiting the committee's powers to arresting

suspects who then must be turned over to the police. This inherited practice of restricting the religious police's authority nonetheless has been pushed much further under Salman. The effective removal of religious policing from Saudi daily life has sparked widespread and broad (though not universal) public support.

Under both the current king and his predecessor, the committee's exit from public life has been perhaps the most visible sign of social liberalization—a trend so noticeable it is easy to exaggerate. Strictures on public behavior are still extensive by regional standards. But the relative relaxation—coupled perhaps with an artistic and cultural efflorescence—has been key to sending a message both to international and domestic audiences about what is billed as the new Saudi Arabia. Domestically, moves to curtail the committee's role have reasserted the primacy of the political over the religious, creating a sense (however contestable) that citizens have recaptured the public sphere. This primacy has been codified in the September 2019 Regulation to Preserve Public Decency, which is meant to manage the excesses of this swift social liberalization without restoring religious authority over the public sphere.⁶⁰

The state has since worked on filling the void left by the committee's absence from the public sphere in other ways too. The newly independent Ministry of Culture in 2018 along with an empowered Entertainment Authority have encroached on that social space. Public cultural events of a kind unimaginable in the past are becoming the new landmarks of the Saudi public square where public order, and repression too, are no longer defined primarily in religious terms.⁶¹ Reining in the religious police has turned out to be an initial step toward mobilizing support for other, more controversial and bold reforms. The committee has been called on not merely to obey the new way of doing things but to support this change by preaching the virtues of “belonging and national cohesion” and absolute “submission to the rulers.”⁶²

Islamic Charity: Funding Beyond Islamic Causes

State interventions to regulate the finances of the Saudi religious sphere are an integral part of the kingdom's policy of standardizing the country's religious establishment. Unlike past attempts, current efforts link those finances to the state's project of overhauling the economy, Saudi society, and the kingdom's international image. Islamic levies are expected to fulfill more than a religious duty and to be spent on policies that go beyond the religious sphere.

Islamic financial institutions are being restructured to better accomplish this new role and reinforce a message of subjugating the religious sphere to public order. This message is meant not only to convince domestic audiences but also to assuage international concerns about Saudi religious activities globally. The interplay among the religious and charitable spheres, both domestically and internationally, has always been complex, but there are clear signs that the sector is now receiving clearer guidance from the top of the Saudi state.⁶³

According to Vision 2030, regulations that directly and indirectly target Islamic financial resources and spending fall under the objectives of creating “a more impactful non-profit sector” by helping relevant bodies “become more institutionalized, formalized and more efficient.”⁶⁴ Regulating religious finances is also perceived to be part of improving “the legal and regulatory framework” of the financial sector and the country in general.⁶⁵

Even before the Vision 2030 strategy was announced in 2017, new regulations were adopted to tighten state control over the management and allocation of Islamic financial assets including endowments, zakat, or private charitable donations.⁶⁶ In addition to expanding nonreligious state supervision and management, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has increased its own supervision over charitable donations to mosques and Islamic associations.⁶⁷ The state's official policy has expanded the use of Islamic levies beyond the religious realm and according to a policy of sustainable development instead of a paradigm of solely Islamic largesse. The stated economic goal is to increase the nonprofit sector's contributions, including those of its religious subsector, to the country's gross domestic product under the authority of the Ministry of Finance.⁶⁸

This new approach is being applied to zakat, which the state has been treating as a tax since 1936, with a special sharia committee deciding on its allocations as defined in the Quran.⁶⁹ A 2016 royal decree modified zakat's legal status and transformed the body overseeing it into the General Authority for Zakat and Tax, whose board of directors is chaired by the minister of finance. A series of regulations followed to "reconfigure the missions and tasks of zakat and revenue."⁷⁰ Then, in 2021, another royal decree merged the General Authority for Zakat and Tax with the General Authority of Customs.⁷¹ Mainly, this reconfiguration aimed to better equip the authority to more efficiently collect zakat dues, customs, and taxes to better manage and allocate this stream of the state's non-oil revenues. Zakat is the main source of welfare assistance for less wealthy Saudis, an essential measure for sociopolitical stability whose pool of beneficiaries is being tightened.

The Saudi state is also seeking to better use the country's untapped \$14.4 billion in *awqaf* (Islamic endowments, such as financial or property assets, which in Saudi Arabia can be public or private).⁷² Overseeing *awqaf* was an integral duty of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs for decades until a 2016 royal decree further curtailed the ministry's responsibility for managing *awqaf* by establishing the General Authority for *Awqaf*. The ministry is still represented on the board of directors, but the new body is now directly linked to the king himself.⁷³ The new regulation also allowed, for the first time, *awqaf* investments that used to be religiously debatable under the supervision of the new body.⁷⁴ These changes embody the same logic

While the Saudi state was already regulating zakat and awqaf, it has been struggling to regulate another source of Islamic spending, namely private charities.

of seeking to ensure that all financial assets in the country are managed efficiently and profitably, whether the funds are religious or not.

While the Saudi state was already regulating zakat and *awqaf*, it has been struggling to regulate another source of

Islamic spending, namely private charities. Since 2001, charitable donations for Islamic causes inside and outside the kingdom have formed the main basis for international accusations of Saudi support for terrorism. The kingdom has adopted successive laws to regulate such donations, with a special focus on money that leaves the country to support Islamic communities overseas. Despite international recognition of progress, Saudi efforts that only have focused on regulating financial flows have not always been deemed a success.⁷⁵

In 2015, the kingdom adopted its first regulation on establishing domestic nongovernmental organizations followed by a political push for such a measure by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. In addition to collecting donations for specific causes, the abundance of Saudi charitable contributions allows Islamic organizations to engage in *dawa* and religious education inside and outside the country, with curriculum that sometimes evades state supervision. The 2015 regulation also allows “non-charitable civic organizations,” further encouraging the expansion of civic activism beyond financial donations and beyond the religious realm.⁷⁶

Since then, several religious organizations have been shut down following inspections by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The latter accused them of embezzling *zakat* and donations from citizens, and the former refused to permit the establishment of redundant Islamic organizations.⁷⁷ The same year, the King Salman Center for Humanitarian Relief, directly affiliated with the royal court, became the sole institution allowed to collect donations and later recruit volunteers for overseas Saudi humanitarian ventures that go beyond the Islamic world.⁷⁸

As expected, some of the closed nongovernmental organizations were also accused of funding the Muslim Brotherhood and terrorist organizations, a pointed reminder that the Saudi state’s efforts are also politically driven by a desire to more tightly control civil society, including religious groups.⁷⁹ In addition to the regulation of donations, official state discourse guards against the idea that any spending for a religious cause is a good deed. Officials repeatedly remind citizens to give donations only to trusted state-registered organizations. The minister of Islamic affairs himself has criticized lavish spending on renovating mosques and building new ones where they are not needed.⁸⁰ Private financial contributions to traditional rallying causes, such as support for Palestine and Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries, have landed their collectors in jail.⁸¹

The Ministry of Education: Fighting Political Islam and Redefining Saudi Identity

The Saudi leadership’s changes to the country’s religious establishment have been more explicit and confrontational with respect to the Ministry of Education and the education system. This is especially true on religious issues (in ways that overlap with the duties of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs). High officials do not claim to be tinkering with minor matters here but rather are launching fundamental reforms in the name of modernizing the country, governing more efficiently, and better preparing students for the labor market.⁸² Such reforms are encroaching on the established and mandatory centrality of religion classes, Wahhabism, and religious teachers at all levels of the country’s education system.⁸³

But even here, the changes afoot are presented not as a repudiation of the past but as a return to it: a way to remove alien influence, not the authentic Saudi understanding of Islam. But the expected magnitude of this shift may be far broader over time than the official rhetoric suggests. It remains unclear how far Saudi authorities want to go and will be able to go, or whether they realize the full-scale impact these changes could have as the effects trickle down.

The rhetoric is clear: the Ministry of Education has sought to root out any Muslim Brotherhood members or intellectual influence among Saudi teachers.⁸⁴ In pursuing its reform agenda, the Saudi state defines

Muslim Brotherhood influence as the source of radical religious interpretations in formal curricula and classroom instruction. This dynamic even has affected what is covered (and omitted) on nonreligion subjects. While some subjects such as philosophy, the arts, and women's studies used to be prohibited altogether, the state still exerts great influence over how they are covered even now that they are permitted. Foreign reports and scholarship have defined such religious influence over education as Wahhabi,⁸⁵ but this is not how the Saudi authorities represent matters. By the Saudi state's reckoning, the fight against extremism, so-called deviance, and terrorism is equated with the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood, making disobedience to the rulers and the prospect of a revolution a totally foreign idea to Saudi Arabia and the ostensibly correct form of Islam its leaders uphold.⁸⁶

Along with the shift in religious instruction is a heightened emphasis on national, and not merely Islamic, identity. Or, more accurately, there is an insistence that Saudi Arabia has to be understood as a nation rather than identified with Wahhabism. History is being rewritten in schoolbooks and reconstructed by way of cultural projects to minimize the presence and role of the founder of Wahhabism.⁸⁷ The history of the state is henceforth meant to be the history of the military conquests and Ottoman-style state formation led by the man who gave the country his family's name, Abdulaziz Ibn Saud.

In an April 2018 interview with the *Atlantic's* editor-in-chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, Mohammed bin Salman initially baffled his interlocutor by suggesting there was no such thing as Wahhabism. He was not so much denying the reality of the historical figure behind the movement; rather, he was suggesting that Saudi Arabia's past—and especially its future—should be understood in more national and religiously pluralistic terms. To that end, he said:

But our project is based on the people, on economic interests, and not on expansionist ideological interests. Of course we have things in common. All of us are Muslim, all of us speak Arabic, we all have the same culture and the same interest. When people speak of Wahhabism, they don't know exactly what they are talking about. Abd al-Wahhab's family, the al-Sheikh family, is today very well known, but there are tens of thousands of important families in Saudi Arabia today. And you will find a Shi'ite in the cabinet, you will find Shi'ites in government, the most important university in Saudi Arabia is headed by a Shi'ite. So we believe that we are a mix of Muslim schools and sects.⁸⁸

When this new image of Saudi Arabia operates in the education sector, the leadership's shift is not just rhetorical: teachers viewed as radical are being removed from classrooms.⁸⁹ Whereas there has been only quiet winnowing of dissident voices among judges, the Ministry of Education has been quite explicit about targeting teachers who belong to suspect groups.⁹⁰ But given that the Muslim Brotherhood never has had legal status or an acknowledged organizational presence within Saudi society, eliminating Brotherhood influence is not a simple matter of purging official members, since there are none. Individuals seen as informally inclined to be sympathetic to the Brotherhood have lost their jobs, but the Brotherhood is targeted as an intellectual approach that blends Islam with politics as much as it is targeted as an actual organization.

In this sense, the Brotherhood is a broad, amorphous target. It is often seen as having entered Saudi Arabia through waves of emigrants from Egypt and other Arab countries and then through local recruiting,

especially in intellectual, religious, and educational circles. The result has been hybrid approaches that blend Brotherhood activism, social engagement, and a sense of political mission with Wahhabi and other Salafist juristic strains, helping to produce a major stream within the *sahwa*,

a wave of religious revivalism and activism that began in the late twentieth century.⁹¹ Thus, when the Saudi state aims at the Brotherhood, it might target a few members of a clandestine organization while also engaging in a broader attack on the *sahwa*, in effect trying to turn back the clock to a dimly remembered (and perhaps misremembered), more pluralist past before 1979. Official efforts to stamp out Brotherhood influence seem to swing between these two poles.⁹²

The Saudi state's approach has evolved over time. In 2015, the Ministry of Education removed books rather than teachers, eliminating writers deemed pro-Brotherhood from curricula and school libraries. It then moved against some teachers in 2018 after both the crown prince and the minister of education publicly denounced the penetration of Brotherhood ideology into the Saudi education system.⁹³ The Ministry of Education then announced that a committee would be tasked with suspending schoolteachers, university professors, and education officials; banning books; and modifying curricula that exhibited or promoted extremist thinking including that of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁹⁴

These actions eventually became more bluntly securitized measures like a signed memorandum of understanding with the relatively new, yet powerful Presidency of State Security to promote “intellectual security in education” by targeting extremism and promoting “positive values that reflect the image of the society.”⁹⁵ And in the past few years, the ministry has worked more broadly to relegate teachers suspected of harboring unwelcome views to administrative duty while they are investigated, a policy explicitly aimed at rooting out those responsible for “intellectual breaches.”⁹⁶

Actions taken against political Islam in Saudi Arabia's education system have also targeted hotbeds with links to the religious establishment in the country's Islamic universities. In 2019, the king appointed a new director to the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh who, for the first time, did not belong to the religious establishment.⁹⁷ The dean of the Faculty of Sharia at the same university was sacked for allegedly inviting a scholar suspected of being a Brotherhood proponent to the university.⁹⁸ The politically motivated arrests of religious public figures who are accused of extremism have extended to both current and former university professors who teach religion.⁹⁹

The state's official discourse on uprooting the Brotherhood's influence in the Saudi education system serves to squash Islamist political activism inside the kingdom and crush any opposition from those seen as Wahhabi-professing radical teachers to the crown prince's agenda of social liberalization, while continuing to avoid any need to directly invalidate Wahhabi doctrine itself.¹⁰⁰

These education reforms are designed to go beyond schoolbooks and teachers. The proposed new system to hire and promote teachers and university professors emphasizes pedagogical skills and not just subject-matter credentials. Some restrictions on female students' dress code have also been lifted.¹⁰¹

Actions taken against political Islam in Saudi Arabia's education system have also targeted hotbeds with links to the religious establishment in the country's Islamic universities.

The announced integration of other subjects such as art, music, philosophy, and critical thinking into schools—and the decision to grant women access to new specialized postsecondary degrees in disciplines like architecture, political science, women’s studies, petroleum engineering, and law—de facto contradict Wahhabi doctrine and the views of its followers inside the Ministry of Education.¹⁰²

There is no expectation, however, that the substance of these curriculum changes will include the same intellectually stimulating debates offered in the democracies of the West or elsewhere in the Middle East. Even the teaching of Vision 2030’s pillars and expectations to Saudi citizens is still mostly done using the traditional method of rote memorization. Nonetheless, the integration of these new subjects without, for example, trying to give them a more acceptable Islamic label is in itself a challenge to the way these subjects were previously prohibited.

Meanwhile, a restructuring of the academic and financial governance of Saudi universities to make them less reliant on the state has simultaneously allowed for the opening of foreign universities in the kingdom—with the Ministry of Education still playing a guiding role.¹⁰³ It is not clear whether those universities would offer the religious education provided in national universities.

Modifying Saudi school curricula is also connected to other state policies that effectively (if not explicitly) emphasize non-Islamic components of Saudi national identity and history over Islamic ones.¹⁰⁴ Cultural and entertainment programs hardly repudiate religion, but they have begun to emphasize artistic expression from a national, rather than religious, standpoint. This emphasis on nationalism started under Abdullah, but the ascension of Salman to the throne led to a more aggressive push in this direction.¹⁰⁵ Boosting Saudi citizens’ sense of belonging and patriotism has become the subject of new textbooks, conferences, and other academic events geared toward reconfiguring Saudi identity.

In 2017, the Ministry of Education established the Center for Intellectual Awareness to promote this kind of nationalist education that reflects the “requirements of national development” and “the twenty-first century” and fights extremism both inside the ministry and in the country’s schools and universities.¹⁰⁶ Starting in March 2021, groups of bureaucrats known as intellectual awareness units “in all education departments and universities” are being tasked with enhancing “the values of citizenship and moderation and standing up to all forms of extremism.”¹⁰⁷

Reports also suggest that the Ministry of Education is scaling back the religious focus of academic curricula and schools.¹⁰⁸ The clear political purpose is to remind Saudis that the legitimacy of the Al Saud family does not only depend on the family’s religious credentials, especially when the religious establishment is being tamed. Education reforms are also advancing the current leadership’s credentials internationally.

Like financial flows, religious education in the kingdom continues to be a source of international accusations aimed at Riyadh for supporting terrorism, despite the changes instituted over the last two decades.¹⁰⁹ And some religious schoolbooks, academic lectures, and even master’s theses and PhD dissertations still hold religious doctrinal interpretations that resist the royal family’s preferred changes with respect to the rights of women or tolerance toward members of other faiths. The general trend is that traditional interpretations of the Wahhabi creed still retain primacy over all others, and many still equate opposition to the kingdom with opposition to Islam.

The Muslim World League: Rebranding Saudi Islamic Influence Overseas

The proselytizing duty of *dawa* in Wahhabi doctrine expands beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia. The political manipulation of this Wahhabi duty to expand the faith so as to garner international support and influence for the Saudi regime drew heavy international scrutiny after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. The Muslim World League was at the apex of Saudi state structures for transnational proselytism until its role was curtailed.

Like the taming of the Committee to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, the subversion of the Muslim World League and its transformation to advocate for “tolerance” and “centrism” has been crucial to lending credence to the Saudi political leadership’s narrative on religious reform in the eyes of the religious community, often beyond what has been achieved on the ground. Such international credibility is core to the new leadership’s national project of modernizing Saudi Arabia in ways that would draw international support for the country’s leadership.

The Muslim World League is now overshadowing the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in terms of the visibility of its overseas activities. While the ministry still seems to be tasked with sustaining the kingdom’s transnational influence, the league is responsible for revamping the international image of this influence. (That said, the league’s leadership tends to stress its international, and not only Saudi, identity.) The ministry and the league are distinct entities but clearly have been linked in the past, sometimes informally but also because the league’s activities at times have received ministry funding.¹¹⁰

Saudi Arabia is indeed restructuring its involvement in the affairs of the *umma* (the collective global community of Muslims), under the guidance of the crown prince, and is using the league to reach out to what Wahhabi adherents consider their infidel enemies guided by the practices of the crown prince. For instance, Mohammed bin Salman has so far met twice with delegations of evangelical Christians, while delegations of major American Jewish organizations have visited the kingdom.¹¹¹

Since 2017, al-Issa, appointed one year earlier as the Muslim World League’s influential secretary general, has adopted the crown prince’s “shock therapy” approach.¹¹² He previously had already been pushing Abdullah’s reform agenda from inside the Ministry of Justice. After initially dismissing al-Issa, Salman’s royal court brought him back to pursue that same reform agenda, only now at a more aggressive pace, across state institutions and in Saudi Arabia’s international diplomatic outreach. His appointment as a member of the Council for Senior Scholars and his subsequent appointment as adviser to the royal court have amplified his influence. He certainly has emerged as an active international advocate for the country’s current official approach to religious issues—and even support for interfaith work.

The revamped Muslim World League is hosting major events aimed at public engagement with non-Wahhabis (including non-Muslims) as it publicizes its new brand of ostensibly moderate Saudi Islam. That is why al-Issa has made statements delegitimizing all use of violence in the name of Islam “including inside Israel” and has sought to unseat Wahhabism as the exclusive, acceptable form of Saudi Islam and the only authoritative basis for universal fatwas.¹¹³ Notably, the crown prince surprised domestic and international audiences by stating in an April 27, 2021, interview that ibn Abd al-Wahhab would be “the first to object” if he “found us committed blindly to his texts and closing our minds to interpretation and

jurisprudence while deifying and sanctifying him.”¹¹⁴ The Council for Senior Scholars issued a statement the next day endorsing the crown prince’s statement.¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, al-Issa has joined panels with rabbis in the United States and Europe, has visited the pope in the Vatican, and has signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a permanent bilateral committee with the Catholic Church.¹¹⁶ In early 2020, al-Issa even made a “historic visit” to the Auschwitz holocaust memorial.¹¹⁷

The league’s public activities inside the kingdom remained limited until 2020 when al-Issa’s appearances on Saudi television channels increased, especially his televised program during the high season of the holy month of Ramadan.¹¹⁸ Even so, he was already playing an important role behind the scenes on domestic religious reforms due to his personal history and proximity to the Saudi leadership. The airing of his progressive views to a Saudi audience fits with the Saudi monarchy’s practice of creating parallel institutions, religious interpretations, and (in this case) religious leaders to compete with and eventually replace the old ones, without explicitly discrediting their predecessors.

More Wala and Less Bara: The Purpose of the Restructuring

The Saudi leadership’s rhetoric on its reform agenda can be very sweeping and quite general. It focuses on modernizing the country; reversing some post-1979 constraints; and developing a society that is more prosperous, advanced, educated, and tolerant. But if the rhetoric is broad, the reform efforts themselves are anything but vague. They encompass a systematic restructuring of the role of religion in Saudi politics and society. While this goal did not begin with Mohammed bin Salman, this pursuit has become more forceful and audacious since he became crown prince. The idea of *al-wala wa-l-bara* (which could be translated as loyalty and repudiation)—with its emphasis on drawing near to the forces of good and repelling the forces of evil—has permeated Wahhabi Islam. The country’s top leadership now seems to be tangibly and intangibly promoting the loyalty side of the equation over the repudiation side of the ledger, at the expense of limiting itself to Wahhabism only.

In tangible terms, the program seems aimed at nothing less than the restructuring of the Saudi state.¹¹⁹ The country’s sprawling state apparatus has long been famous for being decentralized, being populated with fiefdoms and power centers—some under leading (and sometimes rival) members of the royal family—and being loosely coordinated by a monarch who is sometimes aloof. Yet the state is now being reshaped to be far more responsive to the direction (and sometimes even micromanagement) of the king.¹²⁰ Or rather, at present, it is the presumed future king, Mohammed bin Salman, who is increasingly reining in older structures and creating new ones under the much more direct control of the palace.

Intangibly, there is an unmistakable shift in how the Saudi leadership promotes Saudi identity. Religion in general, activities associated with religion (most notably the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, which is a religious duty for all able Muslims, but also many Saudi religious activities abroad), and the Wahhabi approach to understanding Islam are not by any means being repudiated. But marked efforts are being made to promote a distinctly national (not primarily religious) Saudi identity under the Al Saud family. A nationwide Saudi Character Enrichment Program was established for this purpose and is chaired by Prince Khalid bin Salman, the Saudi deputy minister of defense and a close collaborator of his brother, the crown prince.¹²¹

The Shura Council repeatedly discussed draft laws on national unity and anti-discrimination that are not based on Wahhabi doctrine and that were actually rejected by the Islamic and Judicial Committee and by the council's most conservative members.¹²² The emphasis on the year 1979 implies that Saudi Arabia's natural or historic identity is not well represented by the wave of religiosity that was supposedly launched that year. This emphasis, then, seeks to convey that the country's shift in direction is not so much a new venture but a return to a more authentic past, a return simultaneously poised to embrace modernity and globalization.

What is notable about these steps is the way that they neither repudiate religion nor try to recast it—they simply sidestep Islamic considerations, themes, and vocabulary in a way that would have been unimaginable a decade or more ago.

There are, to be sure, tangible and institutional expressions of this new national identity—such as the construction of the freestanding Ministry of Culture or the assertion of a brasher brand of regional foreign policy that appears to discard an older tendency toward circumspection and consensus building. What is notable about these steps is the way that they neither repudiate religion nor try to recast it—they simply sidestep Islamic considerations, themes, and vocabulary in a way that would have been unimaginable a decade or more ago.

But while recast, this revamped Saudi identity is not genuinely pluralistic, at least in the religious sphere. Consider two religious groups that have posed challenges for the Saudi leadership in the past: the *sahwa* and Shia Muslims. The Saudi king's newfound downgrading of the significance of religion does not make much room for either.

Though the *sahwa* is a loosely structured movement orbiting around specific figures, it still has found a foothold within some state institutions—certainly some universities—and there are also official suspicions that other parts of the country's education system have been *sahwa*-friendly terrain.¹²³ Its leading members have certainly felt the full brunt of repression, with Saudi cleric Salman al-Awda charged with a capital crime and other prominent *sahwa* figures imprisoned (like Safar al-Hawali) or pressured to recant or endorse regime policies (like Aidh al-Qarni and Muhammad al-Arifi).¹²⁴

Furthermore, there have been reports that the purges of *sahwa* supporters have gone quite deep.¹²⁵ The *sahwa* always has been fairly broad. Some figures have had a more traditional and even rigidly Wahhabi bent, and others (most notably al-Awda) have evolved considerably toward more inclusive attitudes. That being the case, and with the state's crackdown even occasionally extending to figures calling for liberalizing reforms (like Abdullah al-Hamid, an advocate for a constitutional monarchy who died in prison in 2020), it seems that it is not so much *sahwa* ideas that provoke official suspicion as it is the movement's independence and legacy of popular resonance.

The same trend is observable in the Saudi state's treatment of Shia Muslims, who have always been in an anomalous position in the country. The Wahhabi attitude toward Shia believers historically has been divided between those who view them as mistaken and those who view them as apostates, but state policy has never gone to such extremes.¹²⁶ Areas where Shia Muslims are prevalent complain with reason that

they have been overlooked and discriminated against in the allocation of infrastructural development and social services. But Shia believers do have their own courts for personal status matters, with a promise to further develop and expand them, allowing a measure of religious pluralism in practice.¹²⁷

The trend in the past few years seems to have been to leave matters unchanged on Shia Islam, especially when it comes to institutions and structures. To be sure, there have been some shifts in tone (such as the crown prince's boast to Goldberg quoted above about Shia figures in leadership positions), but hardly any overtly more friendly policies toward adherents of the Shia faith have materialized.

In short, Saudi Shia believers may now officially be regarded less as a religious challenge than a security concern. The continuation of personal status courts and other communal structures—but the absence of Shia figures from the Council of Senior Scholars and many other general state bodies concerned with religion—is unchanged, but any activism on political or social issues still draws a harsh response indeed. Bearing this in mind, it was likely political, rather than doctrinal concerns, that led the regime to execute the prominent Shia religious figure Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in 2016.¹²⁸

Over the short term, then, the effects of the Saudi state's new approach are profound and potentially radical, even though they do not entail upending institutions, genuinely embracing pluralism, or repudiating Wahhabi doctrine but rather focus on containing, bypassing, or rearranging established ideas and institutions. The long-term effects of these changes are harder to discern, however, in part because of how they combine far-reaching measures with the apparent maintenance of the broad outlines of existing arrangements and doctrines.

Measuring the Success and Effects of Saudi Reforms

The short-term effects of the Saudi state's extensive if bounded reform program are difficult to contest—quite literally. Those who might be expected to be the most conspicuous losers, the country's religious leaders, are not in a position to lead any opposition movement. First, on doctrinal grounds, they are so deeply invested in a view of the Saudi ruler (and sometimes implicitly the state)¹²⁹ as the *wali al-amr* (the ruler or leader of a community) that they are constrained from doing much.

Probably the most they can do is offer advice (a course followed in the 1990s in public form but one that seems too risky to apply today).¹³⁰ It would be theoretically possible for marginalized religious figures to reject the religious credentials of the Saudi regime, but to do so would be a radical step. Some radicals indeed took this step in the 1990s and early 2000s, going beyond the advice offered by their tamer colleagues and engaging in strident opposition—with far-reaching results that today's high-level clerics are likely to regard as painful memories.

And indeed, these religious clerics' high-level status is precisely the issue. Like the Ottoman religious establishment in the empire's waning years, Saudi religious leaders are so deeply ensconced in powerful and well-funded state structures that they generally fall in line when the state draws a clear line to follow. And there are multiple signs that is precisely what is occurring now. The decision to allow women to drive

was endorsed by a majority of the Council of Senior Scholars as soon as it was announced—a position that most members likely would have opposed had Saudi rulers not so clearly supported it. The career of al-Issa, a figure with thorough training and a sterling pedigree in the Saudi religious establishment, shows how a religious scholar can get along by going along. He has attained a variety of positions in which he has made personnel changes and advanced public positions in a manner that thoroughly advances the Saudi leadership's objectives.

On only a few points has there been public conflict, and most of the time—on issues such as permitting certain entertainment events or allowing women to drive—the religious establishment has accepted clear leadership decisions. But if there is no

significant overt resistance from the leaders of the religious establishment—and indeed, because of the technical, incremental nature of the Saudi state's efforts, there have only been a few such instances—there are two large sets of questions about the long-term impact of the kingdom's reform program.

First, because these reforms are based on seemingly procedural changes and involve no doctrinal changes, most of them are reversible. The Committee for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice, for instance, could be called back to play a more forceful institutional role. The nonpluralistic elements of Wahhabism could similarly be restored. Because the changes involve matters of emphasis and chains of command, they might be much easier to rearrange again. The lack of open confrontation means that nobody has been defeated. And actually, the increased centralization will make such a reversal easier to pull off (though hardly likely). The changes cumulatively look significant indeed, but it might take a generation of gradual personnel changes before they seem fully secure.

But second, if the changes are indeed sustained—as now seems more likely—they may have unintended effects, both internationally and domestically. Internationally, the new direction may cost the kingdom some soft power in the Islamic world. And as Saudi international religious activities continue doctrinally unchanged but are being made to accommodate a set of policies and a worldview that are explicitly political rather than religiously motivated, Saudi religious activism overseas might seem either hypocritical or vacuous.

Domestically, there may be similarly alienating effects. Even those who profit from the new atmosphere of openness—artists or those interested in popular culture or entertainment from foreign countries—might come to see the regime as prioritizing attempts to impress Western audiences rather than satisfy local demands. Cultural expression might be more open, but those taking advantage of that openness might encounter sharp political limits. Religious figures may come to see official religious doctrine as emptied of all content, perhaps leading not so much to high-level opposition as low-level alienation. Parts of Saudi society that staffed the religious establishment might find other ways to pursue their pious inclinations.

Overall, cultural and socioeconomic liberalization with incomplete doctrinal change or without political liberalization may be an uneasy mix, creating constituencies that cannot be controlled and generating

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fears that the Saudi state is courting the West rather than meeting the organic demands of domestic constituencies. Managing expectations of conflicting groups may eventually require the kinds of subtle political management of social groups that has not been the hallmark of the current leadership's approach.

Taking Notice Without Taking Sides

Saudi Arabia is a significant and increasingly active regional and global actor in terms of economics, politics, and security. For those who work with, depend on, or encounter the kingdom—whether its political leadership or its religious establishment—are these changes good news or bad?

That is an understandable question, but it may not be a helpful one. The changes afoot are potentially quite significant. Yet recent moves are not merely based on individual whims but are related to long-term changes in Saudi Arabia's politics, society, royal family, regional and international security environment, and long-term economic outlook. The question may not be whether to root for these reforms or resist them but to understand and be prepared to react to them since their ultimate shape and direction are still unclear.

Two underappreciated aspects of the changes stand out. First, social liberalization and political liberalization do not go hand in hand. Up until now, just the opposite has occurred. Political control is growing more centralized not only in terms of the wider state apparatus but also within the royal family. It is not just a matter of an audacious and ambitious crown prince making bold moves, but a remarkable restructuring of governance as well as social and political life.

Second, while the changes are potentially far-reaching, their ultimate direction is uncertain. Most are individually minor (and few are wholly unprecedented), and they remain quite reversible. And while state structures and officials have accepted and even applauded the moves, some social resentment and resistance is still possible—and unintended consequences might still materialize. Many small, incremental steps do not amount to an integrated and coherent vision but instead an audacious leap that may bring unknown results—or may lead to an eventual retreat.

For those who deal with Saudi Arabia, it makes sense to spend less time trying to identify winners and losers or good and bad actors. Instead, other actors must be prepared to deal with the country in ways that would have seemed unimaginable a decade ago and are difficult to anticipate fully today.

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Yemen's War-torn Rivalries for Religious Education

MAYSAA SHUJA AL-DEEN

Introduction

In 2014, Yemen's worsening socioeconomic, political, sectarian, and center-periphery tensions erupted into civil war. As the war expanded, religious education became an important tool for mobilization, socialization, and indoctrination among the warring Yemeni factions and their foreign backers.

A Zaydi movement supported by Iran, called Ansar Allah but better known as the Houthi movement, seized Sanaa in 2014. The next year, a Saudi-and-Emirati-dominated military coalition intervened against them, seeking out religious partners on the ground in Yemen such as Salafist groups and, for Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood. These sectarian dynamics have increased the importance of religious allegiances into key drivers of the Yemeni conflict.

Notably, instrumentalization of religion in Yemen far predates this war, stretching back at least as far as the country's Cold War-era division into north and south. In the late 1960s, the north fell broadly into the capitalist camp while the south's government was communist. North Yemen's struggle against communism saw the creation of a string of religious institutes and the politicization of religion, which peaked after the country's 1990 unification. Then came the country's 1994 civil war between the Socialist Party in the south and the Sanaa government in the north. Sanaa's government used religious propaganda against the Socialist Party, issuing *ifta* (singular, fatwa, or a legal opinion on a point of Islamic law), declaring that supporters of the socialist government in the south were no longer Muslims.¹³¹

But today, the growing use of religion in a political battle coincides with a broader sectarian escalation in the region. In this context, religious schools and institutes are playing an important role in political and military mobilization in Yemen, where sectarianism is a powerful driver of military recruitment.

Overlapping Sectarian and Regional Identities

When it comes to the sectarian division in Yemen, it is important to understand that the division is predominately along regional-tribal lines. Yemenis largely fall into two sectarian groups: Shafi'i Sunnis, who make up roughly two-thirds of the population, and Zaydi Shias, who make up the rest. This division predated the arrival of Islam itself in Yemen.

The sectarian division in Yemen is predominately along regional-tribal lines.

Zaydi Shias live, by and large, in what is known as upper Yemen: the region between Jabal Samara, which is around 165 kilometers (100 miles) south of Sanaa,

and the Saudi border. This area includes the territories of the Hamdan tribe, which in turn is divided into the Hashed and Bakil groups. Sunnis of the Shafi'i school dominate the rest of Yemen, including the coastal areas and most of the center, east, and south of the country. Residents of these areas include members of a larger tribe, the Madhag, which has numerous branches—most notably the Murad in Ma'rib Governorate and the Awaliq in Shabwa Governorate. There is also the Kinda tribe in Hadhramaut Governorate, but tribalism is less prevalent in coastal and central areas, which are less isolated and have more fertile land.¹³² These factors helped to stabilize the societies in the central, western, and some of the southern parts of the country, so they became less tribal and submitted more to the state. In contrast, the tribal structure remains relatively strong and dominating in the country's east, in areas north of Sanaa, and in parts of the south.

Tribal and regional identities clearly overlap and have been at the core of struggles for political power in Yemen for decades. More recently, sectarian factors have become more pertinent, and religious education has played a growing role in political conflicts. This results both from interventions by foreign states in the region and from local actors' growing and open use of religion as a mobilizing force. All this has given rise to new, unprecedented forms of religious education for military and political purposes.

Yemen's Conflicts and Defining Identities

Development of Zaydism

It is important, therefore, to understand the history of regional conflicts in Yemen, which have had elements of sectarianism since the rise of Zaydism. Zaydism is an offshoot of Shia Islam. It was established by Imam al-Hadi Yahya bin al-Hussein in Yemen in 896 CE. Al-Hadi settled in Saada in Yemen's northwest and established the first Zaydi state, a short-lived entity ending with his death in 911 CE. Despite its Shia roots, Zaydism does not differ markedly in doctrine from Sunni Islam. Some scholars view it as the fifth school of Sunni jurisprudence, and it is often seen as a crossover between Sunnism and Shiism.

Zaydism developed and survived in isolation, surrounded by Sunni-majority areas, without evolving its own doctrinal personality independent of Sunni schools. Fundamentally, the most distinctive feature of Zaydi thought is its view of government. Similar to other sects of Shiism, Zaydis see the political ruler

as an imam, a religious term meaning the leader of prayer, and add the condition that this imam must be *Ahl al-Bayt* or *Hashemite* (terms designating lineage from the family of the Prophet Muhammad). Different, however, is that Zaydism sees battle as a legitimate route to power and is the only school of Islamic thought that rules in favor of waging war against an unjust ruler.

This Zaydi militancy has meshed with the tribal nature of northern Yemen, especially given the paucity of the region's natural resources compared with other areas of Yemen. For example, the tribal regions of northern Yemen receive less than 250 millimeters (10 inches) of rain per year, while central and western Yemen receive between 600–800 millimeters (24–32 inches).¹³³

Zaydism spread to several other regions, and its followers established a number of states throughout the Middle Ages. But it has only survived into the modern era in northern Yemen, where a succession of Zaydi imams proclaimed their rule over Saada and parts of the surrounding area, in a form of government known as an imamate. By the seventeenth century, they had managed to establish a state that controlled Sanaa and dominated the rest of Yemen for almost a century, until the south seceded.¹³⁴ The imamate state remained in control of what became known as North Yemen until it was overthrown and the Republic of Yemen was founded in 1962.

The Yemeni revolution of September 26, 1962, started as a military coup. Staged by a group of officers from the Zaydi-dominated Yemeni army, it aimed to sweep away the imamate and establish a republic. Egypt backed the republican rebels against the imamate, which in turn was backed by Saudi Arabia, in a civil war that lasted for over seven years.

This conflict, between republicans and the imamate, was largely confined to Zaydi-majority areas between Sanaa and Saada. Both the elite and the masses in other parts of the country, dominated by Shafa'i Sunnis, enthusiastically joined the revolution.

Republican Yemen

Although the 1962 republican revolution in the north put an end to the Zaydi imamate, all five republican presidents who ruled were Zaydis. Accordingly, Zaydi hegemony in the military and security forces has remained even after the fall of the imamate. However, during the early years of the republic, Salafists began their activities in northern Yemen, backed by Zaydi—rather than Sunni—presidents. Two factors help explain this: firstly, the Zaydi principle of the imamate that required Hashemite origins for ruling imams threatened the legitimacy of the republican presidents, who were not Hashemites. Secondly, Saudi Arabia had immense influence over northern Yemen, which formed something of a buffer state between the kingdom and the communist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south. Even after Yemen's unity in 1990, Zaydis maintained power, excluding the Socialist Party after its 1994 defeat and cementing Zaydism as a regional, rather than a sectarian, identity.

The Zaydi dominance of northern Yemen continued until a 2011 uprising that overthrew president Ali Abdullah Saleh in February 2012. Saleh was followed by President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, who was the first non-Zaydi to rule Yemen from Sanaa. Though he still formally holds his title, Hadi's rule did not last, as a Houthi-Saleh coalition toppled him in January 2015, and he fled from Sanaa in February 2015.

In spite of Saleh's reliance on his tribe during his long presidency (1978–2012), his rule witnessed massive social changes, most prominently the weakening of the tribal system. This was for many reasons. First, Saleh attempted to monopolize power, so he tried to control and weaken all the political and social entities that could compete for his authority. Therefore, he used the money and authority of the state to weaken traditional tribal elders and foster others who were loyal to him. Second, the modernization and development of Yemen only extended to the main cities, where tribal elders lived in comfort, disconnected from fellow tribesmen who remained in remote areas lacking basic services such as electricity and water. This divide weakened the tribal system, under which tribes had pragmatically eschewed ideological approaches to conflicts. Over time this proved to boost religious groups.

Traditional Schools of Islamic Thought

Historically—apart from small Ismaili, Baha'i, and Jewish communities—Yemenis have followed three main schools of Islamic thought: Shafi'ism, which is associated with Sufism; Zaydism, which is generally associated with Shiism; and Al-Shawkani, which is primarily Sunni but with Zaydi roots. Each one has used traditional ways of teaching centered on study circles, where a teacher would deliver a lesson and discuss the school's founding texts, such as the Shafi'i *Kitab al-Um* or the Zaydi *Kitab al-Azhar*.

The Shafi'i school, one of the world's major Sunni doctrines, was the most widespread in Yemen. Zaydism ranked second, but it only survives in northern Yemen. Only a small Zaydi community lives outside the country.

The Al-Shawkani school is a strand of Sunnism with Zaydi roots, marked by an open attitude toward other schools of jurisprudence. As early as the fifteenth century, a trend emerged of Zaydis adopting Sunnism, a tendency that peaked with the rise of al-Imam al-Shawkani (who lived from 1759 to 1834). From then

onward, his followers supported successive leaders. Unlike traditional Zaydism, al-Shawkani's teachings did not encourage permanent struggle by pretext of calling for rebellion against unjust imams.

Since the 1970s, these traditional schools have almost disappeared, as Al-Shawkani schools did, or have been marginalized, like Sufi, Shafi'i, or Zaydi schools have been. Instead, Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist schools have flourished.

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been. Instead, Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist schools have flourished. Since 2000, a new Zaydi teaching connecting to the political doctrine of the Houthis has also emerged.

The following sections will examine each of these schools of thought and the changes and transformations they have undergone.

Sunni Schools

The Shafi'i school of jurisprudence in Yemen, which is Sunni, has also been associated with Sufism since the thirteenth century. More recently, this linkage has developed to the point where it is nearly impossible to find a Shafi'i school in Yemen not linked with Sufism. The main Shafi'i teaching centers are in Zabid on the northwestern coast, Al-Baydha in central Yemen, and Tarim in the Hadhramaut valley in the south.¹³⁵

The Al-Shawkani school has retained its special status in Yemen, where it enjoyed extensive political clout thanks to official support. This continued even after the fall of the imamate and the founding of the republic. North Yemen's second president, Abdul Rahman Yahya al-Eryani (who ruled between 1967–1974), was educated at an Al-Shawkani school, as were the republic's first two muftis, Mohammad Zabrah and Mohammad al-Amrani.¹³⁶

The influence of the Al-Shawkani school had started to decline by the mid-1970s as the Yemeni government began to support the Salafist school. Thus, the role of the traditional schools declined, with the exception of a few individual Sufi and Zaydi schools, while Salafism has dominated in Yemen ever since. This was due to the instrumentalization of religion in the conflict sparked by the birth of the republican regime in the north and the Marxist regime in the south in the 1960s.

Scholastic Institutes

The first modern religious schools in Yemen were the *ma'abid 'ilmiya* (scholastic institutes) created by the state in the north in 1974. It is important to note the political context of this decision, which followed the end of the civil war in 1969. Yemen was divided into two states: the Yemen Arab Republic in the north, created in 1962, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south, established after the end of British rule in 1967, which adopted a Marxist social, political, and economic system in 1969.

The rise of the first communist regime in the Arabian Peninsula meant North Yemen became a buffer against the spread of communism elsewhere in the region. This made the northern republic important to other Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, which quickly formed close ties with northern leadership.

The danger of communism threatened the northern republic, which faced a leftist armed group known as the National Liberation Front. Backed by South Yemen, the National Liberation Front staged an uprising in the country's central regions in the early 1970s. This resulted in successive North Yemeni presidents backing various religious groups, seeing them as the most effective ideological weapon against communism. Saudi Arabia supported this official policy and started to fund the different religious groups. The state in 1982 finally crushed the armed leftist group, with the help of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated militia known as the Islamic Front.¹³⁷

Amid this political tumult, the first of these scholastic institutes for religious education was established in the Zaydi-dominated Khawlan region north of Sanaa in 1972, although the state did not officially

recognize such institutes until two years later. Then, the number of institutes grew rapidly, with 500 such schools in operation by 1982. Two decades later, Yemen had 1,200 theological institutes with some 600,000 students.¹³⁸ Despite their popularity, they were shut down in 2001 after the government decided to centralize the public education sector following the October 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden's harbor and the beginning of the so-called U.S. war on terror.¹³⁹

The ma'ahid 'ilmiya formed a parallel education system that was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and became one of the group's key recruitment tools. They covered all stages of primary and secondary education, with additional courses on the Arabic language, Islamic studies, and the Islamic history of Yemen. They did not teach the philosophy curriculum at secondary level but did cover all schools of Sunni thought, including Zaydism, focusing on the Shafi'i doctrine.¹⁴⁰

These schools were administratively and financially independent from the Education Ministry, although they received huge amounts of funding from a range of sources, including the North Yemen state, the Saudi government, and private donors. A former Yemeni official said that "the Yemeni state was at one point spending six times more per student" at these institutes than at public schools.¹⁴¹ The ma'ahid 'ilmiya hosted some 13 percent of the total public school student population.¹⁴²

Opponents of the schools were multiple, including leftists, liberals, and Zaydi scholars and figures. Such groups saw these institutes as dens of recruitment for the Muslim Brotherhood and as part of a Saudi effort to spread Salafism and extremism in Yemen. But their supporters saw them as an ideal way to overcome sectarian differences and unify Yemenis under a common religious framework.

Yet the claim that the schools were conduits for recruitment into the Muslim Brotherhood was not far from the truth. At morning assemblies, the national anthem and cheers for the republic were replaced with songs of the Brotherhood, such as the song "Wal-haq Yahshudu Ajnadahu" ("the rightful path mobilizes its soldiers"¹⁴³) by the movement's leader Sayyid Qutb, and the cheering of Brotherhood slogans, such as

"Allah is our purpose, the Prophet is our example, the Quran is our constitution, [and] death in the service of Allah is our desire."

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The schools, along with summer camps for male students, placed great emphasis on concepts of *dawa* (Islamic proselytization)

and jihad. For example, they included lectures on the stages of the Prophet Muhammad's life and revelation. There were also lessons on the history of jihad and prominent Islamic fighters, as well as a focus on Sunni concepts such as loyalty to *al-jama'a* (the Islamic community) and obedience to the ruler.¹⁴⁴

These theological institutes accepted Muslim Brotherhood-exiled individuals from Egypt, Sudan, and elsewhere as students, teachers, and administrators. There is little doubt that the schools had links with the Muslim Brotherhood and were transformed into recruitment centers for the movement, something confirmed by a former student.¹⁴⁵

The curricula invariably followed hardline teachings close to those of Salafism. For example, these schools banned music and imposed complete segregation between the sexes, from students to teachers to administrative staff. If there was a shortage of female teachers for the girls' schools, as was frequently the case in the countryside, this gap would be filled by older men.¹⁴⁶

The schools were highly popular during the 1980s and 1990s, especially in rural areas, due to the long, difficult journeys involved in reaching public schools in rural areas or villages. The ma'ahid 'ilmiya even provided food and boarding facilities to male students from remote areas. They also had a good reputation for the moral discipline and behavior of their students, as well as their heavy emphasis on physical activities for boys, including activities as tough as mountain climbing, as well as theater and singing of *anashid* (religious anthems).¹⁴⁷ Girls' activities included handicrafts, cooking, anashid singing, and dawa, but no sports.¹⁴⁸ All of these facilities, reputations, and activities encouraged more students to enroll in these schools.

It is worth mentioning that graduates of these religious schools were not accepted into public and private universities. However, they could enter the High Institute for Teachers and earn a primary school teaching degree. This meant the influence of the ma'ahid 'ilmiya extended to public schools via former students who disproportionately became teachers.¹⁴⁹

This was one of Yemen's most significant experiments in religious education in terms of the numbers of students involved; the duration of the practice (from 1974 to 2002); and the material, organizational, and administrative resources involved, which resulted in hundreds of schools across North Yemen. Furthermore, after Yemen's unification, the religious education experiment extended to the south. The schools not only bequeathed a generation of teachers, who continue to spread their ideas via Yemen's public and religious schools, but also deeply influenced a whole generation with the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Salafist Education

The first Salafist institute in Yemen was founded by Sheikh Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i after he returned to the country in 1979, having been released from prison in Saudi Arabia. He had been held on charges of taking part in Juhayman al-Otaybi's seizure of Mecca's Grand Mosque earlier that year. Al-Wadi'i, widely recognized as the founder of Salafism in Yemen, was a Zaydi religious teacher from the Wada'a tribe in Saada. He had settled in Saudi Arabia in the 1950s, where he became Salafist after coming to oppose the fact that Zaydi doctrine distinguishes between the descendants of Banu Hashim (the clan of the Prophet Muhammad) and other tribesmen.¹⁵⁰

Upon his return, al-Wadi'i set up an institute called Dar al-Hadith, in the village of Damaj, in the lands of his tribe in Saada Province, the heartland of Zaydism. Due to the anger of traditional Zaydi authorities, he sought and obtained tribal guarantees of protection.¹⁵¹

The institute's name was significant. Salafist thought leans heavily on the hadith, the sayings of the Prophet, as well as *al-jarh wal ta'dil* (assessments of the reliability of those who memorized and passed

along those sayings). Salafists apply similar assessments to people alive today, a tool they often weaponize against their opponents.

The name of the institute is also linked to two other Salafist concerns. Firstly, Salafism bases all its rulings from previous religious writings or rulings by *al-salaf al-saleh* (the early Muslim community). The hadith thus broaden the scope of the texts considered sacred. Beyond this, any deductions or judgments by personal reasoning are prohibited, as the human mind is prey to passions. Salafists reject all forms of Islamic jurisprudence such as *qiyas* (analogies), *ijtihad* (independent reasoning in jurisprudence), and anything not based on a literal reading of these fundamental religious texts. The second Salafist concern is with purifying Islam and distinguishing between so-called real Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, Salafists are inclined to rupture relationships and denounce those who cross redlines. Due to this rejection of difference, the sect quickly gives rise to disputes and rivalries, even among its own members.

Thus Dar al-Hadith, the institute created by al-Wadi'i, became one of the most important religious centers in Yemen, attracting students not only from across Yemen but also from Africa, the Americas, Indonesia, Western Europe, and Arab countries, mainly Egypt and Algeria. For example, by the mid-2000s, more than one hundred French citizens were studying there.¹⁵² The center also offered accommodations and food for some students.

Most of the institute's teachers had studied at universities in Saudi Arabia and relied heavily on Saudi textbooks such as those of Ibn Baz, Ibn 'Uthaymin, al-Fawzan, al-Lahaydan, and Rabi' al-Madkhali.¹⁵³ The institute also received money from Saudi preachers close to Saudi Arabia's ruling family, including al-Madkhali himself.

This particular strand of Salafism urged its adherents to abstain from politics and focus their efforts on proselytization. It adhered to what it called *as-salafiyya al-'ilmiyya* (roughly translated as academic Salafism), which frowns on political party activity and promotes the Sunni concept of *ta'at wali al-amr* (obedience to the ruler or leader of a community). It strongly opposed jihadists on the basis that jihad was only to be waged on the orders of the ruler. Its opponents referred to this school of Salafism as Madkhaliyya, after al-Madkhali.

The institute enjoyed good relations with the Yemeni government during Saleh's rule between 1978 and 2012. The state did not interfere in its curricula and ignored a complaint against it by Zaydis, who Salafists see as an aberrant sect. The government instead committed to protecting the institute.¹⁵⁴ Accordingly, al-Wadi'i's students soon founded their own institutes on similar lines, such as Dar al-Hadith in Ma'rib (built by Abu al-Hassan al-Masri or Al-Ma'ribi); Ma'had Ma'bar in Dhamar; and Ma'had al-Afyush in Aden (run by Abdulrahman al-Adeni).

After the death of al-Wadi'i in 2001, and despite a dispute over who would take his place, Dar al-Hadith continued its work—until the Houthis laid siege to the village of Damaj in late 2011. Damaj not only hosted an Islamic studies institute but also gave birth to a multinational community with austere and extreme religious leanings. Both Yemenis and foreign citizens resided in Damaj because of the strength of its educational institution. When the Houthis laid siege to the village, they used the presence of so many

foreigners as a pretext for the siege and demanded their departure. This initial siege was followed by another onslaught in late 2013, enduring into January 2014, until the roughly 15,000 residents of the village had been evacuated.¹⁵⁵

Hence, Saada was not the only place where the presence of Salafists created frictions, as it is the stronghold of Zaydism in

Yemen. After the unification of Yemen in 1990, the Salafists also became active in the town of Tarim and in Hadhramaut Governorate, the latter of which is also a stronghold of Sufism. They set up their activities in several of the towns' mosques (including Al-Tawhid wal Sunna, run by al-Ma'ribi, a student of al-Wadi'i). This created more friction, as the Salafists believe that Sufis are misguided or even polytheists.¹⁵⁶

Throughout the 1990s, Salafists were active throughout Yemen, distributing books and recordings. Some strands of the movement were particularly active, such as the Hikma Association in Taiz, a city in western Yemen where al-Wadi'i had refused to carry out charitable work, seeing it as a form of *hizbiya* (factionalism). The Hikma Association began receiving money from the Kuwaiti foundation Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami (Revive Islamic Heritage), run by cleric Abdulkhaleq Abdullah. The Hikma Association then split in two with the 1992 founding of its southern branch in Hadhramaut Governorate, the Ihsas Association, which received funding from Qatar.¹⁵⁷ The main impact of these associations was their charitable work at Quranic schools such as the 'Asim and Manar centers in Sanaa. The founding of institutes and mosques such as Al-Furqan, in Taiz, and Al-Baihani, in Ibb, bolstered the spread of Salafism across the rest of Yemen.¹⁵⁸

The early 1990s also saw the founding of Salafist universities such as Al-Eman University in Sanaa, headed by Abdulmajid al-Zindani, which teaches sharia studies and law, though graduates could not become practicing lawyers.¹⁵⁹ Ahgaff University in Hadhramaut Governorate was founded in 1994, teaching engineering and computer science as well as sharia studies.¹⁶⁰ As was the case with the other Salafist institutes, these universities received funding and support from Saudi associations and clerics, and some were able to offer accommodation and food.

Salafists' relations with Saudi Arabia. Yemen's Salafists have had strong relationships with Saudi Arabia since the beginning of their activities in Yemen near the end of the 1970s. Most have received funding from Saudi religious leaders, and the majority of their institutes rely heavily on books by Saudi scholars. But this has not always guaranteed Yemen's good political relations with Riyadh or detached Yemeni Salafists from fluctuations in the relations between Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

For example, al-Wadi'i had tense relations with the Saudi government after it expelled him on suspicion of writing the statements issued by al-Otaybi during his seizure of Mecca's Grand Mosque in 1979. Al-Wadi'i continued to describe the country as *ardh al-haramayn wa najd* ("the land of the two holy sanctuaries and Najd"), rather than Saudi Arabia, implicitly questioning the Al Saud family's legitimacy

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to rule.¹⁶¹ Yet he continued to receive money from Saudi scholars including al-Madkhali and Abdulaziz bin Baz, both of whom were close to the ruling family, as well as the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, which was founded in 1988 and shut down in 2004 on suspicion of funding terrorism.¹⁶²

These worried ties—between the Yemeni Salafists in general and al-Wadi'i in particular, on one side, and Saudi Arabia on the other side—were also affected by the unstable relations between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In 1990, after Yemen backed former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in the Gulf war, a million Yemenis returned home from Saudi Arabia just as the authorities had to restrict the regulation of Yemeni residency. This left great bitterness among many Yemenis, especially in border areas such as Saada, where, for a period, thousands were returning every day with their modest possessions and little money despite their many years working in Saudi Arabia. This may have been a reason that al-Wadi'i accused former Saudi king Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and the Saudi royal family of creating enmity with Yemen by unfairly hoarding their wealth.

Relations between Yemen and Saudi Arabia deteriorated further with the Yemeni civil war in 1994, when Riyadh opted to support southern Yemeni Socialist Party separatists. Al-Wadi'i accused Saudi Arabia of backing communists in the south and Zaydi tribes in the north. However, when al-Wadi'i fell ill at the turn of the millennium, he was allowed to receive treatment in Saudi Arabia. It was his first visit to the kingdom since he had been expelled in 1979. He met former crown prince Naif bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and Saudi Arabia covered the costs of further treatment in Germany and the United States (despite al-Wadi'i's view, even after his treatment there, that the United States was a den of sin and corruption).¹⁶³

Al-Wadi'i then returned to Saudi Arabia, where he died in 2001 and was buried in the same Mecca cemetery as the most senior Saudi clerics, including bin Baz. Al-Wadi'i had by this time urged his students to throw away all recordings in which he criticized Saudi Arabia and instead called on them to stand with Saudi Arabia against its enemies.¹⁶⁴

It is hard to imagine a complete separation between Yemen's Salafists and Saudi Arabia. But this is not to say that Salafists have been immune to the sensitivities and complexities of the relations between the two countries' governments, which have influenced their rapidly shifting views of Saudi Arabia, from affection and criticism to admiration and resentment—often simultaneously.

Salafists in flux. Salafism is a movement in flux. It has spread widely in Yemen due to its simplicity and directness, but it is in no way organized. Salafists' unbending adherence to the principle of ta'at wali al-amr meant they did not become meaningfully engaged in political opposition to Saleh. Indeed, Saleh instrumentalized them at times, such as during the 1994 war or during his war in Saada against the Houthis.

The 2011 uprising prompted opposing reactions among Salafists. While the overwhelming majority were opposed to the uprising, it was backed by the Ehsan Association and, to some extent, the Hikma Association in Taiz. This gave rise to an alliance between the two associations, known as the Ehsan Islamic Alliance.¹⁶⁵

Post-2011, Salafists in Yemen faced another split, this time over participation in politics and the forming of political parties. It is notable that the first Salafist party was Hizb un-Nahdha al-Islami (Islamic Renaissance Party), which was formed in 2011 and called for South Yemen's secession.¹⁶⁶ This was followed by the March 2012 creation of the Al-Rashad (Integrity) Union, most of the founders of which belonged to the Ehsan Association, and the Silm wa Tanmiya (Peace and Development) Party, drawing on Hikma Association members.¹⁶⁷

After the war began, the intra-Salafist divide deepened and dragged in new players. The United Arab Emirates allied with Salafist fighters such as Hani Bin Breik, a student of al-Wadi'i who has since become a leading figure in the Southern Transitional Council. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has backed other Salafists such as al-Ma'ribi—also a student of al-Wadi'i. Qatar has supported still others, such as the Ehsan Association in Hadhramaut Governorate. Even the Houthis managed to win over some Salafists, including Mohammad Taher Ana'm of the Al-Rashad Party and Mohammad 'Izzudin al-Hamiri of the Slim wa Tanmiya Party.¹⁶⁸

Post-2011, Salafists in Yemen faced another split, this time over participation in politics and the forming of political parties.

The Houthis have allowed some Salafist institutes to continue operating, such as Dar al-Hadith in Damaj, which still provides its services but only to students from the area, especially those from al-Wadi'i's tribe the Wada'a.¹⁶⁹ The Ma'bar Institute in Dhamar is another example. These institutes have continued after they accepted the Houthis' conditions, such as that they cannot accept students outside of their area, which limit their activities, adding to other strict regulations.

This Houthi policy toward Sunni institutes (despite the fact that Houthis closed Zaydi ones and banned Zaydi study circles in mosques), can be explained by the Houthis' pragmatism as a ruling group toward the Sunnis, who make up much of the population of areas under its control. It also helps the group portray itself as nonsectarian and open to others.

Sufi Institutes

Sufism has become the last major stronghold of the Shafi'i doctrine in Yemen. Sufism is not an Islamic school in itself but rather a school of behavior and discipline that focuses on the spiritual aspects of what is known as *al-ihsan wa al-tazkiya* (roughly translated as "good deeds and self-purification") in Islam.

Sufi schools are still operating in some parts of Yemen, including Tahama, Taiz, Al-Baydha, Aden, and Hadhramaut. The city of Tarim in the Hadhramaut valley is the stronghold of Sufism in Yemen. Sufi schools in the south, particularly in Hadhramaut and Tarim, were in many cases closed, and some of their teachers were imprisoned or even killed during the Yemen Socialist Party's 1969–1990 rule. Many of their shrines were destroyed between 1994 and 1995 by Islamist militias aligned with Sanaa in its war against the socialists.¹⁷⁰

Strikingly, many Sufis allied with the Socialist Party in 1994, despite previous mistreatment.¹⁷¹ Some have suggested this reflected a bias toward Saudi Arabia, which backed the southern side. It could also be because most of the separatists during this war were from the Banu Hashim clan from Hadhramaut Governorate, including such important figures as Ali Salim al-Baydh, Haydar al-Attas, and Abdulrahman al-Jafri.

Following the 1994 civil war, Sufis became more active in Yemen. A Sufi school called Dar al-Mustafa was founded in 1996 by a group including Al-Habib Ali al-Jafri, the son of Yemeni political figure Abdulrahman al-Jafri who was head of the Al-Rabita Party, a Saudi-backed southern separatist group. The younger al-Jafri was born in Saudi Arabia and spent some of his life in the UAE. Another cofounder of Dar al-Mustafa was Al-Habib Umar Bin Hafiz. His father was killed by socialists in 1972, forcing his family to flee to Baydha in North Yemen, where Bin Hafiz was taught by noted Sufi Sheikh Hussein Mohammad al-Haydar.¹⁷²

Bin Hafiz became the key figure heading Dar al-Mustafa, which became a world-renowned center for Sufism with thousands of foreign students of over forty nationalities. It was the focus of some opposition from traditional Sufis for revamping curricula and teaching methods, but it has been a major success and continues teaching to this day. Sufi schools generally receive funding in the form of donations from the Hadhrami diaspora in the Gulf and east Asia.¹⁷³

After the end of the 1994 war, Saleh had beaten his socialist enemies in the south and began to give more space to other religious schools to counterbalance and weaken those of the Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood. After the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) left the government in 1997, the state's warming ties with the Sufis became more apparent. Sufi Sheikh Mohammad Ali Mira'i became a member of Saleh's General People's Congress, and in 2000 he founded the College of Sharia Studies in Hudayda. Some Muslim Brotherhood members have claimed that graduates of the college were given preferential access to public sector jobs, showing that they were backed by the government.

The Sufis in Yemen had a number of influential members with followings outside Yemen.

From 2002 onward, Saleh began paying visits to Dar al-Mustafa, while its founders Al-Habib Ali al-Jafri and Al-Habib bin Mahfouz began appearing on state television. In the 2003 parliamentary elections, Sufi elders in Hadhramaut Governorate and elsewhere voiced support for the General People's Congress. It became clear that the Sufis in Yemen were on the rise. In the center of Tarim, Salafist centers such as the Mohammad bin Abdulwahab bookshop were forced to turn off their speakers every Monday out of respect for the gathering of Sufi elders at Dar al-Mustafa.¹⁷⁴

The Sufis in Yemen—unlike the Zaydis who were isolated in Yemen and the relative marginalization of the Salafists in Yemen—had a number of influential members with followings outside Yemen, such as Al-Habib al-Jafri and al-Hafiz. Sufi schools, meanwhile, attracted thousands of students from East Asia and Africa.

When violence escalated again in 2015 with the Saudi-led intervention, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) announced it was in control of Mukalla, the capital of Hadhramaut Governorate, as well as other areas of the valley. It proceeded to destroy a number of Sufi shrines. Notably, many Salafists were in harmony with AQAP. Yet there was no violent reaction from Sufi religious authorities. Sufis have historically eschewed violence, in accordance with their dictum: “Hold the tongue from censure; hold the hand from drawing blood.”¹⁷⁵ In April 2016, Yemeni government forces backed by the UAE-and-Saudi-led coalition were able to force AQAP to withdraw from Hadhramaut Governorate, and the Sufis regained their influence in politics and society.

As fighting intensified in the south and calls grew for secession from the north, some in Hadhramaut, Yemen’s biggest governorate, began to fear for the region’s existence as a social entity and a large territorial unit with its extensive oil wealth. This pushed Sufis, Salafists, and other Hadhramis to take part in the Hadhramaut Inclusive Conference in April 2017. Prominent delegates included Sufi Sheikh Abdulrahman Ba’abad and Salafi Sheikh Saleh al-Sharafi. One Hadhrami journalist said the desire to stabilize the situation in the region and unify it toward its residents’ goals of greater independence and power led to calm between Salafists and Sufis, under the logic that “we are all Hadhramis.”¹⁷⁶

One of the most prominent Sufi figures in the Islamic world is a Hadhrami Sufi, Al-Habib al-Jafri, who has enjoyed positive media coverage for many years. The UAE backed him by funding the Tabah Foundation, which he set up in 2005 and which is active in many countries, most prominently Egypt.¹⁷⁷ More recently, al-Jafri has publicly adopted controversial political positions, such as visiting Jerusalem in 2012 and backing Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.¹⁷⁸ However, when the UAE stepped up its support for separatists in the south of Yemen, creating divisions over its policies and those of its allies, al-Jafri turned from a Sufi notable who stayed out of the fray into a controversial figure among Sufis in the Islamic world and in Hadhramaut Governorate, in particular.

Some say that al-Jafri has lost much of his popularity and credibility because of both the financial support he receives from Abu Dhabi and his political activities, which many Sufis see as unacceptable.¹⁷⁹ Others, however, believe he has maintained his status and stayed out of controversial political causes. They argue that the popularity of the Emirates and their ally, Yemen’s Southern Transitional Council, remains high on the Hadhrami coast even if the same is not true in the valley.¹⁸⁰

Hence, an individual’s position and opinion toward al-Jafri varies according to their stance toward the UAE’s policy in the south or their opinion toward religious scholars’ interventions into politics in general.

In sum, the Sufi school largely remains far from politics, but this does not mean that all Sufi scholars are committed to this general position of nonintervention in politics. The future of the Sufi school and its involvement in politics will face huge challenges because of increasing regional intervention in the south, especially in Hadhramaut Governorate, as regional powers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE heavily used religion in their political intervention.

Zaydi Religious Schools

The Zaydis have had a presence in northern Yemen for more than 1,000 years. Zaydi doctrine was taught in traditional ways in mosques and religious schools right up until the revolution against the imamate. The revolution placed pressure on Zaydi scholars, especially as most of those with Hashemite roots supported the imamate against the republican regime, leaving the latter suspicious of them. Some were killed or imprisoned during the 1962 to 1970 civil war.

As mentioned above, the 1970s saw growing Sunni and Salafist activity across northern Yemen, including in Zaydi areas, supported by the Yemeni government and funded by Saudi Arabia. The Zaydis struggled to adapt to this and remained limited to study circles in mosques, especially in the Imam al-Hadi mosque in Saada and the Great Mosque in Sanaa.

One key feature of the Zaydis as a religious group is their reliance on logic, stemming from their roots in the *mu'tazila* (an early rationalist school of Islamic theology). But the sect did not have its own, independent character in terms of Islamic jurisprudence and was influenced in one way or another by various Sunni schools, particularly the Hanafi school. Zaydism does not rely heavily on the hadith but uses those that align with the Quran, as well as being open to *ijtihad*. Many therefore see Zaydism as simply a political philosophy of government that justifies overthrowing unjust rulers and gives preference to rulers descended from the Prophet.

The political nature of Zaydism made successive Yemeni republican governments nervous about any activity by its adherents. Salafists, on the other hand, increased their presence, creating worry and anger among some traditional Zaydi elders, who are mostly Banu Hashim clansmen. They voiced these concerns with the opening up of public and political life, including the creation of political parties, when Yemen was unified in 1990. This opening saw the creation of a large Sunni political party, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) and two Zaydi Islamist parties, Al-Haq and the Union of Popular Forces.

Al-Haq brought together most of Yemen's key Zaydi figures, including the sect's most prominent scholar since the 1962 revolution, Sheikh Majd al-Deen al-Mu'ayyidi, the teacher of Sheikh Badr al-Deen al-Houthi. In a key statement at its founding, the party announced that it would fight American imperialism, which was manifested in Saudi Wahhabism.¹⁸¹

There were changes not just in politics but also in education, with the establishment of a number of Zaydi institutes, most prominently the Samawi Institute in Saada and Sheikh Murtada's Badr al-Mahtouri Institute. These institutes tried to mimic the Muslim Brotherhood by setting up summer youth camps, the Shabab al-Mu'min (Faithful Youth) camps. The sons of Badr al-Din al-Houthi—Hussein, Mohammad, and Hamid—had all previously studied at Saada's theological institute. Despite the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood runs this institute, it is the only institute in Yemen teaching a Zaydi religious curriculum due to the particularities of the city.¹⁸²

To counter the Salafism and Sunnism spread in the Zaydi areas, a few Zaydi scholars and figures started establishing Zaydi religious camps beginning around 1993. The first one was in the Al-Hamazat region

of Saada. Al-Hamazat is a *hijra* (an area reserved for those learned in religious matters), protected by Yemen's tribes and off-limits for fighting. The camps hosted some 10,000 to 15,000 students in 1994 and 1995, then began spreading into other governorates such as Amran, Hijjah, Al-Mahwit, and Dhamar—even Shafi'i-dominated areas such as Ibb and Taiz.¹⁸³

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The camps received modest financial support from the Yemeni government, which saw them as a way of paring back the clout of Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood in Zaydi areas, especially as the latter lost their utility to the state after the 1994 war and the defeat of the socialists in the south.

These summer camps resembled ma'ahid 'ilmiya and Brotherhood camps, with their heavy emphasis on artistic and sporting activities as well as a religious curriculum based on small religious books that did not touch on political or sectarian subjects but rather carried simplified religious teachings. The importance of the camps lies in the fact that, for the first time, they created a young community brought together by their ideas of Zaydi identity as sons of the tribes, or Hashemites. Through this shared identity, some Zaydi figures were able to gain influence over these youth.

The camps continued running until the year 2000, when Badr al-Din al-Houthi's eldest son and twice-parliament member Hussein al-Houthi returned from his own studies in Sudan and fell into a dispute with some founders of the institutes, such as Mohammad Azzan. In 2002 the camps were split into two sections: one following Azzan and one following Hussein al-Houthi. The camps of al-Houthi started to endorse political-religious study materials, which had been rejected by the founders of these camps. Then they were shut down entirely when a war broke out between al-Houthi's followers and the government in 2004.¹⁸⁴

The Houthi Movement

The Houthis are a Zaydi movement. Its name refers to the family of its founder, Hussein al-Houthi, who became politically active in criticizing the government and mobilizing the public starting around 2000. He was killed in September 2004 during the first round of fighting between the Houthi group and government forces, fighting that broke out five more times from 2004 to 2010. Four years later, the Houthi military expanded and took over the capital Sanaa.¹⁸⁵

The ideology of this group maintains similar positions as traditional Zaydism on key issues such as the legitimacy of overthrowing a tyrannical ruler and the primacy of the Prophet's descendants. However, the Houthis also broke with many traditions.

Firstly, the Houthis have adopted ideas inspired by the discourse of the Iranian revolution, including that of an axis of resistance against arrogant Western imperialism. Secondly, they see *wilayat al-faqih* (rule by the jurist, which is the basis of Iran's ruling system) as influenced by Zaydism. The doctrine differs from

traditional Twelver Shiism, which holds that believers must wait for the coming of the Mahdi before Islamic rule can be established on earth. In contrast, *wilayat al-faqih*, borrowed from Zaydism, is the idea that the faithful must revolt to overthrow and seize power from unjust rulers. The Houthis are also influenced by *wali al-faqih* (the sacred status of the ruler), which hands the ruler many of the powers and prerogatives of the infallible, absent imam. This idea of infallibility roundly contradicts traditional Zaydi views, which see all rulers as potentially unjust, meaning they may be overthrown.

Thirdly, the Houthis have connected the ideas of *'ilm* with the Quran itself. In general, *'ilm* means the distinguishing sign that leads the people. Houthis' definition of this word is not far from this notion, but with more elaboration. The Houthis promote the idea of the *'ilm* as a person, *al-qa'id al-'ilm* (a visionary leader), with roots in Zaydism but upon which the Houthis have placed unprecedented emphasis, playing up the figure's link to the Quran. Traditionally, Zaydis see the idea of *'ilm* as a leader guiding the *umma* (the collective global community of Muslims). But Houthis see the figure of *al-qa'id al-'ilm* as embodying the Quran, bestowing on them an aura of holiness that was never given to Zaydi leaders under the imamate. In this regard, Houthis do not recognize any text as sacred except the Quran, and reject all other books in Islamic heritage, believing that all human literature may tarnish the purity of the faith. This is a complete contradiction of traditional Zaydism and its philosophical roots.

Fourthly, Houthis differ from traditional Zaydis in their ideas of obedience, loyalty, and unity. Like any religious group doubling as a political movement, the Houthis place great importance on the unity of the *umma*. In Houthi thinking, this requires obedience to the leader, while traditional Zaydism does not require the obedience to the leader, as it accepts the notion of rebellion against the unjust ruler.

Finally, the Houthis define themselves as Shia rather than Zaydi. It is important to note that many Zaydis in Yemen long saw themselves as belonging to neither a Sunni nor a Shia sect, understandable for a minority surrounded by Sunnis. But al-Houthi's sermons, seen as the movement's foundational literature, portray Zaydis as Shia and emphasize their proximity to Iranian and other Shia groups. He also held confrontational views toward key Sunni figures, in contrast to dominant Zaydi thinking in Yemen,

which was largely tolerant toward Sunnis and Sunni symbols.¹⁸⁶

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The Houthis have had their disputes with traditional Zaydi leaders, but these have largely been snuffed out due to fear of the Houthi movement. One of the most

prominent Zaydi opposition scholars to have confronted them is Yahya al-Dailamy. Two Zaydi scholars, who asked not to be named, told the author that the Houthis were more oppressive than the previous regime, which had prioritized Salafist education at the expense of Zaydism but did not prevent the latter from operating—let alone imprison, exile, or kill Zaydi scholars who opposed it, as the Houthis have done. The scholars said the Houthis had shut down Zaydi educational institutes by force on the basis that there was “no need” for such studies and that the presence of the books there could distract people from the Quran.¹⁸⁷

Houthi Courses

The Houthis came to control all Zaydi-majority areas of Yemen, where they closed Zaydi study centers and sidelined traditional Zaydi religious authorities. They instead brought others to prominence, such as Shamsuddin Sharfuddin, who was appointed by the Houthis as Mufti of the Republic. The movement now dominates Zaydi discourses and spreads its own ideology by altering school curricula and offering cultural lessons.

These *dawrat thaqafiyya* (cultural courses) are mandatory for public sector workers, conscripts heading for the front lines, and imams. Female school headteachers are also required to take them, as are women who speak and recite the Quran and prayers at household rituals, such as those mourning loved ones.

Throughout these courses, which mostly last between ten to twenty days, participants listen to the speeches of al-Houthi, which are seen by his followers as the most reliable words to be uttered since the Quran. Mostly these speeches deal with leadership, jihad, and the primacy of the family of the Prophet. Despite the fact that the classes are attended by some Sunnis, including public sector workers, the speeches contain anti-Sunni sectarian insults such as attacks on companions of the Prophet and denigration of other Sunni beliefs.

Elite Houthi fighters are sometimes drafted into these programs to give lectures on how, with divine assistance, the movement turned from a marginalized group into a feared fighting force. The classes also include Iranian recorded lectures on the historical battles of the Prophet's cousin Ali bin Abi Talib and the battle of Karbala.¹⁸⁸

Besides these courses, the Houthis also run summer camps for children from the ages of six to twelve, teaching them the movement's ideas and hosting various activities, particularly sports.

Authenticity and Yemeni Identity

While Salafists have enjoyed growing influence in Yemen since the mid-1970s—thanks both to Saudi support and funding and to the presence of millions of Yemeni migrants in Saudi Arabia—Zaydism and Sufism have presented themselves as authentic, indigenous Yemeni ideologies countering Wahhabist ideas imported from Saudi Arabia.

Salafists have responded by accusing Zaydis and Sufis of giving primacy to Ahl al-Bayt (Al-Sada in the case of the Zaydis or Al-Habaib in the case of the Sufis), best known as the Hashemite family, even though the family of the Prophet is not Yemeni. Yemenis are descended from southern Arabs, known as Qahtanis, while the Hashemite clan is from the Quraysh tribe and has more northern roots (*'adnaniyun*). Salafists have played on this historical enmity between Qahtanis and Hashemites to win favor among some Yemenis, who may resent the importance given to the Hashemite clan.

Both Sufis and Zaydis have relations with Hashemites beyond Yemen. Al-Habib al-Jafri, for example, belongs to the Alawite association—a line of descendants from the Prophet’s daughter Fatimah and her husband Ali ibn Abi Talib—that has members from Britain to Indonesia, including in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Syria. The movement’s supervisory council in Egypt even brought a lawsuit to ban a Yemeni-authored book *The Hashemite Tribe: A Thousand Years of Blood*, which was seen as insulting members of the Banu Hashim clan.¹⁸⁹

Many Yemenis have noted what appears to be a compromise between Sufis and the Houthis. The former refrain from attacking or denigrating the latter, a position some have attributed to the privileged status both sides accord to the Banu Hashim and the nature of Hashemite influence in both camps. Their shared enmity toward Salafism and Wahhabism may also play a role.

On the other hand, Yemeni Salafists have rejected accusations that their ideology is imported. They note that Salafism put down roots in Yemen thanks to al-Shawkani, a Yemeni scholar, as the culmination of a tradition of Yemeni scholarship that started with Ibn al-Wazir in the fifteenth century and included other notable figures such as Ismail al-Amir, Saleh al-Maqbali, and Al-Hassan al-Jalal. This is reflected in the names of many Salafist institutes, as well as the fact some of them include al-Shawkani’s books in their curricula. However, unlike the Salafists, al-Shawkani believed in *ijtihad* and *qiyas* as methods of deducing fatwas and rejected the complete reliance on Quranic text. Therefore, connecting the Al-Shawkani school with Salafism is misleading.

Many Salafist institutes and schools also refute accusations that they are close-minded and Wahhabist-inspired by emphasizing that their curricula also include the other Islamic sects (particularly Shafi’ism). Al-Eman University in Sanaa, for example, even teaches about Zaydism.¹⁹⁰

Zaydism differs from Sufism and Salafism in that it is limited to Yemen. Zaydi institutes do not enroll students from outside the country. The sect strongly emphasizes its Yemeni identity in its discourse. For example, the Houthis have an influential newspaper called *Al-Hawyah* (which translates to *Identity*). Zaydis believe that this Yemeni exclusivity sets them apart from other sects and makes them the true expression of Yemeni identity.

It must also be noted that other religious movements in Yemen, both moderate and extremist, hold the concept of the tribe in high esteem and subscribe to subnational, tribal, regional, and sectarian identities, as well as calling for Islamic unity. Yet they can also easily become involved in separatist movements within nation-states, as did the Islamic Renaissance Party in Yemen’s south and the Salafists fighting for Yemen’s Emirati-backed Southern Transitional Council.

Nor are the Salafists alone in having relations with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh gave refuge to certain Hadhramaut families following the independence of South Yemen and the rise of the socialists in 1967. Al-Habib al-Jafri, for example, was born in the kingdom, where he used to host a weekly television show on the Iqraa channel, which broadcasts religious programming globally.¹⁹¹ Similarly, Saudi Arabia hosted some Zaydi Banu Hashim families after the founding of the republican regime in the north in 1962, most prominently the Hamid al-Deen royal family, as well as prominent Zaydi scholars such as Badr al-Deen al-Houthi and

Majd al-Deen al-Mu'ayyidi, who lived, taught, and gave lectures in Najran, Saudi Arabia, near Yemen's border.¹⁹²

This does not, of course, negate Saudi Arabia's history of conflict with these groups. The first Saudi state, which lasted from 1774 to 1818, extended into what is now Hadhramaut Governorate and destroyed Sufi mausoleums there. The first state also fought Zaydis, as has the current, third Saudi state, such as during its battle in the 1930s against Imam Yahia Hameed al-Deen, who ruled North Yemen at the time.

It is also notable that both Zaydis and Salafists have adopted tough rhetoric against Western imperialism and Saudi relations with the United States. This appears clearly in the founding declaration of the Al-Haq party and the sermons of Hussein al-Houthi, who also saw Wahhabism as a form of "imperialist Islam."¹⁹³ Salafists have long railed against the United States and its policies in the region, and some—such as Al-Wadi'i—harshly criticized Riyadh for allowing the United States to station military forces on Saudi territory during the first Gulf war.¹⁹⁴ Both Salafists and Zaydis have criticized the Yemeni government for its cooperation with Washington's war on terror.

The modern religious movements represented by the Salafists and Houthis also share a preoccupation with what they consider purifying Islam and unifying Muslims. The goal of Islamic unity means that both schools reject ijtiḥād and rely solely on the Quran. This has facilitated the politicization of these sects as their leaders are not, for the most part, influential religious authorities but rather have split with traditional Islamic heritage and returned to the religion's founding literature.

Therefore, disputes between these schools are not only religious but also involve questions around Yemeni identity, with each seeking to demonstrate that it is more authentic and more representative of Yemenis. This has great impacts on the political activities of the followers of each of these schools as each tries to prove its national credentials.

Conclusion

The main difference between the traditional religious schools and the contemporary ones is function. The traditional schools aimed to teach their students religious science, so their function mainly was improving knowledge. This made their general approach toward other schools tolerant, based on mutual recognition and respect. Instead, the current religious schools aim toward political mobilization, so these schools are always concerned about creating loyalty. Therefore, discrediting other schools is crucial for the aim of mobilization, resulting in a conflict between them.

Religious schools, particularly those of the Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood, have played a major role in Yemeni politics since the mid-1970s following the country's division into the Western-backed

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north and the Soviet-backed south. But Saleh, with his famous pragmatism, began to sideline and rein in his Salafist and Brotherhood former allies once he no longer had a use for them following the defeat of the Yemeni Socialist Party in 1994.

This trend was amplified as he stepped up counterterrorism cooperation with Washington following the attacks on the USS *Cole* in 2000 and on the World Trade Center's twin towers the following year. The government instead supported Sufis, who had no clear political activities. But Zaydis posed a political challenge as an opponent to the government, while the Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood always had ambiguous relations with transnational jihadist networks such as al-Qaeda.

In the current conflict, these schools have started to bear their fruit and are still spreading. Salafist fighters are deployed on many front lines against Houthis, while Brotherhood fighters are also present on the battlefield. The Houthis' study sessions are also playing an important role in mobilizing their supporters for battle. It remains to be seen how Sufi schools will be affected by the struggle for the south.

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Religious Governance in Syria Amid Territorial Fragmentation

THOMAS PIERRET AND LAILA ALREFAAI

Introduction

Until 2011, state management of Sunni Islam in Syria followed a combination of three main patterns. First, the Syrian state's approach embodied the interventionist and repressive policies that typify religious governance in the Middle East and North Africa at large. Second, Syrian religious governance reflected secularist orientations inherited from the first two decades of rule by the Arab Socialist Baath (Resurrection) Party, which came to power in Syria through a military coup in 1963. And third, this Syrian approach revealed an obsessive focus on the security threat from Sunni Islam, a denomination that encompassed around 80 percent of Syria's population. This is because, since 1963 (and especially since former president Hafez al-Assad took office in 1970), Syria's ruling military elite was drawn from the country's Alawite minority (a breakaway Shia sect whose members accounted for less than 10 percent of the country's population by 2011).¹⁹⁵

For decades, the result was a strategy of indirect rule. Clerics operated under the strict monitoring of the *mukhabarat* (intelligence services), which supported compliant figures and suppressed unruly ones, but official religious institutions remained weak. The *Wizarat al-Awqaf* (Ministry of Religious Endowments) was tremendously understaffed, vocational Islamic education was mostly provided by private institutes of sharia, or Islamic law, and Islamic charities mushroomed in the first years of the twenty-first century. This weak state strategy was a deliberate choice: following the ruthless repression of the 1979–1982 Islamic insurgency, the regime decided it had to tolerate outlets for society's growing religiosity but that Sunni conservative elements, however subservient, were too unreliable to be incorporated into state institutions. Only at the end of President Bashar al-Assad's first decade in power—that is, on the eve of the 2011 uprising—did the regime start to change course.

The shift toward a strategy of institution-based direct rule occurred as a consequence of the regime's anxiety vis-a-vis the growing outspokenness of mainstream Sunni ulema, or religious scholars. Upon his 2007 appointment as minister of religious endowments, Mufti of Tartus Mohammad Abdul Sattar al-Sayyed proclaimed the "end of the era of anarchy," a situation which, he claimed, had fostered the spread of religious extremism across society.¹⁹⁶ A recruitment drive was initiated in the ministry, a directorate was established to supervise female preachers (most notably those affiliated with the influential Qubaysiyat, an all-women apolitical movement for religious education), vocational Islamic education was partly nationalized, and formal state control over the funding of charitable associations was tightened. By 2009, al-Sayyed announced a forthcoming law on the reorganization of his ministry to replace the de facto obsolete legal framework that had been in place since 1961.¹⁹⁷

The ensuing civil war and resulting territorial fragmentation of Syria induced radical transformations in the religious institutions of those regions that now escaped Damascus's authority. Opposition-held areas initially witnessed a situation of statelessness that favored decentralized, bottom-up initiatives such as the ulema leagues that formed the Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council in 2014. In parallel, insurgent groups established a myriad of religious-legal bodies and, in the case of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, more distinctly state-like religious bureaucracies such as the Department of Research and Fatwa.¹⁹⁸

By 2020, three widely different models of religious governance survived outside regime-controlled areas. First, in the northwestern region of Idlib, the hardline Islamist faction now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, or Syria's Liberation Committee)—which was formerly an al-Qaeda affiliate known as Jabhat al-Nusra—was ruling through the formally civilian Hukumat al-Inqadh al-Suriyya (Syrian Salvation Government). Second, in the northern regions of Syria controlled by the Turkish army, religious institutions were affiliated with bodies that emerged from the revolutionary era, namely local councils and the Syrian Interim Government (the executive arm of the Syrian National Coalition, the largest opposition alliance, based in the Turkish city of Gaziantep). Such institutions are now operating under the supervision of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Finally, east of the Euphrates River, governance lies in the hands of actors who historically had little interest in religion—namely, local affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This left-wing Kurdish organization in Turkey has been waging an insurgency against the state since 1984, and its Syrian offshoots control the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Religious Governance in Regime-Held Areas

Once literally besieged in its own capital by rebel groups, the Assad regime subsequently reversed the situation with the military help of Iran and Russia from, respectively, 2013 and 2015 onward. As of this writing, it controls two-thirds of the country's territory, including all of its fourteen provincial capitals except for Idlib, Raqqa, and al-Hasakah.

Rather than ushering in a new era in management of Islam by the Assad regime, the civil war buttressed the pre-existing process of expansion of the formal authority of the Ministry of Religious Endowments over the religious field. An additional step in the nationalization of Sunni Islam occurred only a few

weeks into the 2011 uprising: on April 4, the country's three private Islamic colleges (the Kuftaro Academy, the Fath Institute, and the Shia-led school Ruqqaya Hawza) were turned into branches of a state-run Sham Institute for Islamic Sciences. This was a means of reinforcing state control over religious elites and rewarding

the loyalist ulema in charge of the colleges by granting them long-sought official recognition for their graduates' diplomas. In 2017, moreover, the Sham Institute was elevated to the rank of a university.¹⁹⁹ The same year, state-designed curricula were formally imposed upon the remaining private, secondary-level sharia institutes.²⁰⁰ In the meantime, some of Syria's most respected ulema had left the country and established the pro-opposition Syrian Islamic Council in Istanbul, which deprived the regime of much of its religious legitimacy but also freed the regime from the figures best able to resist its embrace.

The pre-war ambition al-Sayyed harbored to design a comprehensive new legal framework for his ministry eventually came to fruition in October 2018 with the promulgation of Law 31/2018. Although some secularist commentators made the fantastical claim that the law would turn Syria into a Saudi-type religious state, its significance obviously lay elsewhere.²⁰¹ Contrary to claims that the law provided for the expansion of the ministry's influence over other ministries, it actually bolstered the former's financial autonomy and reinforced its prerogatives, as well al-Sayyed's personal power, within the religious establishment.²⁰²

The main victim of al-Sayyed's empowerment was Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, whose position was weakened by Law 31/2018 in three ways. First, the length of tenure for a grand mufti was reduced from a lifetime appointment to a three-year term. Second, the grand mufti would now be nominated by the minister of religious endowments, whereas in the past holders of the post had been elected by a council of senior scholars or, as happened with Hassoun in 2005, directly appointed by the president. And third, the grand mufti's (theoretical) supreme authority in matters of fatwa, or a legal opinion on a point of Islamic law, was turned into the mere vice-chairmanship of the newly established al-Majlis al-'Ilmi al-Fiqhi (Scholarly Council of Jurisprudence) presided over by the minister of religious endowments.²⁰³

The hostility al-Sayyed felt toward the Aleppo-born Hassoun seems to be rooted in a combination of (partly region-based) factionalism and, to a lesser extent, intellectual differences. The former had long been close to conservative Damascene ulema such as the late Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti (an eminent scholar and regime loyalist assassinated in 2013), who despised the grand mufti's quasi-secularist and ecumenical views, although the latter had endeared him to some pro-regime members of religious minorities.²⁰⁴

To pass Law 31/2018, al-Sayyed took advantage of the grand mufti's apparent fall from grace with the regime. In November 2018, Syria's Air Force Intelligence Directorate reportedly leaked a phone conversation in which the grand mufti was heard negotiating a ransom for the release of one of his

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relatives held hostage by a Druze militia in the governorate of Suwayda.²⁰⁵ In the first half of 2020, Hassoun almost disappeared from state media coverage. The country's official news agency, the Syrian Arab News Agency, for instance, hardly ever mentioned him, and he was noticeably absent from public events such as an ulema visit to the mausoleum of Hafez al-Assad in the northwestern town of Qardaha for the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the late president's death.²⁰⁶ Likewise, it was al-Sayyed and the Scholarly Council of Jurisprudence (which Hassoun failed to attend) that led the official Islamic response to the coronavirus pandemic, justifying the suspension of collective prayers on religious grounds and urging those who could afford it to support the needy allowing early payment of the Ramadan alms.²⁰⁷

The grand mufti's misfortunes may have been related to the outbreak of the simmering conflict between Assad and his cousin Rami Makhlouf, who was once Syria's chief crony capitalist and who in 2020 angrily denounced the seizure of his assets in a series of video statements.²⁰⁸ Hassoun's sons co-own a real estate company with a member of the Syrian parliament named Bilal al-Na'al, himself an associate of Makhlouf by way of the Damascus Cham Holding Company. (Established in 2006, this firm was Syria's first holding company and is now in charge of constructing the luxurious housing development of Marota City in Damascus.)²⁰⁹ Na'al is also the owner of Falcon, a private security company that contracted with the Makhlouf-owned companies Syriatel and Cham Wings.²¹⁰

The feud between al-Sayyed and Hassoun is also part of another divide that has shaped Syrian politics in recent years, namely, the Russia-Iran rivalry. The inclusion of the minister's son Abdullah into the Russian-and-Turkish-sponsored Syrian Constitutional Committee seemed to indicate that the minister is favored by Moscow.²¹¹ Abdullah al-Sayyed claims to have the ear of Russia's Chechen Republic, which allegedly borrowed from the strategy he and his father have devised to reshape Islam in Syria.²¹² The elder al-Sayyed is also said to be close to businessman Iyad Hassan, who partners with Russian investors in the Yalta real estate project in the Syrian port city of Tartus along the Mediterranean Sea.²¹³

Hassoun, for his part, has continued to benefit from Iran's support, as evidenced by the fact that, while he was de facto banished from Syrian state media, he retained extensive access to Iranian-sponsored outlets. In May 2020, for instance, Alalam Syria TV granted him a thirty-minute interview.²¹⁴ Since the regime's recapture of eastern Aleppo in December 2016, Hassoun took advantage of his close ties with militias affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Aleppo's Local Defense Forces, both of which have become critical actors in the northern city's security landscape.²¹⁵

This allowed Hassoun to fill the void left in 2012 by the exile of Suhaib al-Shami, his archrival who once reigned supreme over Aleppo's religious bureaucracy. Hassoun secured the appointment of relatives and protégés to key religious positions in the city, including many of the mosque pulpits left vacant after the rebels' defeat.²¹⁶ He also reportedly emerged as a broker between the authorities and would-be returnees such as Sheikh Mahmoud al-Hout, a popular preacher and head of the Kiltawiyya sharia institute, who came back to Aleppo in 2019 after seven years of exile in Egypt.²¹⁷ In spite of rumors of his impending dismissal in the spring of 2020, Hassoun seems to have garnered enough support to return to favor, as illustrated by his presence alongside Assad during the celebration of the Mawlid (a minor holiday marking the birthday of the Prophet Muhammed) in October that year.²¹⁸

As for the minister, he has also worked to increase his influence in the patrimonial way that has become the hallmark of the Assad regime. The elder al-Sayyed, whose own father Abdul Sattar held the same position in the 1970s and whose brother Khayr al-Din served as the governor of Idlib, gave his son Abdullah a prominent role in the Ministry of Religious Endowments by appointing him as director of religious endowments in Tartus.²¹⁹

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Abdullah al-Sayyed has also been appointed head of al-Fariq al-Dini al-Shababi (the Youth Religious Team), a voluntary organization that the ministry set up in 2016 to mobilize junior male and female religious scholars between the ages of twenty-five and forty in the fight against “extremism” and the promotion of “moderate” religious discourse.²²⁰ The team has held training sessions and conferences across the country while enjoying extensive access (including a dedicated weekly program) to the ministry’s Nour al-Sham television channel.²²¹

Besides al-Sayyed’s own multivolume *tafsir* (the critical explanation or interpretation of scripture),²²² the backbone of the team’s doctrine consists in the so-called *fiqh al-azma* (jurisprudence of crisis)—that is, refutations of the regime’s religious nemeses, in particular Wahhabis; the Muslim Brotherhood; and any *takfiri* (someone who has accused others of apostasy), which is what the regime calls jihadis. One should not overstate the originality of this intellectual endeavor: what the Sayyeds aim to propagate is not some groundbreaking Islamic modernism but a neotraditionalist approach centered on what they consider an authentic—that is, politically subservient—understanding of *al-islam al-shami* (Syrian-Levantine Islam).²²³

Unlike other social groups such as peasants, workers, and students, men of religion had not been incorporated into Soviet-style popular organizations during the first decades of Baathist rule. This meant limited access to state resources and decisionmakers but also an ethically comfortable isolation from the secular-minded, Alawite-dominated elements that rule over those state agencies. By contrast, the team was jointly established by the Ministry of Religious Endowments and the intensely loyalist National Union of Syrian Students as an “integral part” of the union, as explained by Darin Suleiman, who has been head of the union since 2020 and who attended most major events held by the Youth Religious Team in pride of place.²²⁴

Very much like the Baath Party itself, the team is best conceived of as a patronage structure that members join in search of political and security benefits rather than as a political movement eliciting genuine ideological conviction in its ranks. The main incentives for joining it are privileges granted to members by the ministry and security apparatus regarding appointments and authorizations for religious activities.²²⁵ This patronage has proven particularly appealing in formerly rebel-held areas, which remain submitted to drastic security measures.²²⁶ However, the moral discomfort aroused by this bargain is such that some scholars—including team members themselves—advance religious arguments to discourage their colleagues from joining it.²²⁷

Thus, through the Youth Religious Team, the ministry is propping up a new generation of clerics that owe little to their own scholarly merits and much to their political connections. Besides ethical considerations, there are limitations to this strategy. In spite of Abdullah al-Sayyed's exaltation of young religious scholars as more capable of propagating a flexible religious discourse than their elders, younger scholars are not about to replace their more experienced colleagues.²²⁸ In the religious field at least, the Assad regime still needs the religious old guard's scholarly credibility, as well as its human and institutional resources. In 2019, Assad inaugurated the International Islamic Cham Center on confronting terrorism and extremism not in the company of the Youth Religious Team but instead with senior ulema from the Fath Institute and the Kuftaro Academy (including then mufti of Damascus and its countryside, Adnan al-Afiyuni, who was appointed as the center's director).²²⁹ A few months later, Umayyad Mosque preacher Ma'mun Rahme, whose unrestrained pro-regime enthusiasm was inversely proportional to the reverence he inspired among the faithful, was replaced by Tawfiq al-Buti, the son of aforementioned religious luminary, Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti.²³⁰

Support from the mukhabarat is likely to ensure that the team will remain a key player within the Sunni religious field. However, in Syrian politics at large, the Sayyeds' ambitions have faced significant setbacks. Upon its establishment in 2016, the Youth Religious Team had four members of its fifteen-member Central Council elected to the People's Assembly, Syria's parliament.²³¹ Team affiliates—who replaced the handful of more senior ulema who had represented religious-minded Sunni constituencies in parliament since the early 1970s—included female preacher Farah Hamsho, the sister of crony businessman Muhammad Hamsho, and Muhammad Zuray'a, who was appointed as the assembly's secretary.²³² However, not a single Sunni religious candidate succeeded in the next round of legislative elections that was held in 2020.²³³ Two years earlier, the Sayyeds faced another political setback when explicit mention of the Youth Religious Team in Decree 16/2018 (the draft version of Law 31/2018) was eventually replaced with a mere reference to *al-'unsur al-shababi* (the young element).²³⁴

The team's political misfortunes resulted, first, from the considerable anxiety its emergence sparked among members of pro-regime minority constituencies, who view any political empowerment of conservative Sunnis as an existential threat and who initially perceived the team as an Islamic movement akin to the Muslim Brotherhood.²³⁵ Opposition to the Sayyeds' policies broke out at the People's Assembly and on social media upon the release of Decree 16/2018, as both Latakia Province's parliamentary representative Nabil Salih and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (which draws the bulk of its membership from Alawite and Christian communities) denounced what it called an attempt at "Islamizing society."²³⁶ This outcry resulted in several amendments to the draft law, including the deletion of the mention of the team and the lifting of a provision allowing the ministry to recruit foreign nationals, which was widely interpreted as a means to incorporate Iran-backed Twelver Shia missionaries into Syria's religious bureaucracy.²³⁷

Minority constituencies had already expressed their opposition to the Sunni religious establishment in 2016 during an outreach event held by the Youth Religious Team in the Alawite-majority province of Tartus. Obviously uncomfortable Sunni clerics had to face attacks from participants reproaching them for giving firebrand sermons and for instilling in their listeners "the fear of God more than the love of God."²³⁸ In recent years, secular-minded observers have blamed various instances of censorship and imposed public morality on the ministry's alleged hidden influence.²³⁹

In fact, these fears appear to be overblown.

On matters of strategic importance, the religious establishment is less able to shape regime policies than it used to be before the civil war. Notably, a committee of conservative legal experts provoked

widespread indignation in secularist circles in 2009 by drafting amendments to Syria's personal status law. The government ultimately withdrew the amendments, but the affair nevertheless demonstrated the influence of conservative religious opinion on social matters.²⁴⁰ Ten years later, however, the government enacted amendments that shifted the personal status law in a somewhat more secular direction, changes that were described by conservative observers as "violations of sharia."²⁴¹

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Finally, the most significant limitation on the empowerment of the Youth Religious Team and of Sunni clerics at large is their questionable political relevance for the regime. In that respect, Sunni religious elites compare unfavorably with far more resourceful players—namely, paramilitary leaders and war profiteers—whose growing influence resulted in the former's exclusion from parliament in 2020.²⁴² Except for topmost religious cronies such as al-Sayyed and Hassoun, the ulema have traditionally been tied to businessmen running small- and medium-sized businesses who have been overshadowed by the aforementioned war-created economic elites.²⁴³ Moreover, whereas clerical go-betweens proved instrumental in the negotiated surrender of rebel-held localities around Damascus from 2014 onward, those so-called sheikhs of reconciliation lost much of their relevance after the regime completed the reconquest of the capital's suburbs in 2018. Most prominent among them was al-Afiyuni, who died in an October 2020 car bombing while in the company of Sheikh 'Adil Mastu (who survived the blast) in Qudsaya, a town the two men had once helped return to regime control.²⁴⁴ By a troubling coincidence, the assassination occurred on the day the People's Assembly approved a decree abolishing the National Reconciliation Committee (the body in charge of supervising local negotiated surrenders), which a member of parliament described as now being "useless."²⁴⁵

Religious Governance in Idlib Province

An early insurgent stronghold, the province of Idlib fell entirely to the rebels in 2015 following an offensive by the Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), a military coalition dominated by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani's Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. Between 2017 and 2019, several rounds of infighting resulted in the victory of Jabhat al-Nusra (by then renamed as HTS) over Ahrar al-Sham and its allies. The infighting also led to the submission of the province to the authority of an HTS-affiliated civilian administration, the Syrian Salvation Government. From a military perspective, the region became a de facto Turkish protectorate when Ankara's army, which had deployed there as an observation force in 2017, forcefully repelled a major regime offensive in early 2020.

Among the four state or state-like entities now ruling over parts of Syria, HTS is the only one that overtly endorses an Islamist ideology. Originally a franchise of the Islamic State in Iraq, and then the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra broke with the latter in 2016 and renamed itself HTS the

following year. Subsequently, al-Jolani's group gradually distanced itself from transnational jihadi ideals and adopted an increasingly pragmatic, Syria-centered ideology.

HTS's Islamist outlook is reflected, first, in the forward-looking denomination of the Syrian Salvation Government's dedicated agency, namely, the *Wizarat al-Awqaf wa-l-Da'wa wal-Irshad* (Ministry of Religious Endowments, Islamic Call and Guidance). HTS sees the agency as particularly strategic: Whereas the Syrian Salvation Government upon being established in 2017 allocated ten out of eleven portfolios to sympathetic yet formally independent figures, the Ministry of Religious Endowments (HTS) was entrusted to a senior HTS member—namely, then chairman of the group's al-Majlis al-Shar'i (Legal-Religious Council), Anas Muhammad Bashir al-Mousa, also known as Bahir al-Shami.²⁴⁶ A subsequent holder of the post was Ibrahim Shasho, who defected from Ahrar al-Sham to HTS after his former faction endorsed codified law in June 2017.²⁴⁷

While the ministry is concerned with the management of religious institutions, the Syrian Salvation Government's *marja'iyya* (legal-religious reference) is al-Majlis al-A'la li-l-Ifta' (the Higher Fatwa Council), which was established in April 2019. The latter is also embedded within HTS's own religious apparatus: Besides the ministers of religious endowments and justice, its founding members include HTS's two top *shar'is* (Islamic jurists), namely, 'Abd al-Rahim 'Atun (also known as Abu Abdullah al-Shami) and Mazhar al-Ways.²⁴⁸

HTS's direct control over religious institutions entails policies that interviewees among Idlib-based clerics uniformly describe as highly centralized and authoritarian. Everyday monitoring of local mosque activities is carried out by a ministry-appointed, HTS-loyal *mas'ul al-masajid* (mosque officer).²⁴⁹ Mosque officers have been charged with putting an end to the unregulated character of mosque-based lessons and conferences that has prevailed since the advent of insurgent rule in 2012.²⁵⁰

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temporarily substituted with HTS-affiliated *shar'is* at sensitive political moments; preachers who refused to step aside could be permanently dismissed. This particularly has been the case during the repeated rounds of infighting between HTS and other factions since 2017. Preachers who are not aligned with HTS have been reluctant to support al-Jolani's group in such contexts because of a deep-seated belief in the sinful character of rebel fratricide, and/or because they had sympathies for HTS's rivals.²⁵³ As one interviewee remembers, "during HTS's war against the Nur al-Din Zenki Movement [around late 2018 and early 2019], [HTS leaders] asked a respected Friday preacher to stay home while they sent one of their kids to give the sermon and incite people to fight Zenki."²⁵⁴

Appointments and dismissals of imams and preachers are strictly conditioned on compliance with official guidelines.²⁵¹ As a result, several clerics have been replaced with HTS affiliates and sympathizers.²⁵² Independent *khatibs* (preachers at Friday prayers) who retained their position were

In spite of the above, there are several limitations to HTS's domination over Idlib's religious field. First, attempts to placate local communities through displays of pragmatism have resulted in policies that, although inflexible on political loyalty, appear more lenient on matters of religious doctrine. There has been no wholesale imposition of the group's Salafist creed over local men of religion who, to a non-negligible extent, still embrace the Sufi version of Islam that used to be dominant before 2011. Dismissals of clerics on religious grounds have most often been a pretext for politically motivated decisions. Moreover, whereas Salafists generally eschew *madhabib* (established schools of jurisprudence), HTS has started to promote the teaching and judicial use of the Shafi'i school (the most widespread school of Islamic jurisprudence in the Syrian countryside) to ease relations with homegrown men of religion and to stifle the most doctrinaire jihadi shar'is among its ranks.²⁵⁵ Such doctrinaires often belong to HTS's foreign contingent of clerics, who have largely been kept away from Friday pulpits and mostly officiate as military chaplains.²⁵⁶

HTS's grip over the religious field has proven softer in regions where it does not hold full military dominance over other rebel factions, such as in the western countryside of Aleppo.²⁵⁷ This is more generally the case outside major population centers, considering that the Syrian Salvation Government's religious bureaucracy has invested the bulk of its (limited) economic and human resources in the control of the urban religious field.²⁵⁸ HTS's Ministry of Religious Endowments being unable to pay salaries for all mosque personnel, the mosque personnel often have to rely on their own resources and those of local communities.²⁵⁹ Appointments of ministry-affiliated clerics thus occur when political necessity dictates; in the summer of 2020, for instance, HTS asserted its authority over the village of Arab Sa'id, which until then was controlled by the al-Qaeda loyalists of the group called Hurras al-Din.²⁶⁰

The management of specialist Islamic education conforms to the mixed pattern expounded above. HTS runs its own Preachers Training Institute, while key positions are occupied by HTS sympathizers such as Anas 'Ayrut, the leader of the 2011 uprising in Banyas in Tartus Governorate who succeeded Shasho as dean of the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Idlib.²⁶¹ Yet independent Islamic institutes continue to operate in Idlib. The Syrian Salvation Government closed down or seized institutions it perceived as hostile, such as Idlib's branches of the Free Aleppo University, which is affiliated with the rival Syrian Interim Government.²⁶² At the same time, it has continued to tolerate sharia institutes run by non-Salafist groups that are seen as politically neutral, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Tabligh, both of which teach Ash'ari theology, which contradicts the Salafist creed.²⁶³

Likewise, the Syrian Salvation Government has opted for strict monitoring, rather than a full takeover, in its relations with major Islamic charities such as Idlib's Jam'iyyat al-Nahdat al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Renaissance Association). Self-restraint in this matter derives from a concern, as the saying goes, to avoid "killing the goose that lays the golden eggs"—that is, putting off donors, including the Turkish Diyanet and the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Jam'iyyat 'Ita' (Giving Association), by replacing the existing management with HTS loyalists.²⁶⁴

As a result of HTS's Islamist nature, the remit of religious affairs is not as clearly delimited among Idlib's political institutions as it is in other Syrian polities. Legal matters, in particular, are closely interconnected with religious affairs, notably because they are run by clerics rather than by experts in secular law. Prior

to his appointment as Minister of Religious Endowments, al-Mousa chaired the court of appeals in the Army of Conquest coalition.²⁶⁵ His successor, Shasho, had served as minister of justice in the Syrian Salvation Government's first line-up.²⁶⁶ Shasho himself was replaced in the latter position by Anas Mansur Sulayman, a sharia graduate who built his credentials by serving as a judge in post-2011 sharia courts.²⁶⁷ Accordingly, the first general conference of Idlib's heads of courts in May 2020 was jointly held by the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Religious Endowments (HTS).²⁶⁸

The Syrian Salvation Government's religious policies also extend into the economic realm. As a means of bolstering the government's ability to levy income tax (a major challenge for both state and nonstate actors ruling over Syrian territory), the Ministry of Religious Endowments (HTS) supervised the establishment of al-Hay'a al-'Amma li-l-Zakat (the General Authority for Zakat), whose task is to centralize the collection of compulsory alms and their redistribution to the needy. In the fall of 2019, popular protests erupted in the northwestern city of Kafr Takharim after officers of zakat, or the mandatory annual charitable donations made by Muslims, seized the alms' share of oil from users of olive presses. Discontent resulted from excessive levies (a fact that the zakat authority itself eventually acknowledged by demonstratively returning the oil to some farmers) but also from a broader rejection of the Syrian Salvation Government's legitimacy, as local communities preferred to continue paying zakat into grassroots, decentralized schemes.²⁶⁹ Similar, albeit less visible, dissatisfaction has been provoked by the ministry's drive to register religious endowments and centralize their revenues (against the preferences of local communities) for schemes in which endowments specifically cater to the mosque to which they are attached.²⁷⁰

Because the Syrian Salvation Government's *raison d'être* is to confer a modicum of respectability on HTS's rule in the eye of foreign actors and local communities, the most controversial aspect of Islamist governance in Idlib is not carried out by the Syrian Salvation Government but by bodies that are directly commanded by HTS. That greatest source of controversy is the practice of *hisba*, or the enforcement of religious norms, particularly in terms of female modesty and gender segregation, in public spaces. Following the near-complete takeover of Idlib in 2017, the group established a hisba apparatus named Sawa'id al-Khayr (Arms of Good).²⁷¹ The apparatus became particularly active in the spring of 2018, when a new round of infighting against Ahrar al-Sham and its allied factions led to a rare stalemate that made HTS appear vulnerable, hence particularly eager to tighten its control over society.²⁷² Yet popular discontent with hisba practices and this heavy-handed interference in the operations of educational and medical institutions subsequently convinced HTS to freeze the activities of the Arms of Good.²⁷³ By early 2019, another crushing victory against rival rebel factions allowed HTS to concentrate on polishing its image and, more vitally, on preparing the defense of Idlib against a looming large-scale loyalist offensive.

HTS's religious police reemerged in March 2020 under the name Markaz al-Falah (Bliss Center), whose members subsequently arrested the head of a midwifery institute following a drawing exhibition featuring a "masonic emblem" (in reality, the female symbol: ♀).²⁷⁴ This time, the return of HTS's vice squad seemed related to concerns over the group's internal cohesion. An increasingly blunt embrace of *realpolitik* (a *de facto* military partnership with the Turkish army, acceptance of the March 5 Turkish-Russian ceasefire, and a crackdown on Hurras al-Din) was met with unease by hardliners. Yet religious actors typically see the sacred realm as a more legitimate and solid grounds for challenging the incumbent than purely political considerations. Therefore, HTS dissidents such as Egyptian cleric Abu al-Yaqzan

al-Masri and military commander Abu Malik al-Telli (who established his own short-lived faction before being arrested by HTS) seized the opportunity of the coronavirus pandemic-induced closure of mosques in April to voice their criticism of the Syrian Salvation Government.²⁷⁵ But HTS's Consultative Council member Abu al-Fath al-Farghali, another Egyptian hawk who remained loyal to al-Jolani, insisted that, notwithstanding the political compromises imposed on the group by the Turkish military buildup of February 2020, the domestic implementation of sharia remained a red line.²⁷⁶ Against this background, the reactivation of the hisba might be interpreted as a means of enticing figures like al-Farghali and the many foreigners that reportedly man the Bliss Center into remaining loyal to HTS rather than joining Hurras al-Din or other hardline groups.²⁷⁷ This expedient might only be temporary, however, and is likely to become unnecessary given HTS's ever-increasing military superiority over its radical contenders.

Religious Governance in Turkish-Controlled Areas

The Turkish-controlled zone of northern Syria was established through three military operations. First in 2016–2017, Operation Euphrates Shield secured the rebel-held city of Azaz and expelled the Islamic State from the northwestern cities Jarablus and al-Bab. Then in 2018, Operation Olive Branch seized the Kurdish-majority region of Afrin from the PKK-aligned People's Protection Units (YPG). Finally, in 2019, Operation Peace Spring targeted a border strip extending from Tell Abyad to Ras al-Ayn.²⁷⁸

Religious institutions in those areas stand out due to their decentralized, multilayered, and fragmented character. This is because Ankara's approach to governance in northern Syria simultaneously relies on the co-optation of mutually competing Syrian revolutionary structures and on the direct involvement of Turkish institutions.

Like all rebel-held Syrian regions, northern Syria witnessed a mushrooming of uncoordinated grassroots religious initiatives following the expulsion of regime troops in 2012. A myriad of religious schools, Islamic charities, and ulema leagues were created by local men of religion, rebel factions, and foreign (mostly Gulf-based) sponsors.²⁷⁹ In the province of Aleppo, the Legal-Religious Council began a process of bottom-up coordination of these initiatives in 2013.²⁸⁰ Initially conceived of as a syndicate for clerics, the council gradually came to claim—against similar ambitions on the part of Islamist factions like Ahrar al-Sham and HTS's predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra—the status of a quasi-official institution exerting prerogatives formerly held by the Assad regime's Ministry of Religious Endowments.²⁸¹ The council saw itself as the nucleus of a new Ministry of Religious Endowments to be established within the Gaziantep-based Syrian Interim Government of the Syrian National Coalition (the largest opposition alliance), but the latter focused its limited resources on other priorities, namely, education and healthcare.²⁸² Formal cooperation between the council and the interim government was thus initially limited to the joint management of the three dozen *thanawiyyat shar'iyya* (sharia secondary schools) established by the council.²⁸³

In 2014, the Legal-Religious Council became a founding component of the Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council. In a similarly bottom-up fashion, the latter assembled a vast array of ulama organizations from all over Syria and the diaspora, including Sufis, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and (non-jihadi) Salafists.²⁸⁴ The Syrian Islamic Council was conceived of as a purely scholarly, non-executive body claiming

the status of marja'iyya for the Syrian opposition. Accordingly, it has been chiefly concerned with the issuance of fatwas and statements on religious issues (such as setting the amount of Ramadan alms), though it also has addressed political developments such as disputes between rebel factions.²⁸⁵ Although the council generally aligns with Turkish policies, it recently demonstrated a degree of independence by condemning those who leave the domestic front to fight abroad, an oblique reference to Syrians who volunteered as mercenaries to participate in Ankara's military interventions in Libya and Azerbaijan.²⁸⁶

When Operation Euphrates Shield was launched in 2016, the Legal-Religious Council, with the support of the Syrian Islamic Council and the Syrian Interim Government, presented itself to Turkish authorities as the most suitable partner to administer Islam in the area.²⁸⁷ Yet, reflecting in this a broader pattern of Turkish governance in northern Syria,²⁸⁸ Ankara eventually tasked each major town's *al-majlis al-mahalli* (local council) with establishing an *idarat al-awqaf wa-l-ifta' wa-l-shu'un al-diniyya* (directorates of endowments, fatwa, and religious affairs). Local directorates are responsible for managing endowments, appointing mosque personnel and muftis, organizing Quran classes, and monitoring Friday sermons in their respective districts. The nineteen such directorates that saw the light of day in the three zones of Turkish military operations were later assembled into a loose single *idara* (administration), while in reality they reported directly to the Diyanet.²⁸⁹ The latter's *vakif* (foundation) is the chief provider of funding for the restoration, maintenance, and staffing of mosques.²⁹⁰ Turkey also imposed its own model of recruitment of mosque personnel through a competitive examination, which contrasts with the connection-based model that prevailed before 2011.²⁹¹ By May 2019, the Diyanet claimed to have hired over 1,400 clerics in northern Syria.²⁹²

The Legal-Religious Council and the Syrian Islamic Council reacted to their marginalization at the hands of local directorates by encouraging the Syrian Interim Government to finally establish its own Hay'at al-Awqaf wa-l-Shu'un al-Diniyya (Authority of Endowments and Religious Affairs), a hundred-members-strong administration, in January 2018. The authority's president since that date has been Rafa'a 'Abd al-Fattah, a founding member of the Syrian Islamic Council. Accordingly, the authority vocally proclaims its recognition of the Syrian Islamic Council as its marja'iyya.²⁹³ On matters of mosque management,

Administrative fragmentation explains the exceedingly complex structure of the Islamic educational sector in northern Syria.

the role of the authority is apparently confined to Afrin, Ras al-Ayn, and Tell Abyad, due to the absence of preexisting local councils following the uprooting of PKK-aligned institutions upon Turkey's capture of those areas.²⁹⁴ The authority plays a more significant role in the educational realm because it inherited the management of the sharia high schools formerly affiliated with the Legal-Religious Council and because of the leverage it derives from the Syrian Interim Government's ability to standardize diplomas and have them recognized by national institutions of higher learning in Syria and abroad.²⁹⁵

Besides sheer administrative rivalries, there are doctrinal dimensions to the competition between local directorates and the Syrian Interim Government's religious affairs authority. The former are dominated by homegrown, traditionalist, Sufi-leaning scholars who intend to take advantage of their empowerment

by the Diyanet to roll back Salafist influence. The latter remains strong as a result of the legacy of the Islamic State's three-year rule over the al-Bab area, the ongoing presence of Salafist-leaning rebel factions like Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, and the activities of Gulf-funded nongovernmental organizations like the Taj Association for Quran Teaching.²⁹⁶ By contrast, the nexus between the Syrian Islamic Council and the Authority of Endowments and Religious Affairs displays an inclusive attitude reflecting its own pluralistic makeup. Moreover, whereas the directorates and Turkish authorities favor a statist, top-down approach to the management of religion and education, the authority, once again echoing the Syrian Islamic Council's preferences, emphasizes the need to facilitate the role of what authority members call religious civil society—that is, the many grassroots initiatives that appeared from 2012 onward.²⁹⁷

Administrative fragmentation explains the exceedingly complex structure of the Islamic educational sector in northern Syria. At the middle and high school levels, it includes three distinct categories. First, there are sharia secondary schools, which are religious courses of study within general, nonvocational high schools, affiliated with either local councils or the Interim Government. Then there are equivalent Imam-Khatib high schools directly attached to the Turkish Ministry of Education.²⁹⁸ Finally, northern Syria has *ma'ahid shar'iyya* (authority-affiliated private Islamic institutes, or vocational Islamic high schools) like the Mecca Institute of the League of Syrian Ulama—itself linked to the Muslim Brotherhood—and the Abdallah Ibn Hudhafa al-Sihami Institute run by the Ahbab Association, a local offspring of the Jama'at ad-Da'wa wat-Tabligh.²⁹⁹ In the realm of higher Islamic studies, likewise, the offer is divided between the Faculty of Sharia of the Syrian Interim Government–affiliated Free Aleppo University; branches of the Turkish Gaziantep University, such as the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Azaz or the Sharia Institute in Jarablus; and the al-Bab branch of Başakşehir Academy, a private, Istanbul-based, Syrian-run university.³⁰⁰

The multiplicity of Islamic educational institutions in northern Syria should not be mistaken for the extent of their reach. Members of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Azaz lament that sharia institutes and secondary schools only cater to a minuscule share (which they estimate at around 1 percent) of all school pupils in northern Syria.³⁰¹ This low figure does not necessarily constitute evidence of a decrease in religiosity among locals, as it could also be explained by concerns over career opportunities. Yet it is consistent with other trends that local men of religion interpret as signs of a popular backlash against religious norms which, in their view, finds its origin in the abuses committed by the Islamic State and other hardline Islamist rebels.³⁰² Preventing the resurgence of *ghuluw* (extremism) and the spread of irreligion are the twin challenges that local religious institutions see themselves as poised to face in the future.

Religious Governance in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which was proclaimed in 2018, is the latest iteration to date of the governance structure first established in 2012 by the YPG in the Kurdish-majority areas of Afrin, Kobane, and Qamishli. Between 2015 and 2019, U.S. military support against the Islamic State allowed the YPG and its partners within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to expand southward into Arab-majority areas of the provinces of al-Hasakah, Raqqqa, and Deir ez-Zor.

Official religious institutions in the autonomous administration have been shaped by three main dynamics. First, there is the leftist, secularist, and feminist ideology of PKK founder and ideologue Abdullah Öcalan. The second one is a top-down, hegemonic party model of governance that leaves very little space for private initiatives. And the third is the post-2015 inclusion of large Arab communities that remain suspected of harboring sympathies for the Islamic State and radical interpretations of Islam in general.

Following the proclamation of the Rojava self-rule administration in 2014, *hay'at diniyya* (religious bodies) were established in the three cantons of Afrin, Jazira (including Qamishli and al-Hasakah), and Kobane.³⁰³ In 2016, these bodies were placed under the authority of the *Maktab Shu'un al-Adiyan wal-Mu'taqadat* (Bureau of Religions and Beliefs) for Northern and Eastern Syria.³⁰⁴ Whereas all official religious institutions in Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East and North Africa define themselves as primarily—or exclusively—Islamic, the bureau is inherently conceived as pluralistic. First, its name not only makes space for several religions but also for potentially nonreligious beliefs. Second, its logo gives the same importance to the symbols of Islam (a crescent), Christianity (a cross and a dove), and Yezidism (a peacock). Third, it is headed by three *ra'is mushtarak* (co-presidents) representing each of the three religions.³⁰⁵ Fourth, it is supplemented with a *Maktab Multaqa al-Adiyan* (Bureau for Religious Encounter) whose task is to reach out to non-Muslim communities inside the autonomous administration and abroad.³⁰⁶

Besides a heavy emphasis on tolerance and religious coexistence, another key feature of the autonomous administration's religious discourse is an insistence on gender equality. Mirroring the administration's Executive Council, the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs is headed by a mixed co-presidency: while the Syriac Christian and Yezidi presidents are men, the Muslim president is a woman, namely, a sharia graduate from al-Azhar University named 'Aziza Khanafir.³⁰⁷

The bureau is an executive body rather than a *marja'iyya*. The latter function is exerted by the *Mu'tamar al-Mujtama' al-Dimuqrati al-Islami* (Islamic Democratic Society Congress), which originated as the Union of Muslim Scholars in the Jazira Canton (also called the Union of Kurdish Muslim Scholars). The union was established in 2015 by the local autonomous administration as a means of co-opting clerics and, as a founding member has explained, to “get rid” of extremist fatwas and scholars.³⁰⁸

Union members were subsequently appointed to key positions within the autonomous administration's religious institutions. Union chairman Mohammed Mullah Rashid Gharzani became the head of the Islamic Democratic Society Congress upon its establishment in 2019.³⁰⁹ Sheikh Muhammad al-Qadiri is the son of 'Ubayd Allah al-Qadiri, a prominent figure of the Qadiriyya Sufi order based in Amuda, a town near the Turkish border, and whose following includes many Arabs from the Euphrates Valley.³¹⁰ Muhammad al-Qadiri presided over the Religious Body of the Jazira Canton upon its establishment and continues to exert a supervisory role over the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs in his capacity as head of the organization and administration.³¹¹ In parallel, he has occupied political positions such as head of the *Hay'at al-A'yan* (Council of Dignitaries), which primarily includes tribal chiefs and board member in the *Minassa Jamahiriyya* (Peopledom Platform), a coalition that promotes unity among Syrian Kurdish parties.³¹² The union's media chief, Duran al-Hashimi, a young scholar also affiliated with the Qadiriyya,

owes the trust of the autonomous administration's authorities to his participation in the defense of Rojava as a fighter and military chaplain.³¹³ He has played crucial roles such as manager of investment projects related to religious endowments and superintendent for local branches of the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs established in Arab-majority areas after their capture from the Islamic State.³¹⁴

The transformation of the Union of Muslim Scholars into the Islamic Democratic Society Congress indicated the extent of the PKK's ideological influence over religious governance in the autonomous administration. During the first decade of this century, Öcalan

evolved from a rigidly antireligious stance toward a tactical embrace of Islam, whose neglect, he argued, was responsible for the failure of many leftist movements across the region.³¹⁵ According to Rahman Dag, Öcalan extolled what he called cultural Islam, which forms the basis of Islamic society in opposition to state-dominated or political interpretations of religion championed by the PKK's Islamist enemies.³¹⁶ As Kurdish self-rule consolidated in northern Syria from 2012 onward, Öcalan's local followers also found themselves ruling over other ethnic groups like Arabs and Assyrians. As such, the party's ideologues used the Charter of Medina, which was designed by the Prophet upon his arrival in the city of Medina, as a means of conferring Islamic legitimacy upon the notions of peaceful coexistence and equality of rights between Muslims and non-Muslims and between Muslims of various tribes and origins. It was on the basis of these elaborations, and upon Öcalan's call, that the first Democratic Islam Congress was held in 2014 in Diyarbakir, a Kurdish city in Turkey along the Tigris River.³¹⁷ Likewise, the first Islamic Democratic Society Congress that met in Rumeilan (Syrian Jazira) in April 2019 opened with a reading of Öcalan's letter to the 2014 congress and took place under the slogan "reviving the Charter of Medina." Accordingly, the congress adopted a banner featuring the Prophet's shrine in Medina.³¹⁸

The congress decided to incorporate the essentially Kurdish Union of Muslim Scholars into a multiethnic structure, which meant including Arab scholars such as Mufti of Manbij 'Abd al-Razzaq Kalo as a congress speaker and establishing its headquarters in the Arab-majority Syrian city of al-Hasakah.³¹⁹ The timing of this shift was significant, as it shortly followed the SDF's capture of the Islamic State's last stronghold in the Syrian town of Baghuz Fawqani, which had put an end to four years of military expansion that brought sizeable Arab communities under the autonomous administration's purview.

The congress also absorbed the union's female counterpart, the Religious Foundation for the Muslim Woman. Resultingly, the three hundred attendants elected female scholar Dalal Khalil as co-president of the congress with Gharzani and created a mixed consultative council of twenty-five members.³²⁰ Reflecting on the autonomous administration's decision to increase its investment in the control of the religious field, the congress was conceived as an all-encompassing Islamic establishment. As a marja'iyya, it issues fatwas such as the one that provided a religious rationale for the decision by the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs to close mosques during the coronavirus pandemic. The congress also denounced the re-publication of French cartoons of the Prophet in September 2020.³²¹ It runs an Islamic college (the Democratic Islam Academy), secondary vocational Islamic schools (al-Salam institutes), Quran memorization circles,

Reflecting on the autonomous administration's decision to increase its investment in the control of the religious field, the congress was conceived as an all-encompassing Islamic establishment.

a charity (al-Salam Humanitarian Association), and a journal (*Social Islam*).³²² Finally, since 2019, it has been liaising with Saudi authorities to organize the pilgrimages of the autonomous administration's residents to Mecca. The launch of this partnership ended a seven-year monopoly of the Syrian National Coalition's Pilgrimage Committee in this domain.³²³

Like the congress, the Democratic Islam Academy is co-presided by Gharzani and Khalil.³²⁴ Its four-year course trains male pupils as imams and Friday preachers, and their female classmates (who made up three-fourths of the class of 2019's thirty students) as religious teachers in mosques and schools.³²⁵ The academy seemingly endorses the autonomous administration's ideological orientations, as illustrated by a quote from Öcalan that features on its banner (which reads "religion is the memory of society").³²⁶ Its peculiar logo symbolizes the superiority of reasoning and creativity over rote learning and indoctrination, as it consists of a brain and an open book—not the Quran that appears on the emblem of numerous Islamic organizations, but a blank book surmounted by a pen. In practice, however, the academy features more conservative elements that reflect the mindset of the traditionalist Sufi scholars who presided over its establishment. Indeed, male and female pupils attend classes in separate rooms, and jurisprudence syllabi are mostly based on the Shafi'i school of *fiqh* (human attempts to understand and apply jurisprudence of sharia).³²⁷

It was precisely to preserve its vocational and relatively traditional character that the academy was not included in the more decidedly modernist Faculty of Religious Studies that was inaugurated at Rojava University in 2020.³²⁸ Like the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs, the faculty at Rojava University is a pluralistic institution consisting of three departments for Islam, Christianity, and Yezidism. A modicum of gender balance was achieved, here again, through the appointment of a female scholar as head of the Islamic department. Remarkably, students of all religious backgrounds follow the same curriculum during the first two years of study and only specialize in the third and fourth years.³²⁹ As a result of this revolutionary approach, the faculty was hailed by Muhammad Habash, an influential Dubai-based cleric and former member of the Syrian parliament who has been vilified by his senior colleagues due to his claim that Islam holds no monopoly on eternal salvation.³³⁰

The local management of Islam in the autonomous administration lies with *mu'assasat diniyya* (religious institutions) affiliated with the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs. The latter are supposed to work hand in hand with consultative councils of local ulema, but in Arab-majority areas, at least, those councils do not seem to play any effective role.³³¹ Each religious institution is officially headed by a local cleric, typically with a Sufi background (such as Ali al-Nayif al-Shu'ayb in Raqqa, 'Abd al-Razzaq Kalo in Manbij, and Najm al-Din al-Husseini in Deir ez-Zor).³³²

Local religious institutions deal with day-to-day issues such as mosque appointments and Friday sermons, which they write and distribute to the city's preachers. The local religious institutions operate under the close supervision of a Kurdish official known as the *kadir al-awqaf* (cadre of religious endowments)—*kadro* (cadre) refers to diehard PKK loyalists who control key positions within the SDF and the autonomous administration.³³³ On two occasions at least, decisions made by local religious institutions (a threat to arrest whoever might publicly break the Ramadan fast in Manbij in 2018 and the reinstatement of collective prayers in mosques in Raqqa during the coronavirus pandemic) were repealed immediately

after they were announced.³³⁴ Local religious bureaucrats seem to enjoy slightly more autonomy at the ideological level. In February 2020, for instance, the Religious Institution in Raqqa hosted the first Islamic conference held in the city since its capture from the Islamic State by the SDF two years earlier.³³⁵ Although the conference’s final statement included obligatory references to moderation and tolerance, it made no mention of the more controversial concept of democratic Islam.³³⁶

The consolidation and expansion of the autonomous administration’s religious institutions should not be interpreted as a break with the PKK’s secularist agenda, which remains alive and well, as illustrated by the suppression of Islamic education in school curricula.³³⁷ Unlike their counterparts in other regions of Syria (including in regime-held areas), the autonomous administration’s religious institutions are not supposed to promote Islamic values. Instead, as illustrated by the establishment of the Islamic Democratic Society Congress, they are aimed at ensuring that religious discourse and practices strictly comply with the ruling party’s ideology. No Islamic charities, schools, or movements are tolerated outside the realm of official institutions—except for al-Hasakah’s ‘Irfan Institute, a large vocational Islamic high school run by the Kurdish-majority Naqshbandi Khaznawi Sufi order, which likely retained its position because of its size and influence.³³⁸ Imams and preachers have been dismissed due to accusations of extremism but also, reportedly, for political offenses such as failing to attend demonstrations against Turkey.³³⁹

At the same time, the process described above is not merely top-down. It also reflects the efforts of religious actors who, faced with an unfavorable political environment, struggle to remain relevant by espousing the incumbent’s discourse. In her capacity as the Democratic Islam Academy co-president, Khalil explains, “at the beginning we faced significant difficulties because Islam was looked upon negatively, so acceptance of such an academy seemed impossible. However, through insistence and efforts, we managed to clarify things and make people revise their views on Islam.”³⁴⁰ Similarly, the booklet of the first Islamic Democratic Society Congress defended the expression “democratic Islam” (against objections that there is only one Islam and that it doesn’t suffer epithets) by emphasizing the need to “frame our Islamic thought in a way that reassures people.”³⁴¹ The autonomous administration’s leadership is thus faced with the same problem as twentieth-century secularist rulers across the region, including the Syrian Baathist regime: its embrace of Islam is purely tactical, but its control of the religious field relies on partners who, unlike their political masters, take religion seriously.

Beyond Borders: The Syrian Islamic Council

The Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council is arguably the only Syrian religious institution whose influence meaningfully extends beyond regional and national borders. This is due, first, to inherent features such as its relative independence and inclusion of some of Syria’s most respected scholars. For instance, in January 2021, condolences for the death of council member Sheikh Adnan al-Saqqa even came from HTS, in recognition of the deceased’s scholarly merits and in spite of the council’s vocal support for rebel factions that had battled al-Jolani’s men in previous years.³⁴² The Syrian Islamic Council is, to put it simply, the only major religious body in Syria that is perceived as a political actor in its own right rather than as a mere mouthpiece for its political patron. Whereas the religious apparatuses of the regime, HTS, and YPG are largely ignored (or derided) by their detractors, the Syrian Islamic Council has been excoriated by

HTS shar'is for its hostility to their group and was even the target of demonstrations held by the ulema of the autonomous administration in protest over the council's support for Operation Peace Spring in 2019.³⁴³

The Syrian Islamic Council is also the leading religious authority among the Syrian diaspora. It does not command unquestioned loyalty, of course: Syrian expatriates might follow other ulema living in exile or inside Syria, affiliate themselves with non-Syrian Islamic groups and figures, or disregard religious leaders altogether. Yet the council's dominant position stems from a lack of meaningful challengers, considering that there has been no real attempt at establishing an alternative Sunni religious authority within the Syrian diaspora. Moreover, few exiled ulema that are not affiliated with the council have secured or retained significant standing—a figure like Sufi scholar Muhammad Abul Huda al-Yaqoubi is rather exceptional in that respect.³⁴⁴

Conclusion

After a decade of civil war, official religious institutions across Syria are now organized along patterns that vary widely from one region to another. In regime-held areas, the conflict has accelerated the nationalization of the religious field under the authority of al-Sayyed and at the expense of his rival Hassoun, the grand mufti. Notably, al-Sayyed has promoted a new generation of scholars led by his son Abdullah through the establishment of the Youth Religious Team, which, for the first time in the history of Baathist Syria, has brought junior men of religion into the regime's popular organizations. In Idlib, Islamist governance has translated into direct control of clerics affiliated with the ruling HTS over the Syrian Salvation Government's Ministry of Religious Endowments. The prerogatives of official religious institutions extend to the realms of justice, tax collection, and public morality. In Turkish-administered zones in the north, religious governance is at the center of a competition between endowments directorates affiliated with local councils and funded by the Turkish Diyanet, on the one hand, and the Syrian Interim Government's Authority of Endowments and Religious Affairs, which enjoys the support of the Syrian Islamic Council, on the other hand. In the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, finally, a highly centralized religious apparatus headed by the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs and the Islamic Democratic Society Congress promotes a religious dialogue-centered interpretation of Islam in line with the leftist views of the ruling Democratic Union Party.

In spite of such glaring differences, there are several similarities between the four polities. First, the self-management of the religious field once allowed by the collapse of state control over opposition-held areas has given way, in all cases, to some variant of the heavily state-centric, top-down pattern of religious governance that characterizes the Middle East and North Africa more generally. Second, a decade of civil war has considerably increased the imbalance of power between religious actors and commanders of military forces. None of the official religious institutions are in a position to challenge the political leadership—not even in Idlib, where HTS's al-Jolani has regularly dismissed scholars who have opposed his many policy shifts. Finally, however, all of the four political regimes considered here suffer from a lack of financial and symbolic resources that limits their ability to fully control and reshape Islam according to their respective secularist, Islamist, or traditionalist views.

The twin weaknesses of political and religious leaderships create room for compromise. Yet the latter's effects will be felt differently depending on the region. In Idlib and Turkish-administered areas, there is a broad congruence between the views of the two sides regarding the place of Islam in society and politics. Ideological differences chiefly concern doctrinal matters (like the Sufi-Salafist divide) that have already proven surmountable. In such contexts, compromise in the form of increasing tolerance of doctrinal differences on the part of political authorities likely will have a stabilizing effect by removing a major source of tension with religious actors. On the contrary, the political orientations of the Assad regime and the autonomous administration remain fundamentally at odds with the agenda of religious conservatives. Consequently, a modus vivendi that would gradually give clerics more space to operate would inevitably generate contradictions, such as those that were witnessed in Syria prior to 2011. However subservient, religious leaders (including those affiliated with official institutions) are not content with secularist policies and will patiently wait until the context is ripe to reverse them. As these dynamics combine with the two regimes' continuing securitization of (Arab) Sunni Islam for sectarian or ethnic reasons, heavy-handed management of official Islamic institutions is likely to remain a source of friction between both the Assad regime and the autonomous administration and their religious-minded constituencies.

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Libya's Factional Struggle for the Authority of the Islamic Endowments

FREDERIC WEHREY

Introduction

One evening in November 2015, just after 6:00 p.m., five men carrying assault rifles entered a government office in the Libyan capital of Tripoli and arrested the office's director.³⁴⁵ At first glance, the incident is unremarkable and barely newsworthy—one of countless instances of coercion after the fall of late dictator Muammar Qadhafi in Libya, where a succession of weak governments has faced pressure from unaccountable militias. In this case, the abductors belonged to a powerful, Tripoli-based armed group called the Special Deterrence Force. Nominally under the Ministry of Interior, the Special Deterrence Force has long acted as de facto police and moral enforcers in the Libyan capital and its environs. Their ranks include a sizeable number of adherents of Salafism—the doctrinaire, literalist, Islamic current.

This ideological outlook partially explains the arrest that night. In a statement, the militia claimed that the office director was supporting propaganda and recruitment by the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Tripoli's mosques.³⁴⁶ Yet this was a flimsy pretext. To be sure, the government functionary—a former Quran teacher and building contractor in his forties named Muhammad Ala' al-Din al-Taktik—followed the so-called Libya Dawn coalition that included revolutionary Islamists and some sympathizers of jihadi militancy.³⁴⁷ And his doctrinal interpretation of Islam certainly clashed with that of the Salafists. But he was no friend of the Islamic State either.

In place of the charge of extremism, a more credible explanation for the brusque abduction that night is to be found in al-Taktik's appointment. He was the director of the Tripoli office charged with overseeing Libya's *awqaf* (singular *waqf*, or Islamic endowments, such as financial or property assets), a religious institution that has long wielded immense economic, political, and moral power both in Libya and throughout the Muslim world.³⁴⁸

Abolished at one point during Qadhafi's rule, the national awqaf office—at various times termed a ministry or an authority—and its local branches have become the objects of a fierce and occasionally violent contest between contending political factions since the dictator's demise in 2011. At stake is the endowment's authority to manage vast sums of rental income from the buildings, real estate, and other financial assets donated as waqf; oversee zakat (mandatory annual charitable donations made by Muslims); and regulate Islamic discourse through the appointments of imams (mosque leaders), *khatibs* (preachers at Friday prayers), and Quran teachers. The implications of such roles are far-reaching in Libya's economic and political affairs, extending well beyond the nominally religious role of the General Authority for Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, as the current national bureaucracy in Tripoli is known.

"It's more important than the presidency," noted one Libyan community leader and religious scholar.³⁴⁹ "When you control it, you get *hayba* [prestige] and income," noted a Libyan scholar who studies the country's religious currents.³⁵⁰ Echoing this, a Muslim cleric and community leader pointed to the authority's financial resources and its ability to shape popular opinions as evidence that controlling it was "more important than oil."³⁵¹

While some might take issue with such sweeping assertions, the battle for the ministry has still been an important corollary to the more high-profile and better-studied rivalries to influence and control Libya's central bank, investment authority, national oil corporation, and security sector. Disputes over the awqaf authority have shaped the institution's authority and roles, battered Libya's already dire economy, added to its political turmoil, widened its social fissures, and sometimes exploded into violence. Those associated with awqaf offices have experienced these tribulations firsthand, often at great personal risk.

In the case of the Tripoli cleric, al-Taktik was lucky. The Special Deterrence Force released him not long after his arrest, though he was summarily dismissed from his post and replaced by a figure from a rival ideological and political current that was aligned, unsurprisingly, with the militia that had detained him.³⁵² And al-Taktik would not be the last Libyan awqaf official to be threatened or coerced in the years ahead.

The competition for the management of awqaf as a source of political and social authority but also an economic asset stems in large measure from its long-standing repression during Qadhafi's decades-long dictatorship as well as the formative period of Italian colonial rule from 1911 to 1943. Following the 2011 revolution that toppled Qadhafi, the escalating rivalry over the awqaf authority mirrors the broader trends of political fragmentation, hyper-localization, and descent into nationwide armed conflict.³⁵³ This chaos was itself the result of weak or nonexistent governing institutions, inter-elite contestation, and growing international intervention, especially by the competing regional powers of Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, who have advanced different visions of ideological and political order in the Middle East.³⁵⁴

In particular, the struggle embodies the tensions between national and local authority, the misappropriation of oil-derived government funds, and the recourse to armed intimidation as a zero-sum expression of politics. Disputes over property ownership, an especially disruptive legacy of Qadhafi's rule, have worsened awqaf-related turmoil.³⁵⁵ As part of his collectivist ideology, Qadhafi appropriated awqaf-managed real estate and used it to build housing, universities, airports, and regime facilities. Since the 2011

revolution, resurgent awqaf authorities and citizens have laid competing claims to these holdings, though the absence of accurate land surveys and record keeping have made establishing proper entitlements especially contentious.³⁵⁶ In some cases, Libyan citizens have tried to appropriate real estate assets claimed by the awqaf ministry, eliciting frequent warnings from religious authorities.³⁵⁷

At another level, the awqaf have become a casualty of competition within Libya's religious field over social legitimacy, economic resources, and political power. This contest, broadly speaking, has been waged between two loose constellations:

on the one hand, adherents of Salafism—especially a Saudi-inspired variant of Salafism whose followers are colloquially known as Madkhalis for their deference to the Medina-based Saudi cleric Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali—versus more revolutionary and activist Islamist currents, including those aligned with or supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadist elements, as well as adherents of Sufism.³⁵⁸

Far from being an arcane religious debate or solely the domain of Islamic clerics, the question of the awqaf in Libya has broad implications for the country's economic, political, and social stability. Foreign, and especially Western, policymakers who seek to engage with Libya's religious field—as part of broader efforts at societal outreach, conflict resolution, or countering violent extremism—need an understanding of how the institution's roles, authorities, and practices have been shaped by armed conflict, political contestation, and foreign influences. Importantly, Western policymakers should understand that the awqaf bodies are not above politics. Nor is there such a thing as a so-called authentically Libyan or religiously pure awqaf authority: the institutions have always been shaped by politics, diverse and sometimes contending Islamic currents, and foreign influences throughout Libya's modern history. Conversely, diplomats and nongovernmental organizations should be aware of two important dynamics: how the competition for the awqaf institution has contributed to Libya's current fragmentation and divisions and how Libya's elites and citizens perceive the awqaf body's dynamic roles. More specifically, those investigating and trying to eliminate corruption within Libya's state institutions should understand the impact of corruption on the awqaf authority's financial roles, especially its management of real estate and supervision of zakat.

Far from being an arcane religious debate or solely the domain of Islamic clerics, the question of the awqaf in Libya has broad implications for the country's economic, political, and social stability.

The Long Shadow of Italian Rule

The current political rivalries for control of offices of the awqaf and their attendant moral and social authority, along with the disputes over waqf land and properties, stem in many respects from the legacy of Qadhafi's torturous rule (1969–2011) and the preceding disruptive period of Italian colonial occupation (1911–1943).³⁵⁹ Yet it is important when examining these periods to avoid the analytical pitfall of positing a primordial and doctrinally pure awqaf that is uncorrupted by politics or foreign influence. Throughout history, the institutions of the awqaf in Libya and elsewhere in the Muslim world have always been inherently political. They have also been influenced by an array of foreign powers, from within the Arab and Muslim world and from outside. These legacies, combined with the decade of factional violence and

political contestation of post-2011 Libya, have undoubtedly shaped the authority of the institution today and how Libyan citizens perceive its significance and roles.

Throughout Libya's modern history, the types of awqaf assets were marked by regional differences. For centuries in eastern Libya, awqaf consisted primarily of land administered by the Sanusi Sufi brotherhood and dynasty, associated with local *zawaya* (singular *zawiya*, or religious schools, lodges, or orders that play an important social role in their surrounding communities).³⁶⁰ In the colonial region of Tripolitania, in contrast, awqaf holdings were more diverse and were administered by the Ottoman sultan until 1915 when they fell under Italian control.³⁶¹ In subsequent years, the Italian colonial powers dealing with the awqaf tried to incorporate preexisting legal and administrative frameworks from the Ottoman era—associated with the Hanafi and Maliki schools of jurisprudence—as part of their efforts to impart an Islamic face to their rule.³⁶² Rome's subsequent changes to the awqaf administration were often couched as Islamically sanctioned reforms, undertaken with token input from pro-Italian Libyan notables, that safeguarded—the Italian authorities maintained—the religious integrity of the institution.³⁶³ More broadly, Italian colonial policies in Libya occurred during a time of intense criticism and introspection from within the Muslim and Arab world about the institution's economic viability and overall efficiency.³⁶⁴ When Italian colonial officials moved more forcefully to seize eastern awqaf properties in the late 1920s as part of a brutal counterinsurgency strategy against Sanusi-led resistance, they cited these voices in an attempt to justify their policies.³⁶⁵

The net effect of this foreign interference and manipulation in the awqaf left behind a legacy of ambiguity and politicization that persisted until well after the demise of Italian rule. The post-Italian period before the Qadhafi regime constituted a period of relative continuity, if not a renaissance, of awqaf administration. Notably, the Allies did not interfere in the institution during their postwar governance from 1943 to 1951, when the British administered the Libyan regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and the French oversaw the southern region of Fezzan.³⁶⁶ Under the independent United Kingdom of Libya, formed in 1951, awqaf holdings, particularly those overseen by the Sanusi *zawaya*, formed an important source of authority for the short-lived Sanusi monarch, King Idris. Here again awqaf administration did not change significantly.³⁶⁷

The Awqaf Under Qadhafi

When Qadhafi toppled the monarchy in 1969, he implemented several policies to undercut the vestiges of the Sanusis, replacing Sanusi figures with non-Sanusi ulema, or religious scholars, as well as putting the *zawaya* under government supervision and forbidding the building of new ones.³⁶⁸ But, by and large, he did not significantly intrude on the awqaf institutions during this initial period. Rather, he sought to maintain their authority and influence, albeit under non-Sanusi clerical control, to bolster the Islamic credentials of his new regime.³⁶⁹ Resulting changes to the awqaf bodies were modest and mostly administrative, designed to further diminish Sanusi influence. In 1971, for example, the regime enacted a law that unified the awqaf offices under the newly created General Authority for Awqaf, which brought under its purview the administration of Islamic universities (which had previously been under Sanusi supervision), Islamic proselytization, the administration of mosques, and the *zawaya*.³⁷⁰ Shortly thereafter,

the 1972 creation of the Islamic Call Society subsumed the general authority's supervision of the awqaf, and then another law, modeled after Syrian and Egyptian legislation, clarified certain provisions related to the awqaf's authority over inheritance and other matters.³⁷¹

But starting in 1973, regime policies toward the awqaf shifted dramatically. That momentous year saw the start of Qadhafi's purported cultural revolution, which incorporated a farrago of socialism, Islamic doctrine, and the so-called direct democracy articulated in Qadhafi's *Green*

Book and formalized in 1977 with the proclamation of the new state of the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. The consequences of this ideological shift for Islamic institutions and Muslim clergy were profound. As part of this new vision, Qadhafi came to see the clerical class as anachronistic interlopers between God and the masses and as political threats to his authority.³⁷² Consequently, the regime undertook increasingly repressive measures against outspoken ulema—who resented being stripped of their clerical authority and privileges, including oversight of the awqaf—while greater power on religious matters was devolved to the regime's popular committees.³⁷³ By the 1980s, increased pushes toward collectivization—including the forbidding of rental income—led to the regime's outright abolition of the awqaf authority and a ban on donations on behalf of the awqaf.³⁷⁴ Qadhafi's government also transferred some awqaf holdings in cities and towns to the regime's favored tribes, who had recently arrived from rural areas.³⁷⁵

From the 1990s to the 2000s, the awqaf authority enjoyed something of a resurgence, albeit under tight regime control.³⁷⁶ Specifically, it became a proxy for the government in administering mosques, supervising imams, and aligning all religious practices with a state-approved form of Islam. This became especially apparent by the mid-2000s, when the regime began instrumentalizing the Madkhalis, the pro-regime Salafist current, as a bulwark against jihadi militancy.³⁷⁷ Mosque imams, appointed by awqaf authorities, increasingly came to be dominated by Madkhalis, who were approved by and in some cases connected to the security services. A former member of the awqaf authority in the port city of Misrata described serving on an awqaf committee before the 2011 revolution charged with appointing mosque imams and khatibs and being compelled to pass the resumé of candidates to internal security authorities for vetting. Invariably, Madkhalis were chosen, often with only thin formal education and training.³⁷⁸ Echoing this, another Libyan observer close to the Salafists asserted that, by the late 2000s, “the *manabar* [mosque pulpits] were overflowing with Madkhalis.”³⁷⁹

The ascendant Madkhali current would become one of several contestants for control of the awqaf body and other Islamic institutions after the collapse of the Qadhafi regime in 2011.

The Prize: The Awqaf After Qadhafi (2011–2014)

In many respects, the fall of the Qadhafi regime represented a definitive historical break for Libya's Islamic institutions and Islamic actors, creating newfound opportunities and dilemmas alike. On the one hand,

they enjoyed newfound latitude to speak, write, organize, and proselytize. And yet, this sudden opening also presented them with newfound dilemmas and choices as well—about their participation in the country's new political order and their relations with other political and Islamic currents, who were also maneuvering for ascendancy and influence in governance institutions, the security sector, and especially at the grassroots level and on the street.³⁸⁰ The struggle for the awqaf institution, then, must be situated within this ideological and doctrinal ferment in Libya's Islamic field in the years following the dictator's demise.

A key prize in this contest was the national awqaf office because of its mandated role in overseeing the appointment and monitoring of imams and its administrative influence over Quranic schools and the dissemination of Islamic materials.³⁸¹ But the awqaf authority also exists at the center of a political and economic contest. Its responsibility for regulating and administering religious endowments of land and real estate assets to support mosques, schools, and charitable causes made it a prize of factional contestation. According to one former head of the national awqaf office, it consists of the following five sections: Administration of the Awqaf, Department of Waqf Properties, Department of Zakat Funds, Department of Mosques and Quranic Schools, and a section for management of Sufi *zawaya*.³⁸² Conversely, the office has sometimes taken on theology-based rehabilitation for imprisoned jihadists and offered itself as a platform for national reconciliation.³⁸³ Awqaf officials have also engaged in diplomacy with foreign actors—most notably Saudi Arabia but also Egypt, Morocco, Qatar, and Turkey. Unsurprisingly, these overtures have been met with criticism by factional and ideological opponents who charge that the officials are overstepping their mandate.³⁸⁴

Since 2011, ideological and political factions have competed to control the awqaf authority's financial resources and its oversight over mosque appointments. Further, Libya's broader Islamic discourse has been frequently propagated by religious figures who have enjoyed tacit backing from militias, who themselves often had ties to powerful political elites and were receiving state funds.³⁸⁵ In tandem, a variety of social and political actors have made claims and counterclaims about its holdings and assets, dating back decades and reflecting the policies of manipulation and interference by Qadhafi and Italian officials.³⁸⁶ Memories of these policies, colored through rivalries that arose during and after the 2011 revolution, continue to inform a wide range of property-related grievances today, including those related to the awqaf. Overlaying these tensions are disputes over budgets and administrative authority between the awqaf institution in Tripoli and its offices in Libyan cities, towns, and communities outside the capital. Here again, this gap between the center, or the capital, and the periphery, or the provinces, is a deep-seated problem stemming from the Qadhafi era that affects other aspects of Libyan governance.

In the first year after the revolution, multiple sources from Libya's clerical community and Islamist currents described a low-level contest among Islamic actors for influence in mosques, schools, and social life—chiefly, between Madkhalis, the Muslim Brotherhood, Sufis, and the more activist and militant figures loosely affiliated with Libya's Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani.³⁸⁷ The latter current, associated with the mufti, is especially important in any analysis of the awqaf authority or ministry because of al-Ghariani's oversight of Libya's Dar al-Ifta, or Office of Fatwa (a legal opinion on a point of Islamic law). Since 2011, the Dar al-Ifta has existed as a social and moral authority parallel to the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (earlier called the General Authority for Awqaf and Islamic Affairs), issuing fatwas on matters of

arbitration and conflict resolution. And at various times, depending on the factional control of the office of awqaf, the Dar al-Ifta and al-Ghariani himself both supported and clashed with awqaf authorities.³⁸⁸

In the immediate aftermath of Qadhafi's fall, the most significant change to the awqaf office was its April 2012 elevation by the transitional government to the status of a ministry rather than a general authority.³⁸⁹ To head this new body as minister, the government of interim prime minister Abdurrahim el-Keib in November 2011 appointed a Libyan cleric named Hamza Abu Faris, a mosque imam and scholar whose outspoken and dissident views incurred the wrath of the Qadhafi regime in 2010.³⁹⁰ His appointment attracted immediate attention from the government of Saudi Arabia, which appeared especially concerned about his Islamist leanings and influence: an alleged Saudi intelligence memo, leaked to Wikileaks, flagged his supervision of the awqaf as being an important channel for the resurgence of political Islam in Libyan social and political life.³⁹¹ While this assessment was undoubtedly an exaggeration and a misreading of the Libyan political landscape, it does highlight the importance a major Arab and Islamic foreign power ascribed to the institution of the awqaf in Libya. This foreign interest would only increase as factional contestation for the awqaf increased in the years ahead.

The real rivalry at this time was for grassroots influence in social spaces and over local mosque appointments, the establishment of private schools, some municipal awqaf offices, and the distribution of Islamic materials.

Libyan clerics and Islamist interlocutors describe the struggle for the national awqaf authority in 2012 as fairly muted. The real rivalry at this time was for grassroots influence in social spaces and over local mosque appointments, the establishment of private schools, some municipal awqaf offices, and the distribution of Islamic materials.³⁹² In this shifting landscape, the Madkhalis dominated the scene with increasingly assertive tactics. This represented a shift from their passivity during the 2011 revolution, when many either sat on the sidelines or actively sided with the regime—a reflection partially of their previous alignment with the Qadhafi government but also their ideological aversion to taking up arms against the *wali al-amr* (the ruler or leader of a community, though certain Salafist doctrines use this term to mean a sitting head of state or bureaucratic or political authority to whom obedience is required).³⁹³ But by the beginning of 2012, they had started using lobbying, petitions, payments, and other means to influence appointments in the mosques and Quranic schools of western Libya.³⁹⁴ Increasingly, a development that paralleled these tactics was the formation of Salafist Madkhali-leaning armed groups.³⁹⁵ Among the most powerful of these was the Tripoli militia that would become the aforementioned Special Deterrence Force.³⁹⁶

In the early years after Qadhafi's fall, a major expression of Madkhali Salafist violence occurred against physical sites connected to Libya's Sufi heritage—most notably graves, shrines, and libraries.³⁹⁷ Here again, acquiescence and, in some cases, complicity from Libyan security officials played a role. But so too did a bureaucratic development in the newly created Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs. In early 2012, administration of the Sufi *zawaya* was reportedly taken out of the ministry's portfolio of responsibilities. According to several interlocutors, this left the *zawaya* politically exposed and with reduced funding streams. "When the *zawaya* were under the ministry of awqaf, they were protected," noted one Libyan

scholar of Islamism.³⁹⁸ He went on to assert that the waves of Salafist attacks on sites of Sufi heritage in early 2012—especially the graves of Sufi scholars, which are overseen and administered by *zawaya*—were in part enabled by this move from Libya’s transitional government.³⁹⁹

In tandem, the port city of Misrata, a commercial and political powerhouse to the east of Tripoli, became the site of increasing competition between the Madkhalis and their opponents from other Islamic and Islamist currents—such as the Muslim Brotherhood, former members of the now-defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, some supporters of al-Ghariani (a minority), and some Sufis—over social space, economic and political power, and religious authority. The *awqaf* branch was an especially important source of contention given its oversight of financial assets and property in Misrata, which represented the second-largest real estate holding in monetary value in Libya after Tripoli.⁴⁰⁰ But with that branch reportedly in the hands of a Muslim Brotherhood-aligned figure after the 2011 revolution, Madkhali Salafists shifted toward a grassroots strategy of trying to control the city’s mosques by aggressively influencing the appointments of imams. A former *awqaf* official in Misrata described these influence tactics in 2012 as the following:

If the [Madkhali] Salafis didn’t agree with an imam, they would go as a group to the mosque. After hearing the sermon, they would submit a petition to the *awqaf* office [saying] that the imam made mistakes in his understanding of the Quran or hadith—really, any excuse [they could find]. The *awqaf* office would then send a committee by surprise to attend the sermon and would ask for the names of the petitioners. . . . Eighty percent of the names were fake or were not regular mosque goers. Neighbors would say to the *awqaf* committee, ‘We don’t know these people [the Madkhalis] and we’ve never seen them before at this mosque.’⁴⁰¹

By the second year of Libya’s transition, however, these local contests had escalated to national-level political conflict over the *awqaf* office in the capital. Starting in 2013, then prime minister Ali Zeidan, a former member of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, a longtime opposition movement that included an Islamist component, took office. Zeidan’s appointment introduced the perception among opposing factions that the front dominated Libya’s key political and administrative institutions, including the onetime elected legislature, the General National Congress, and the *awqaf* ministry.⁴⁰² On February 10, 2013, Zeidan appointed Abd al-Salaam Saad, a Sufi scholar and former head of the Senegal-based branch of the Libyan Islamic Call Society under Qadhafi, as minister of *awqaf* and Islamic affairs.⁴⁰³ Saad’s appointment had been a concession to former prime minister Mahmoud Jibril, the leader of the National Forces Alliance, a sprawling political coalition that included Islamists but has often been erroneously described as secular. But Saad immediately faced opposition from Islamists centered around al-Ghariani—reportedly due to Saad’s proximity to the former regime and especially his personal ties to former foreign minister and Qadhafi confidante Moussa Koussa.⁴⁰⁴ As a result, the post was left unfilled until July 2013 when Zeidan appointed Ali Hammuda, a former head of Misrata’s *awqaf* office and a longtime member of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, including its military wing.⁴⁰⁵

Zeidan intended for Hammuda to be a compromise candidate, acceptable to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamists loosely gathered around the mufti, and Jibril’s diverse National Forces Alliance. And by many accounts, Hammuda was able to straddle a relatively nonpartisan position.⁴⁰⁶ Yet his tenure was

buffered by pressure from an increasingly assertive Madkhali Salafist current, which sought to undercut his authority by seeking to replace mosque imams and khatibs throughout Tripoli and beyond through lobbying, bribe payments, and sometimes force.⁴⁰⁷ As the head of the awqaf ministry, Hammuda diagnosed the root of the institution's problems as a product of the broader governing weakness of the Zeidan government in the face of factionalism and the power wielded by armed groups, as illustrated starkly by the brazen kidnapping of Zeidan himself in October 2013.⁴⁰⁸ Outside the capital, the government of Tripoli's writ was tenuous to nonexistent, especially in the south and in the east, degrading service provision, security, and the authority of the Tripoli-based awqaf office.

While deriving religious inspiration, guidance, and education from Saudi-based clerics, Libya's Salafists often acted autonomously from Saudi Arabia on many issues.

Exasperated by the feebleness of the Libyan government and worried about the Madkhalis' increasing power, Hammuda turned to Saudi Arabia, the foreign state from which he believed the Madkhalis derived spiritual inspiration, political guidance, and funding. During a trip to Riyadh in 2013, he asked the Saudi foreign minister about the government's alleged support to Libya's Madkhalis, but the Saudi official's response was, "we don't have any knowledge of this."⁴⁰⁹ While official Saudi denials should not be taken entirely at face value, they do illuminate an important aspect of Libya's Salafist-Madkhali current. While deriving religious inspiration, guidance, and education from Saudi-based clerics, Libya's Salafists often acted autonomously from Saudi Arabia on many issues, especially those related to local alliances, politics, and military action. And while they respect and follow many Saudi Arabia-based clerics, not just al-Madkhali himself, they do not obey their guidance in lockstep. In some cases, they even modified or reinterpreted injunctions and statements from Saudi-based clerics, including al-Madkhali, to suit their agendas inside Libya.⁴¹⁰ Put differently, they were not acting on figurative remote control from Riyadh or Medina, nor as a Trojan horse for state-directed Saudi ideology, as some commentators inside and outside Libya have alleged.⁴¹¹

This relationship with Saudi Arabia would become ever more contentious during the series of stark political choices and fragmentation that was thrust upon the Madkhalis and the awqaf during Libya's civil war, which erupted in the summer of 2014.

The Awqaf and Libya's Civil War (2014–2018)

On May 16, 2014, a loose coalition of disaffected army units and aging military aircraft aligned with an eastern-based military commander named General Khalifa Haftar attacked militia bases in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi. The attack, dubbed Operation Dignity, would set in motion a spiraling conflict which, by the end of that summer, would split Libya into two opposing political administrations loosely aligned with local militias, towns, and communal groups like tribes—drawing in an array of dueling outside powers whose military proxy war continues to the present.

The ostensible and immediate motive for Operation Dignity, spearheaded by Haftar's Libyan National Army—which later became the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF)—was the restoration of security in Benghazi, which had declined precipitously since 2013, and the elimination of Islamist militias, though the attack reflected a host of other political and social tensions in eastern Libya and across the country. These included tensions between political Islamists and their opponents, worsening ideological rivalries across the Middle East in the aftermath of the coup in Egypt led by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi, the growing power and politicization of Libyan militias and the backlash this induced from the officers and technocrats of the old regime, grievances over the distribution of Libya's wealth, and factionalism and dysfunction within Libya's national legislature—the General National Congress.⁴¹²

At the center of the operation, however, was Haftar's own desire to seize national power. His repeated threats to do just that by attacking Tripoli triggered a counteroperation, known as Libya Dawn, by a coalition of western-based forces and Islamist militias that attacked Tripoli's international airport in July 2014 and soon established a rival political administration based in the capital, the National Salvation Government.⁴¹³ Over the next four years, this coalition, acting through Misrata, would battle Haftar's forces across the country and especially in the contested eastern city of Benghazi. This political fracturing of the country mobilized and polarized Libya's Islamists, Muslim clerics, and Islamic institutions. It also presented them newfound opportunities for political ascendancy and social expansion. In Benghazi, Misrata, and parts of Tripoli, militant Islamists, jihadists, Muslim Brotherhood members and their supporters, and followers of al-Ghariani lined up behind Libya Dawn and the National Salvation Government.⁴¹⁴

The country's Madkhali current was similarly galvanized, though not without some degree of doctrinal debate among leading figures about the permissibility of taking up arms—a debate that for some echoed the dilemma posed by the 2011 revolution.⁴¹⁵ In eastern Libya, many Madkhalis joined Haftar's operation, either as fighters in his Libyan National Army and later LAAF or associated paramilitaries or by lending moral and propaganda support. Many did so after a series of Islamist and jihadist assassinations of notable Madkhali figures in eastern Libya in early 2014, though also partly because of the Islamic State's seizure of power that summer in the central city of Sirte. The Islamic State's claim to power in Sirte was also accompanied by violent repression of local Madkhalis, especially during a summer 2014 uprising by tribal members from the Firjan tribe, to which Haftar belongs.⁴¹⁶ The resulting crackdown electrified Madkhalis across the country, but especially those in eastern Libya and Benghazi. Buoyed by the resulting injection of military and political support from the Madkhalis and from an array of tribal and local militias, Haftar's gradual consolidation of power across eastern Libya resulted in the Madkhalis' expansion of social influence and control over Islamic institutions like mosques, schools, and an eastern-based General Authority for Awqaf and Islamic Affairs.⁴¹⁷

In western Libya, however, the situation was reversed. The seizure of power in Tripoli by activist and militant Islamists aligned with the mufti dealt a staggering blow to Madkhalis; some leading clerics in Tripoli fled for havens in the Nafusa Mountains, like the town of Zintan. Others simply stayed home and stayed silent. Meanwhile, Madkhali-leaning armed groups, namely the Special Deterrence Force, continued to operate and clashed with Islamist opponents aligned with the mufti.⁴¹⁸ But overall, the

Salafists and their supporters acknowledged that the summer of 2014 produced a seismic shift in the ideological balance of power in the capital region.⁴¹⁹

This shift in the balance of power affected the awqaf organizations as well. With the Zeidan government gone after the prime minister fled the country in March 2014, the head of the awqaf ministry, Hammuda, resigned in October of that year.⁴²⁰ In his place, the Libya Dawn government–appointed minister of awqaf was a cleric, former merchant, and revolutionary militia leader from the town of Bani Walid named Mubarak al-Futmani. Two vice ministers also exerted power: Abd al-Basit Yarbua from the northwestern city of Zawiyah and Abu Bakr Buswayr from Misrata. Abdul-Basit Ghweila, a dual Libyan-Canadian citizen, took the helm of the Tripoli awqaf office.⁴²¹

All three had Islamist ideological orientations that can best be described as activist, revolutionary, and, in some instances, militant.⁴²² The result was that, for the first time since the revolution, the leadership of the national and Tripoli awqaf ministry was aligned with the mufti’s Dar al-Ifta and other networks.⁴²³ And with the Madkhali current’s major and most outspoken clerics silenced or evicted from Tripoli, the capital saw, at least on the surface and in key positions, a degree of ideological homogeneity.⁴²⁴

In the coming years, both Dar al-Ifta and the Islamist-controlled awqaf ministry in Tripoli would play important roles in Libya’s civil war and political factionalism, offering moral and rhetorical support to militia forces battling Haftar across the country, particularly the Benghazi-based armed group coalition the Benghazi Revolutionaries’ Shura Council (BRSC), which included the hardline jihadist and United Nations (UN)–designated terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia. At the same time, they faced a twin ideological challenge from the Islamic State, which lambasted the Libya Dawn government as un-Islamic and staged violent attacks against mosques, eliciting countercriticism from awqaf officials.⁴²⁵ Moreover, the National Salvation Government’s ministry of awqaf tried to push back against the growth of Madkhalism in regions beyond Tripoli—partly because such growth represented political influence from Haftar’s camp. In 2015, for example, an awqaf official visited municipal endowment officials in the southern city of Sabha and stressed the importance of rejecting all fatwas “imported from abroad”—a reference that applied to Saudi-backed Madkhali statements, sympathetic to Haftar, and also Islamic State pronouncements.⁴²⁶ For their part, Madkhali Salafist hardliners, including within the Special Deterrence Force, issued threats against awqaf officials and sometimes kidnapped them, as in the case of the abduction of the aforementioned al-Taktik, the director of the Tripoli awqaf office. This in turn prompted awqaf officials to turn to their own militias, like the powerful Libya Shield.⁴²⁷

In some instances, hardline statements and actions from Tripoli-based awqaf officials during the National Salvation Government period courted outrage and criticism from Libyan citizens, their ideological opponents, and outside diplomats. The head of the Tripoli awqaf office, Ghweila, in particular became a lightning rod for controversy from ideological opponents. In 2014, for example, during a gathering in the western town of Zliten, he issued a video supporting jihad—a video that his opponents quickly

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seized as evidence of radicalism but which he maintained was taken out of context and referred to the anti-Qadhafi revolution.⁴²⁸ Two years later, in 2016, his son was killed in Benghazi fighting Haftar. This death was erroneously reported in Libyan anti-Islamist outlets and even Western outlets as evidence of the son's membership to, variously, Ansar al-Sharia, the BRSC, and the Islamic State; but he was actually fighting with a Benghazi-based anti-Haftar militia, the Omar Mukhtar Brigade, which was formally independent from all of these groups or coalitions.⁴²⁹ Finally, Ghweila was also linked by media sources and Western officials to the father of the Islamic State militant Salman Abedi, a dual Libyan-British citizen who attacked a Manchester nightclub in May 2017—a charge Ghweila also sought to refute.⁴³⁰

For his part, Yarbua's reputation was affected by his close association with his fellow Zawiyani, Shaaban Hadiya, the leader of the Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room, which had kidnapped Zeidan in October 2013. But perhaps most significantly, the head of the national awqaf ministry, al-Futmani, suffered a major political blow when his son was revealed to have reportedly fought and died for the Islamic State in Sirte in 2015—at the hands of militia forces allied with the National Salvation Government, of which his father was a part.⁴³¹ As a result, al-Futmani reportedly lost influence politically toward the end of his tenure, with his vice ministers increasingly running affairs.⁴³²

By mid-to-late 2015, the fissiparous coalition of elites, militias, and towns that comprised the Libya Dawn coalition and National Salvation Government was unraveling, in part due to the launch of a UN-brokered peace process aimed at ending the Libyan civil war and producing a unity government. This process reverberated across the Islamist milieu and through Islamic institutions in Tripolitania, sparking debate and dissent among elites connected to the Libya Dawn coalition. Specifically, an Islamist coterie of awqaf figures led by al-Futmani offered their resignations in protest of the UN talks and their acceptance by figures formerly supportive of Libya Dawn, especially from Misrata.⁴³³

On March 3, 2016, the National Salvation Government appointed a Misratan cleric and scholar named Ahmed Shtewi to head the national awqaf office—which was changed from a ministry to the General Authority for Awqaf and Islamic Affairs under then prime minister Fayezi al-Sarraj's Government of National Accord (GNA), which arrived in Tripoli later that month. As was the case with his predecessors, al-Sarraj's tenure was rocked by administrative difficulties and political challenges from multiple directions. For starters, he told a delegation prime minister's office that he was still loyal to the now-defunct National Salvation Government and not the GNA. Moreover, in early and mid-2016, the awqaf authority was drawn into the escalating military operations by GNA-aligned forces against the Islamic State's base in Sirte and its cells in and around Tripoli and along Libya's western seaboard in the town of Sabratha. To support the counterterrorism campaign, the awqaf ministry used its authority to warn against ideological recruitment by the terrorist group in the capital's mosques.⁴³⁴

In addition, the awqaf office in Tripoli became entangled in the parallel military battle under way in the eastern city of Benghazi between Haftar's forces, which included Salafist Madkhalis, and anti-Haftar armed groups, which included Islamists and jihadists backed by supporters in Tripoli and Misrata. Given this ideological dimension, the conflict unsurprisingly reverberated in the religious sphere: in July 2016, for example, al-Madkhali issued a statement calling on his followers to fight the BRSC because, he alleged, it was affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴³⁵ In response, Shtewi's awqaf ministry issued

a statement castigating al-Madkhali for his interference in Libya's internal affairs.⁴³⁶ On top of this, the Tripoli awqaf authority aligned with the GNA and, theoretically national in authority, faced a political and ideological challenge from a separate awqaf office, aligned with Haftar's eastern camp, dominated by Madkhalis, and based in the eastern city of Tobruk. For months, there had been no coordination or communication between the two. But by August 2016, there were signs of a brief thaw: the Tripoli-based religious authorities cooperated with their counterparts in the east on facilitating the travel of Libyan citizens for the hajj pilgrimage.⁴³⁷

But perhaps the most serious conflict the Tripoli-based awqaf ministry faced was mounting tension between the Islamists affiliated with al-Ghariani and the Madkhali Salafists.

But perhaps the most serious conflict the Tripoli-based awqaf ministry faced was mounting tension between the Islamists affiliated with al-Ghariani and the Madkhali Salafists. “[We were] caught between the Dar al-Ifta and the Madkhalis,” a former Tripoli awqaf official said of himself and his colleagues about these tensions.⁴³⁸

The conflict between the two currents erupted into their most serious bout of violence in November 2016, when a hardline Salafist subunit of Abdelraouf Kara's Special Deterrence Force in Tripoli killed a cleric, Nader al-Omrani, a confidante of al-Ghariani's who headed the Dar al-Ifta's Islamic Research and Studies Council. While the facts of the killing and the degree of Madkhali involvement are murky, the incident resulted in a backlash against the Madkhali Salafist current in the capital, especially among armed groups affiliated with or associated with the Dar al-Ifta and the BRSC.⁴³⁹ To deescalate tensions and temper the Madkhalis' newfound rhetorical and military boldness, the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs under Shtewi issued a statement banning eleven Madkhali figures from preaching in mosques.⁴⁴⁰ Elsewhere, Shtewi replaced the awqaf office head in the northwestern city of Gharyan, reportedly in response to a request from the municipality, with a new cleric, a self-described Maliki mosque preacher with a master's degree in project management who was friendly to al-Ghariani.⁴⁴¹ A member of the awqaf office in Gharyan described the ensuing efforts to remove imams in the town, many of whom were Madkhalis.

There were thirty-two khatibs who were Madkhalis; they were focusing on the wali al-amr in their *khutba* [sermons] and saying bad things about the ulema. And going against our traditions, like [saying that] ‘it is *haram* [forbidden] to give money, you have to give *asida* [a traditional dish]. And also, ‘Why are you in Western clothes.’ But [the awqaf office] only removed two or three, because . . . of problems and pressure from the [Madkhali] armed groups.⁴⁴²

By early 2017, Shtewi and his awqaf ministry became increasingly embroiled in financial disputes related to the ministry's oversight of the *sunduq al-zakat* (zakat fund) and real estate. Starting in 2016, a local militia, the Bab al-Tajura Brigade, surrounded the fund's office in Tripoli's Nufliyin neighborhood and was allegedly channeling the assets to its members.⁴⁴³ Officials from the GNA were powerless to stop the strong arming, with al-Sarraj reportedly sending several injunctions to the militia to stand down.⁴⁴⁴

Meanwhile, tensions mounted between the prime minister's office and the National Salvation Government holdover awqaf ministry over real estate rental prices: Shtewi had raised the rent on awqaf-supervised land, especially in the capital's Old City, because citizens were renting real estate from the awqaf authority and then subleasing it at far higher prices.⁴⁴⁵

By April 2017, the friction had reached its apogee and Shtewi was removed from his position by a GNA edict. The new minister, a former school principal named Abbas al-Qadi, was, by many accounts, relatively nonideological and nonpartisan, though he hailed from a prominent Tripoli family and was close to al-Sarraj. Yet his tenure lasted just over a year, partly due to shifting dynamics in the respective influence of armed groups in Tripoli.⁴⁴⁶ In the spring and early summer of 2017, nominally pro-GNA militias in Tripoli, some aligned with the Madkhali Salafists, launched a military push to evict militias and hardline Islamist holdouts from the National Salvation Government, some aligned with the Dar al-Ifta and some hailing from the now-defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, an armed jihadist opposition group active in the Qadhafi era. With their bases overrun, surviving armed group leaders and clerics from these Islamist currents fled to enclaves in the capital—like Tajoura—or to the western city of Misrata or left the country altogether, often for Turkey.⁴⁴⁷ By removing the Islamist military challenge to Madkhali influence, these military developments on the ground cleared the way for the accelerated return of Madkhali clerics to the capital's mosques—an ascent that was mirrored in a corresponding power shift in the national awqaf office.

The Madkhalis Ascendant (2018 to the Present)

In November 2018, the GNA sacked al-Qadi and appointed a Madkhali Salafist cleric from Tripoli's Fashlum neighborhood named Mohamed Ahmeida al-Abbani to the position of head of the General Authority for Awqaf and Islamic Affairs.⁴⁴⁸ An ostensible reason for the firing was al-Qadi's support for the tradition of the *Mawlid* (a minor holiday marking the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad), which Madkhalis opposed as a heretical practice.⁴⁴⁹ More significantly, though, the move reflected the growing power of Madkhali armed groups, especially the Special Deterrence Force with whom Abbani enjoyed close ties.⁴⁵⁰ The appointment was thus part of a newfound ascendancy of Madkhalis in Tripoli's security sector, its streets, and its mosques and schools. In contrast, the Islamists and al-Ghariani's supporters suffered a stunning reversal since their victory in the 2014 Libya Dawn operation. Yet the struggle was far from over.

Under Abbani, the awqaf ministry undertook wide-ranging efforts to elevate the Madkhali Salafists in western Libya's social and religious spaces. Madkhali figures who had fled the capital returned and enjoyed protection by Madkhali-leaning militias.⁴⁵¹ In various cities around the capital—especially Misrata, Gharyan, Zliten, al-Khums and Zawiya—Abbani tried to alter the clerical composition of local awqaf authority leadership, often provoking dissent and protests.⁴⁵² In some cases, like Zawiya, rival awqaf offices emerged.⁴⁵³ In Gharyan, Abbani removed the aforementioned long-standing head of the awqaf office, reportedly at the behest of local Madkhalis.⁴⁵⁴ In the Nafusa Mountains, Abbani's rise spurred the parallel ascendancy of Madkhalis in towns where awqaf offices had overlapping responsibilities for Islamic matters like the hajj and antagonized ethnic Imazighen (singular, Amazigh), many of whom follow the 'Ibadi faith.⁴⁵⁵

Predictably, the Madkhalis' rise stirred tensions with al-Ghariani and the Dar Al-Ifta. In response, al-Ghariani—now in exile in Turkey—deployed a broad array of clerical and media weapons, including a television station called Tanasuh run by his son reportedly with funds from Qatar.⁴⁵⁶ Imputing undue foreign influence over the awqaf office, al-Ghariani has routinely accused the Madkhalis now running the awqaf ministry of being handmaidens of Saudi intelligence.⁴⁵⁷ In turn, Abbani issued a memorandum in response to what he considered “seven allegations” from al-Ghariani, accusing al-Ghariani of blocking local awqaf offices in Zliten and al-Khums with piles of sand.⁴⁵⁸

The tug-of-war between these ideological factions and the polarization sparked by Abbani's appointment and subsequent assertiveness was inextricably linked to political tensions related to the rise of the Haftar-aligned faction in eastern Libya. There, Madkhalis consolidated their control over both the Bayda-based awqaf office and in the awqaf of the long-contested town of Derna, which Haftar's LAAF forces conquered from Islamists and jihadists in late 2018.⁴⁵⁹ As part of this dominance, the leaders of the now-Madkhali-leaning awqaf office tried to exert influence over social norms, like opposing the mixing of genders in public spaces, influencing the content of mosque sermons, and imposing restrictions on art and musical events they deemed un-Islamic.⁴⁶⁰ Yet their influence was not uncontested; these efforts sometimes engendered pushback by protesters and civil society.⁴⁶¹

Still, Haftar continued to enjoy strong military and political support from the Madkhalis as he pushed out of eastern Libya into Fezzan in the south in late 2018.⁴⁶² As he encroached on the capital in early 2019, he enjoyed support from some western-based towns and communities that included Madkhalis, especially in Surman, Sabratha, Zintan, and even some parts of Tripoli—including elements within powerful armed groups like the Special Deterrence Force. Thus, the ideological and religious contest for the awqaf and other institutions became colored by politics: Madkhalis were widely assumed to be Trojan horses or fifth columns for Haftar when his military forces arrived at the capital. To be sure, this was sometimes the case; several interviews with key Salafist figures in Sabratha and Tripoli in January 2019 revealed a sympathy for Haftar, often obliquely conveyed at the time as support for a “strong army” and “order”—a sympathy that ignored Haftar's own calculated use of social and political violence.⁴⁶³ Similar sentiments were voiced by Salafist Madkhalis in Zawiya at this time.

Yet in other instances the reality was more complex. Madkhalis were in many cases pragmatic and opportunistic; if Haftar were to emerge as the most powerful figure in the capital, then they would be quick to align themselves with him, justified on the basis of the Salafist doctrine of obedience to the wali al-amr. However, plenty of other non-Salafist Tripolitanian armed groups and figures were just as opportunistic. For his part, Abbani maintained in public that he was staunchly supportive of the GNA, citing various Salafist doctrinal precepts to justify this allegiance to the Tripoli government, a position which was corroborated in interviews with former awqaf officials.⁴⁶⁴ He also withheld monetary support to awqaf offices in those towns he deemed supportive of Haftar, especially towns in Tripolitania like Sabratha, while he did give money to awqaf offices in Fezzan, which relied on support from both of the opposing political administrations in eastern and western Libya.⁴⁶⁵

With Haftar's surprise attack on the capital in early April 2019, the tensions escalated. Capturing Gharyan, Haftar's LAAF quickly formed an alliance with local Madkhalis, whose influence had been

steadily rising since 2019. “When Haftar arrived there, the Madkhalis were waiting for him,” according to one official from Gharyan.⁴⁶⁶ Under the LAAF’s control, local Madkhalis came to dominate mosques, the awqaf, and the hospital, according to interviews with citizens from the town. Yet in other instances, Madkhalis in western Libya found themselves constrained by social and political pressures and the pointed mobilization of armed groups, many of whom had once been at odds with one another. Some, like the Madkhali-leaning military unit known as 20–20 within the Special Deterrence Force, sat on the

For his part, Abbani sought to use the awqaf office’s authority to counter Haftar ideologically.

fence until the summer of 2019. The unit mobilized only when it became clear that the GNA’s militia defenders had halted Haftar’s advance, after feeling pressure from other armed groups, and after it sent a delegation seeking clerical guidance from Saudi Arabia, according to a source close to the 20–20 unit commander.⁴⁶⁷ In tandem, Madkhali preachers in Tripoli’s mosques faced criticism from congregants and from rival Islamists that their sermons were not sufficiently critical of Haftar’s attack and that they skirted mentioning the Islamic imperative to defend the city.⁴⁶⁸

For his part, Abbani sought to use the awqaf office’s authority to counter Haftar ideologically, even going so far as to visit al-Madkhali himself in Saudi Arabia to ascertain whether or not his previous fatwa endorsing Haftar was still valid.⁴⁶⁹ Abbani reportedly used al-Madkhali’s noncommittal response to try to induce defections among eastern Libyan Madkhalis in Haftar’s camp, though there’s little evidence of this happening.⁴⁷⁰ Separately, during a trip to Mecca that same year, Abbani reportedly met a delegation of Madkhali Salafists from the Dar al-Ifta committee from eastern Libya who had come to solicit an endorsement from al-Madkhali for Haftar’s military campaign. In the course of that meeting, Abbani told them that if they were truly committed to fighting the *khawarij* (meaning jihadists and the Islamic State), then they should recognize that the GNA, which they sought to topple, had detained these extremists in the Special Deterrence Force’s prison in Tripoli.⁴⁷¹ Relatedly, Abbani met with Khalid al-Mishri, the head of the High State Council in Tripoli, to help defuse Salafist-Islamist tensions in Zawiya, asserting to Mishri that he was a “Salafi but not a Madkhali,” according to one source with knowledge of the meeting.⁴⁷²

By April 2020, however, battlefield developments further affected awqaf-related instability. In the summer of 2020, GNA-affiliated armed groups—backed by Turkish drone strikes and Syrian mercenaries—pushed out of Tripoli, capturing several towns that were either held by the LAAF or sympathetic to Haftar. The GNA advance resulted in the retreat of Madkhalis from local awqaf offices, mosques, and other Islamic spaces. In some towns, supporters of al-Ghariani or figures aligned with (or in the case of Zawiya, sympathetic to) the Islamist leader Mishri tried to fill the vacuum.⁴⁷³

In tandem with this political reshuffling, the awqaf offices in Tripoli, and those in the east, faced a significant humanitarian challenge from the coronavirus pandemic, which Libya’s conflict, political divisions, and depleted medical infrastructure left the country uniquely exposed to. During this crisis, religious authorities became an important adjunct to public health edicts by the weak GNA in Tripoli. Similarly, in the east, the awqaf authorities supported the LAAF’s militarized response to the public health crisis. By mid-March 2020, both awqaf offices had issued statements urging people to stay in their homes

and to stop daily and Friday prayers in mosques. In Tripoli, in particular, these Islam-based appeals were undercut by intense politicization of the public health response and challenges to the GNA awqaf office's authority, coming from both rival Islamists aligned with al-Ghariani and local, town-based authorities.⁴⁷⁴

By early 2021, power and religious influence in the capital region seemed set for another reshuffle. After a ceasefire signed in October 2020 and a set of UN-brokered talks called the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, Libyan delegates agreed in February 2021 to the formation of a new executive authority, the Government of National Unity (GNU), with Misratan tycoon Abdul Hamid Dabaiba as its prime minister. Contrary to popular assumptions, the new government is not a boon to political Islamists, though Dabaiba does have prior ties to the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood and activist Islamist figures, especially those residing in Turkey and Qatar.⁴⁷⁵ Even so, clerical figures and Islamists aligned with al-Ghariani are seeking to exploit the new government's apportioning of appointments.⁴⁷⁶ Meanwhile, political and business figures in the west and east alike have the potential to temper any intra-Islamist tensions by striking alliances and bargains that cross ideological lines.

As of this writing, no new appointments have been announced for the leadership of the Tripoli-based General Authority for Awqaf and Islamic Affairs—which is technically supposed to incorporate the eastern awqaf authority under the GNU. As is the case with other economic and political institutions, it is likely that the awqaf authority will fall victim to continued intra-elite contestation and some degree of renewed ideological jockeying in the period before the proposed Libyan elections in late 2021 to replace the GNU.

Conclusion

In the near decade since the fall of Qadhafi, a broad array of Libyan economic and political institutions have fragmented or collapsed in the face of competing pressures from ideological and political factions. As a body with a long historical pedigree and broad powers of moral authority, land ownership, and revenue allocation, it is not surprising that the awqaf offices would become a magnet for contestation. Its travails since 2011 reflect the frequent turnover of power in the capital, the rise of armed groups with local and ideological affiliations, a national split between parallel administrations in eastern and western Libya, and endemic tensions over political authority and financial autonomy between the capital and Libya's far-flung towns and municipalities.

More significantly, perhaps, awqaf offices and holdings have been buffeted by severe rivalries within Libya's Islamist field among various doctrinal currents, ideologies, and clashing clerical personalities. Relatedly, the struggle for control of the awqaf has been linked to debates about the degree of foreign influence over the country's religious sphere, most notably after the rise of the so-called Saudi-inspired Madkhali current—whose subservience to Saudi Arabia has been vastly overstated by foreign and Libyan voices alike. Offices of awqaf have also been weaponized as part of the battle against terrorism in Libya, with rival personalities and currents accusing awqaf officials of complicity with so-called extremists. Awqaf officials in both the east and west have been mobilized purportedly to deradicalize imprisoned jihadists from the Islamic State. And most recently, awqaf authorities have been deployed as part of the

country's public health initiatives by authorities in the west and the east to regulate Islamic public spaces in the wake of the spread of the coronavirus in Libya.

Underpinning all of these developments has been the fraught legacy of the awqaf since the reign of Qadhafi, when these offices and assets became inextricably linked to the late dictator's co-option and control of Islamic discourse and his collectivist approach to property and land—the fruits of which continue to be a source of conflict and instability. Yet even before the dictator, awqaf holdings were instrumentalized by Libya's ruling colonial powers, principally the Ottomans and the Italians, and the awqaf office's authority and functions were shaped by reformist debates and deliberations underway at the time across the Arab and Muslim world. Thus, the notion of a pristine and uncorrupted awqaf that is somehow insulated from political and foreign influence is misguided.

Moving forward, awqaf offices will feature prominently in Libya's broader challenges of state building and reconciliation. With their presence in the religious sphere through mosque appointments and influence over Islamic discourse, they will continue to be viewed as important sources of moral and social authority. Their supervision of property assets makes them similarly valuable as economic prizes. Reducing factional competition over the institution will require the same broad-based reforms that Libya has so desperately needed over the years and that have proven so elusive: security sector reform, financial transparency and accountability, decentralization, and, perhaps most importantly, a commitment by elites to furthering the public good rather than self-enrichment.

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CHAPTER 5

Who Will Speak for Islam in Egypt— And Who Will Listen?

NATHAN J. BROWN AND MICHELE DUNNE

Introduction

Egyptian state institutions have a powerful presence in the religious realm—teaching, preaching, broadcasting, adjudicating, legislating, and conducting scholarship on religious issues. While the institutions themselves are deeply rooted in society, the past decade has seen tremendous turmoil in the context in which they operate: an Islamist movement entered the halls of power and was evicted, a new president with an agenda in the religious realm has reassembled and deepened an authoritarian system, and security bodies have repressed some religious organizations and movements as well as policed others.

In important ways, Egypt's various official religious bodies not only survived the turmoil but emerged in a more powerful position. They are more autonomous and more cohesive; they also have seen strong unofficial rivals to their influence in Egyptian society edged aside. But each of these developments seems precarious. Newfound autonomy is surviving insecurely under a security-minded regime and a domineering president, and cohesion is challenged by potential rivalries among key figures, sometimes aggravated by regime attempts to play favorites. Furthermore, institutions' social influence remains uncertain in a society in which traditional authorities wrestle with the limits of what heavy-handed political tools can accomplish.

The role of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in the religious realm has attracted tremendous international and domestic attention. Internationally, he has garnered some approval as a promoter of what he calls “renewed Islamic discourse.”⁴⁷⁷ Regionally, he is a leader in the camp of those who wish to eliminate political Islam—his regime not only deposed former president Mohamed Morsi and arrested thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members, but also seized thousands of independent mosques and hundreds of charities with ties to Islamist movements. Sisi's 2015 speech calling for a religious revolution, made

before an audience of senior religious scholars, was music to the ears of Western leaders at a time when the self-proclaimed Islamic State was not only spreading across parts of Iraq and Syria but inspiring violence in Europe and the United States as well. Domestically, Sisi has lectured religious leaders on topics ranging from religious thought to extremism to divorce. Indeed, while Egyptian observers often analyze presidential efforts as a return to past periods of regime domination, Sisi has tread into doctrinal matters where his predecessors showed little interest.

But while Sisi's effort to steer religious teachings and discussion is real—and hardly likely to end—its effects are uncertain to date. While some parts of the state religious establishment have been responsive and are under direct regime control, others—most notably the globally preeminent Islamic university and center of Islamic studies known as al-Azhar, and especially its top leadership—have jealously protected their autonomy and firmly (if generally gently) resisted presidential instruction on particular matters.

Egypt's Islamic establishment is composed of a complex of institutions, many of which have been involved in a wide range of issues in recent years, sparking debate over their reform and renewal. Such debates are happening on a structural level—with the Parliament an arena for such arguments—but also in general public discussions about the need for and meaning of renewal. This has led to a political tug of war over control of the religious establishment, involving not only the president's initiatives but also the actions of other critical actors. The resulting outcomes not only affect the reforms on Egyptian society to date but also amount to a struggle for control of religious institutions.

Islamic Institutions in Egypt

Islamic institutions have been a part of the Egyptian state apparatus as it has emerged over time—with some of them dating back over a millennium (long before they were formally folded into the official apparatus). Al-Azhar was founded in 972 by a then-ruling Shia dynasty; others have histories that are shorter only by comparison, dating back to the Ottoman period or the nineteenth century. In Egypt, where political and religious authority have often overlapped, much effort has been expended over who leads these

In Egypt, where political and religious authority have often overlapped, much effort has been expended over who leads these religious institutions and how much they are answerable to the political ruler or regime.

religious institutions and how much they are answerable to the political ruler or regime. Tussling over the control and oversight of Islamic schools, mosques, and other bodies dates back to the construction of a modern bureaucratic state in Egypt in the nineteenth century, with rulers attempting to sway, co-opt, and dominate various institutions. In the 1960s, the regime of former president

Gamal Abdel Nasser took an intrusive approach, and direct regime control over the religious apparatus reached its height. The Nasser regime's tools were never abandoned, but subsequent decades saw a gradual loosening, with rulers sometimes playing various institutions off against each other but also hoping that the state religious apparatus together would confront or at least contain radical religious movements, especially as those movements won a foothold in parts of Egyptian society from the 1970s onward.

Some within Islamic institutions have always pressed to maximize their autonomy and win even more. They won a victory of sorts in the tumult surrounding the 2011 uprising, not only getting a greater degree of autonomy written into the law but also proving their worth to security-minded state officials who were skeptical of—and ultimately moved against—the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists.⁴⁷⁸ When Sisi assumed the presidency, therefore, he found a mixed religious establishment, of which some groups were allies in some ways. However, others had powerful actors willing to insist that their credibility rested on some distance from day-to-day politics and their protection of religious heritage and learning, which they saw as a national treasure based on deep expertise that transcended the policy directions of senior members of the executive branch.

Al-Azhar

Al-Azhar perhaps stands as Egypt's leading religious institution—and that is certainly how it presents itself. With a network of primary and secondary schools, a university, a set of research and scholarly bodies, and an international educational presence, al-Azhar is a complex of many different institutions, led by a figure with the title “grand imam” (also commonly called the sheikh of al-Azhar) with an office that oversees all subordinate parts.

While al-Azhar is part of the Egyptian state apparatus, its strong sense of mission and identity—with its scholars and students wearing distinctive garb and its loyal followers and alumni spread throughout the country and world—makes al-Azhar an institution that cultivates a mindset among its leadership—as well as many of its rank-and-file faculty, students, and personnel—that it has a global, divinely inspired mission. Its Facebook page announces that “God designated Egypt in al-Azhar to be a lighthouse to the entire Arab-Islamic world.”⁴⁷⁹

That image—and that role—has given the institution a powerful voice in religious affairs and in public affairs more generally that has made it not only influential but also a political prize to be won. And it has led to regime efforts, especially in the modern era, to draw al-Azhar's support for regime policies, ideology, and rhetoric. With the clear assertion of state control over religious endowments (and thus the many properties whose rental incomes have supported al-Azhar) over the past century and a half, as well as other legal and administrative moves during the nineteenth and twentieth century, the tools of regime influence tended to grow. Direct control probably reached its height after 1961, when the al-Azhar institution was reorganized—its Hay'at Kibar al-Ulema (Body of Senior Scholars) was abolished and its university was placed under more direct watch and forced to add secular faculties. At this same time, the religious pronouncements coming out of al-Azhar proved supportive of the regime's ideological directions.

Controls gradually loosened again from the 1970s onward, though not so much through formal change and more through a loosening of centralization in parts of the Egyptian state during the presidencies of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. Still, some within the religious institutions' ranks and supporters, and certainly within Islamist opposition movements, denounced what they saw as continuing regime controls. The ranks of al-Azhar contained a wide variety of jurisprudential and doctrinal approaches, and indeed al-Azhar institutionally has portrayed itself as broadly accepting of the various schools of Islamic law. And al-Azhar's leaders themselves seized the opportunity of the 2011 uprising to prevail upon the

country's interim military leadership to grant religious institutions far more autonomy than they had enjoyed for many decades. That was accomplished in a piece of January 2012 legislation that rushed through the armed forces' council four days before the Islamist-dominated Parliament sat for its session, likely an attempt by the military to ensure that al-Azhar would remain independent from the regime.⁴⁸⁰

The law re-established the Body of Senior Scholars as the head of al-Azhar; the first members of the body were to be named by then incumbent al-Azhar Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb; they were then to name his successors as well as their own when a vacancy opened. The grand imam has proceeded slowly, never filling out the full membership of the body. Appointments have been a careful balancing act—not simply because various specializations and legal schools have to be represented but also because al-Tayeb has moved cautiously and been generally inclined toward figures with the right combination of scholarly accomplishment, quiet demeanor, and seniority. He has named a few very public figures, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Doha-based Egyptian scholar who served on the body initially, and Ali Gomaa, the former grand mufti who still serves on the body and has been a harsh critic of the Muslim Brotherhood and a very visible supporter of the post-2013 regime. But most other members are known only among other Azharis and have limited public recognition. Al-Tayeb has learned to turn to the body regularly to issue statements and even propose a draft law with the authority of its collective wisdom rather than simply that of his office.

And the body—as well as the lifetime tenure of the grand imam—has become critical to al-Azhar's ability to maintain an independent voice. It is not that al-Azhar's leaders see their role as oppositional; far from it. Al-Azhar's leaders fully accept the legitimacy of the existing political order and support the political leadership's authority to administer the country as it sees necessary to serve the public interest. Its leaders thus tend to be conservative—not necessarily regarding policy (though some can be) but accepting a political order that they see as making righteous social life and religious practice possible. So even while, for instance, closely guarding its own autonomy, al-Azhar does not hesitate to cooperate with the Ministry of Interior in devising mechanisms of local conflict resolution.

But al-Azhar is still very jealous of controlling its own internal operations. The institution's leadership, for instance, was very suspicious of the Muslim Brotherhood, but systematic purges and arrests of Brotherhood members and sympathizers took place over a more prolonged period (compared with other universities) because of the institution's greater autonomy. And it continues to insist that it needs to follow its own methods in teaching and determining doctrine.

If the grand imam and the Body of Senior Scholars are the linchpin of the institution's autonomy, the university and the network of primary and secondary schools are the secret of its widespread presence in Egyptian society. This is not only true in a formal sense—there are al-Azhar schools all over the country—but also in an informal sense. Most religious officials and employees, including all preachers in state-regulated mosques, are al-Azhar alumni, giving the institution a constituency that few other parts of the religious apparatus can match.

Dar al-Ifta

Egypt's Dar al-Ifta, a state institution headed by the grand mufti and sometimes called the Office of the Mufti, dates its origin to 1895.⁴⁸¹ While there had been chief muftis before this date with some official roles, that period saw a host of religious positions being transformed into state bureaucracies with formal regulations, administrative structures, and legal bases.⁴⁸² The Dar al-Ifta was formally attached to the Ministry of Justice—where it technically remains, though it generally presents itself as a freestanding state body. In that sense, the office has grown up alongside the modern Egyptian state, advising its officials (and members of the public who seek its guidance) on religious matters—and clearly establishing Egyptian sovereignty in matters of religious law connected to the state.

Much smaller and more sharply focused in its mandate than the sprawling set of complexes overseen by al-Azhar, the Dar al-Ifta's role and prominence have varied over its lifetime according to the political circumstances and the prestige of the figure of grand mufti. But especially since

the 1970s, its prominence has risen for two reasons. First, the institution provides an authoritative and scholarly voice for a vision of Islamic law that is comfortable with and supportive of the authority of the modern state and critical of radical or oppositional voices. In 2017, for instance, the grand mufti backed the ban on trading Bitcoin because the ban undermined the ability of the Egyptian state to regulate currency, allowed traders to escape security agencies, and could be used by the Islamic State.⁴⁸³

But Dar al-Ifta is hardly alone in this regard, and that leads to the second reason for its rise in prominence: regimes have been able to play authoritative state bodies like al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta against each other in support of the policy of the day. In the late twentieth century, the grand mufti and the grand imam of al-Azhar sometimes developed a reputation as rivals, with the mufti junior in stature but generally (but not always) a bit closer in alignment with the regime position.

Rivalry among state institutions has continued over the past decade, but no longer does Dar al-Ifta pose much of a challenge to al-Azhar. As a source of fatwas, or religious rulings, Dar al-Ifta is simply smaller and less well known (with many Egyptians unaware of how it is distinct from al-Azhar, a huge institution with a presence throughout the country). But more significantly, the 2012 law reforming al-Azhar governance also allowed the Body of Senior Scholars to name the grand mufti (with the president retaining only the formal authority to promulgate the appointment).⁴⁸⁴ Not only did this bring the grand mufti and Dar al-Ifta into al-Azhar's fold in a formal sense, it also ensured that the mufti would continue to be a more junior figure, as the mufti retires at age sixty while the grand imam enjoys a lifetime appointment.

When Goma'a (a leading public figure who commanded broad respect as a teacher and scholar but who clashed with other scholars in a way that led him to engage in bitter public personal disputes, undercutting his reputation) reached the end of his (extended) term as mufti in 2013, the new law was invoked and led to the appointment of Egypt's current grand mufti, Shawki Allam—a humble and conciliatory figure

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who is close to al-Azhar's leadership.⁴⁸⁵ The result is that Dar al-Ifta's prominence as a separate voice has ebbed though its less autonomous position, and the weaker status of its leader, may lead it to be a more reliable supporter of specific regime policies. Allam's reputation has led to some rumors that the regime will turn to him to replace al-Tayeb as grand imam of al-Azhar, whose relationship with the regime is more nettlesome.

Ministry of Religious Endowments

Perhaps the biggest religious bureaucracy in Egypt is the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which has more than 300,000 employees. However, its status as a ministry—located squarely within the executive branch and indeed inside the cabinet—effectively eliminates its ability to serve as an autonomous religious voice.⁴⁸⁶ Its head is quite clearly attached to the regime, and the current occupant seems to work to make a virtue out of this necessity. Further, its considerable administrative presence gives it tremendous reach and legal authority, though as an institution it lacks the prestige or reputation of the more autonomous bodies.

The ministry arose out of a steady growth in administrative oversight of endowments asserted as the modern Egyptian state was built in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Because those endowments supported mosques and charitable and religious institutions, the ministry had an effective oversight role over the structure of Islamic houses of worship and other activities. By the 1950s, it effectively came not simply to oversee and monitor but to control such entities directly.⁴⁸⁷

The effect has been to turn every recognized mosque in the country into a state-managed facility; every official preacher in the country into a civil servant; and much of the country's charitable activity (such as distribution of alms) into a state function, at least in theory. Such control does exist in practice, but it can be uneven for several reasons. First, the resources of the ministry have never been sufficient to patrol every place used as a mosque. The religious revival in Egyptian society that began in the 1970s led to the emergence of a large number of privately funded mosques, *zawaya* (in Egypt, referring to local prayer spaces), and even spontaneous assemblies in open-air settings.⁴⁸⁸ Second, even in government-controlled mosques, the preachers are trained in al-Azhar institutions, so many have considerable loyalty to their alma mater and look there for guidance on religious issues. Third, mosques and preachers are often

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embedded in their communities—with local committees to support their work and with preachers who take on a strong pastoral role—that make some feel as anchored in their local society as in the state bureaucracy.

(particularly but not exclusively those sympathetic with the Muslim Brotherhood) from the spheres it controls—including a purge that seems to be ongoing rather than simply a short-term creature of the post-2013 environment.⁴⁸⁹ The ministry has also stepped up oversight both over zakat, or mandatory annual

Since 2013, the ministry has used its tools in an effort to enforce a pro-regime line; it has also worked to exclude pockets of opposition

charitable donations made by Muslims, distributed through mosques and over the local committees that often support the work of neighborhood houses of worship. Mosques have been closed outside of prayer time as part of a general, increased regulation of public space but also out of an apparent feeling that mosques have served historically as a meeting ground for Islamists and a recruiting ground for groups oppositional to the regime. And mosques also quickly earned a reputation for being monitored not merely by the ministry but also by state security bodies.

Most publicly, the ministry worked to impose a single “written sermon” in 2016, one that was to be read by every preacher for Friday prayers throughout the country.⁴⁹⁰ The initiative provoked a storm of criticism, including from al-Azhar, which insisted that it alone was responsible for its own mosque and that its graduates were trained to develop sermons, not simply read one. The dispute ended with the ministry agreeing that it would fix the topic for the sermon (and regulate other matters, like length) and circulate a text, but it would not insist that the text be read word-for-word. In 2019, the ministry further suggested that preachers submit audio and visual recordings of their Friday sermons but backed off the requirement when preachers protested, even while reminding them that it had other tools for monitoring.⁴⁹¹ And it was quick to use the coronavirus crisis—in which it dawdled before following the example of al-Azhar and canceling Friday prayers—to renew its efforts to control small prayer rooms, rooftop meetings, and street gatherings.⁴⁹²

The ministry’s sermons are prepared by an expert committee, including members of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, an advisory body within the ministry itself and generally hew to non-controversial topics with two major exceptions. First, the council regularly emphasizes the duty of obeying the *wali al-amr* (the ruler or leader of a community, which in a political context means the ruler or political authority). Second, it proclaims the necessity of combating terrorism and extremism (terms the ministry uses to describe not only the Islamic State but also the Muslim Brotherhood).⁴⁹³

Such measures sometimes bring the ministry into tension with al-Azhar, an institution that is both protective of its autonomy and moral and religious authority and is insistent that its voice is authoritative on doctrinal matters. At times, the minister of religious endowments and the grand imam have seemed personal rivals as well, in the same way the grand mufti and the grand imam tussled in earlier decades—leading to periodic public assurances that the two officials have harmonious relations and their institutions are allied.⁴⁹⁴

Other Institutions With Religious Authority

The Ministry of Religious Endowments and al-Azhar are the most visible and extensive parts of the state apparatus that deal with religion. But they are hardly alone. The Ministry of Interior issues identity cards and thus determines the religious status of each citizen (which in turn determines the family law that applies to them). And, difficult cases can be litigated in administrative courts.⁴⁹⁵ State-owned media (and media controlled by state bodies, even if nominally private) determine which preachers and scholars are broadcast. The Ministry of Education is a less obvious but quite significant religious actor—religious education is mandatory in state schools, and the ministry determines the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the instructors, though it relies in part on al-Azhar for guidance. (State religious education has

been controversial over the years, though actual changes in what is taught seem to be minor despite the political swings of the past decade.) Family courts apply Islamic law—in its codified form when they can and according to Egyptian judicial understanding of Islamic jurisprudence when the code is silent or ambiguous. And Parliament often wades into religious issues involving legislation (especially family law), doctrinal authority (the extent of deference to al-Azhar), and other matters of policy that touch on the religious sphere.

What this multitude of official religious actors ensures is that matters of religious policy not only create discussion among Egyptians but also lead to cacophony among state institutions—and with the narrowing of the sphere for politics and public debate, arguments about religion are often dominated by state actors.

In those debates, the president's word is generally final (when it is spoken), and the presence of the security services is often powerfully felt. Debate still takes place, sometimes even obliquely with the president himself and sometimes involving critique of significant religious leaders. Much of the public debate takes place in the media, but perhaps the most notable public forum is the Parliament, which frequently takes up religious issues.

Islamic Reform Initiatives in Parliament Since 2013

While most critical decisions seem to be made within narrow regime circles, some important religious issues are debated in lively parliamentary sessions. The actual legislative record of the Egyptian Parliament is fairly meager, but it has turned into an important forum for airing controversies for two reasons. First, the strong public role of oppositionist Islamist movements over the past generation—and the much more recent rapid rise and fall of Muslim Brotherhood rule—have thrust many religious issues on the parliamentary agenda. Second, while the Parliament contains no real opposition voices, it does contain some who may wish to leave their mark in the religious realm. In the body that sat from 2015 to 2020, some parliamentarians suggested Egypt's religious establishment was too unresponsive to modern needs and overly invested in outmoded curricula or teachings. Just as significant, some figures who hailed from the religious institutions themselves—including the former president of al-Azhar University, a figure who had been shunted aside amid internal controversies and rivalries—took the lead in suggesting changes.

Two kinds of legislative initiatives have been put forward since 2013 regarding religion in Egyptian politics and public life. The first concern religious structures; the second concern substantive issues—but both are really about who has authority.

On structure, initiatives have thus far taken the form of rumors and trial balloons, most clearly aimed at diminishing the autonomy of religious institutions, especially al-Azhar. Perhaps the most ambitious effort occasioned a flurry of activity in 2017; it would have rescinded much of the institutional autonomy al-Azhar's leadership won in 2012 had the institution's leaders not successfully rallied against it in public debates.⁴⁹⁶ Indeed, none of the initiatives has proceeded very far, and the kinds of changes that are sometimes floated would likely never be heard without the anticipation that they could obtain the support of the country's senior leadership (including the president himself). But it is unclear whether

such initiatives are motivated by the ideological inclinations of the initiator, an initial foray sponsored by a senior leader, or a shot across the bow of bodies that sometimes seem to provoke presidential headaches. Even so, they are likely not merely idiosyncratic projects or exercises of flamboyance by grandstanders given the constricted nature of Egyptian political debates and the attempt by the Parliament's leadership to control and manage the body.

For instance, in the spring of 2020, a large number of parliamentarians, including the chair of the parliamentary committee overseeing religious affairs, suggested a series of amendments in the 2012 law. These amendments granted the president a stronger role in appointing the grand mufti, allowed experts in a variety of fields—and not just senior members of a few al-Azhar departments—to be included in the Body of Senior Scholars, and provided for some oversight of the grand imam.⁴⁹⁷ Once again, al-Azhar rallied opposition, with the grand imam joined by the Body of Senior Scholars. Only when the initiative was passed to the Council of State (a judicial body that reviews draft legislation) did legal and constitutional objections lead the Parliament to table the initiative.

But parliamentarians have also waded into the question of who may issue fatwas, with the ostensible goal of combating the phenomenon of extremist, implausible, and misleading religious guidance.⁴⁹⁸ And while that is indeed a likely purpose, the legislation also wades into turf battles among state institutions that all feel authorized (and so continue) to issue fatwas—Dar al-Ifta, the Ministry of Religious Endowments, al-Azhar's Body of Senior Scholars, al-Azhar's Islamic Research Complex, and individual al-Azhar faculty members.

A second set of legislative initiatives deal with matters of substance, and in particular family law. Based on modern codifications of rulings that stem from Islamic jurisprudence, any debate about family law (including marriage, divorce, custodianship, and inheritance) is inherently religious in nature.

Two rival initiatives—one initiated by al-Azhar with a final proposal produced by its Body of Senior Scholars and another pursued by a few parliamentarians—have been subjects of ongoing controversy.⁴⁹⁹ Some find the al-Azhar-proposed law excessively conservative on some matters; the distribution of rights and duties among husband and wife is the most frequent subject of dispute. But underlying that argument is one that really involves authority: al-Azhar claims that it is the most reliable source of knowledge on religious questions; that this position is enshrined in the constitution; and that while its opinions do not automatically translate into law, they represent the distillation of the most learned scholarship in the country. Many vocal parliamentarians answer that al-Azhar may develop its own opinions but that Parliament being overly deferential to al-Azhar would be a violation of Parliament's constitutional position as the legislative branch.

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These are two portentous early signs that the Parliament that seated in 2020 is likely to push its role in religious issues further than the preceding Parliament did. First, the cabinet is placing some amendments to the family law immediately on its agenda (after review by the Council of State).⁵⁰⁰ Second, Sisi used his prerogatives of appointing some members of Parliament to grant Gomaa a seat in the body. Gomaa was a very respected religious scholar whose strident and vitriolic rhetoric against scholars deemed close to the Muslim Brotherhood have made him a controversial figure indeed. He was immediately assigned as chair of the religious affairs committee in the Parliament, a position that gives him significant power to affect the parliamentary agenda. Given his prominence, his past position as grand mufti, his membership on the Body of Senior Scholars, and his close support for the 2013 overthrow of the Brotherhood (where his rhetoric was unrestrained and even violent, as opposed to that of the grand imam), a tug of war seems likely to unfold between the Parliament and the current al-Azhar leadership (perhaps on grounds of personality and politics more than religion).⁵⁰¹

At issue, then, is really whose position should prevail when there are differences on religious issues: how constitutional and moral authority relate to each other and how much political leadership can guide, cajole, or command state religious bodies or have its policy preferences reflected in state-sponsored religious guidance. And from the perspective of the religious institutions themselves, the question is how much autonomy they can be allowed on matters they consider within their expertise or even within their own domain (with al-Azhar's curriculum being a frequent topic of public discussion).

Changes in Islamic Discourse

Not all contest is bureaucratic. Broad doctrinal and jurisprudential matters, especially general ones about how to apply Islamic teachings to questions of contemporary society, have entered public discussion on some occasions. And these debates about Islam are not contained in the Parliament. To a degree that is virtually unprecedented in Egyptian religious life, the head of state himself has weighed in—quite generally, but still forcefully—on doctrinal matters.

Sisi's first shot across the bow of the Islamic religious establishment came in early January 2015, eight months after he became president. Speaking before a large assembly of religious leaders on the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, Sisi departed from his prepared remarks about the need to base religious discourse on correct doctrine to ask rhetorically how it was possible that incorrect "thinking" among Muslims was terrorizing the world.⁵⁰² "We are in need of a religious revolution," he said, adding "you imams are responsible before God."⁵⁰³ He then questioned whether students in religious institutions were being correctly taught. Returning to his script, he promised the state's firm support for such institutions, drawing applause from an audience that appeared somewhat stunned.

Sisi's speech, which he followed with attendance at a mass service a few days later on Coptic Christmas, garnered him huge international coverage and praise.⁵⁰⁴ Prominent Western commentators went so far as to suggest Sisi deserved the Nobel Peace Prize and asked whether he might be Islam's Martin Luther.⁵⁰⁵

Sisi would return to related themes—that reform efforts thus far were inadequate, Islamic thought or discourse needed to be updated or enlightened, and new efforts were needed against ideas used to justify

extremism—repeatedly in the coming months and years.⁵⁰⁶ In fact, since 2015 Sisi has used his annual speech on the Prophet’s birthday several times as an occasion to berate imams and religious scholars, even clashing in more restrained but still quite clear manner with the highly respected grand imam of al-Azhar.⁵⁰⁷

While the phrase “reform of religious discourse” was forcefully added into Egyptian political discussion by Sisi, it has been taken up by other institutions with vigor. While that term is associated with the president’s call, al-Azhar’s leaders themselves have often posed as reformers for decades—though ones who do so based

on knowledge and renewal while still serving as guardians of the *turath* (heritage) that the institution has curated in its understanding for over a millennium. In a sense, reform is now the project of all religious institutions—but each institution means different things by it and, more fundamentally, has a very different conception of who should be doing the reforming.

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For al-Azhar, reform has been discussed for over a century—and reform means the revival of traditions of scholarship and learning to apply the traditions to modern conditions. That revival must be led by scholars themselves. Those who wish to toss aside the religious heritage of past generations, the entire corpus of Islamic jurisprudence, or even some venerated texts (such as some of the sunna, the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, which are used as a source of law) are not so much reforming as destroying religious discourse.

But not everyone is ready to defer to al-Azhar’s claim to lead and define the terms of reform—and the public feuding with the president has given space to those who challenge al-Azhar’s authority. Indeed, while debate on social and political issues has been sharply contained, arguments about religion are robust. Parliamentarians feel free to weigh in; prominent intellectuals go beyond the president’s direct but very general rebuke to specific attacks on al-Azhar. The minister of religious endowments rushed to use the president’s call to convene a series of conferences and initiatives to “renew religious discourse.”⁵⁰⁸ A very public debate in January 2020 between the president of Cairo University and the grand imam spilled out beyond the conference where it took place to a series of follow-up interventions that kept the issue in the press for weeks.⁵⁰⁹ The result can be polarizing, with al-Azhar’s supporters seeing their revered institution as under concerted attack. For their part, al-Azhar’s critics see the institution’s position as implicitly theocratic in its insistence on its own authority.

Sisi’s interventions in the debate about renewal have been episodic and general, but they are also consistent and clear. He does not call for secularism or individual freedom of conscience—heterodox religious groups, such as the so-called Quranists who reject the sunna and claim to rely only on the Quran itself, are still subject to persecution for supposedly threatening state security.⁵¹⁰ Instead, Sisi directs the *ahl al-din* (men of religion) to abandon obscurantist fixation on texts and instead put themselves at the service of state priorities. Sisi has publicly rebuked al-Tayeb as missing the point. “The current dilemma

worldwide is not about following the sunnah or not. It is about the wrong understanding of our religion,” the president said publicly in an event where the grand imam had just defended the religious heritage.⁵¹¹ Sisi went on to ask whether those calling for the abandonment of the sunna were more wrong than those who misinterpreted the religion.

Of course, political and religious figures have tussled in the past over policy issues, the autonomy of the religious sphere, and matters of appointment and oversight. But the current tension between the grand imam and the president is new. Nasser placed religious institutions, including al-Azhar, under much greater control and sought their endorsement of policy initiatives (including support for socialist measures consistent with Islamic norms of social justice). But he staked out no religious claims himself. Sadat cultivated a public persona as *a-ra'is al-mu'min* (the believer-president), tilted official ideology in a religious direction, and, like his predecessor, sought support for specific policies (such as the negotiation of a peace treaty with Israel). But only Sisi has spoken out on matters of general religious discourse and thought, instructed religious scholars on their tasks, and admonished them not only in the name of the Egyptian state or people but also before God. And the struggle over religion—while contained and sometimes muted—has taken on a political tone, and sometimes even a personal one for the president.

The Dynamic Between Sisi and the Grand Imam

Among the more dramatic aspects of Sisi's attempt to control the religious sphere has been his ongoing public feud with the grand imam of al-Azhar. Al-Tayeb took office in 2010 upon appointment by Mubarak and has shepherded the millennium-old institution through the tumultuous political and religious events that followed. He maintained reasonably good relations with the transitional military council and tense ties with the presidency under Muslim Brotherhood leadership, but later, he stood at Sisi's side along with Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria for the announcement of the July 3, 2013, military coup.

While al-Tayeb is far from a revolutionary or a Brotherhood sympathizer, something has been amiss between him and Sisi since the early days of Sisi's leadership. Al-Tayeb made several statements in the days following the July coup calling for inclusive national reconciliation, in particular objecting to the brutal force Sisi used to crush the Muslim Brotherhood during mass killings in July and August—going

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so far as to withdraw briefly from public view (retreating to the southern city of Aswan).⁵¹² In the words of one observer, Sisi resented al-Tayeb's effort at neutrality, which he viewed as “unjustifiably treating a state that fights terrorism as equal to the sponsors of that terrorism.”⁵¹³

Sisi became president in 2014 and started taking on the religious establishment in January 2015 with the call for renewal of religious discourse noted above. He and al-Tayeb disagreed publicly about several religious and practical issues in 2016 and 2017, including Sisi's policies that had specific fallout for al-Azhar, such as Egypt's participation in a controversial Islamic conference held in Chechnya and accommodation of Chinese government requests to deport Uighur students.⁵¹⁴

One episode that highlighted the personal nature of the dispute began in January 2017 when Sisi, who has a tendency to focus sharply from time to time on what he views as social ills (for example, obesity), took on the issue of increased divorce rates.⁵¹⁵ Calling for eliminating the traditional Islamic practice of verbal divorce, Sisi challenged al-Tayeb publicly, reportedly asking somewhat teasingly, “What do you think, Grand Sheikh? You are giving me a hard time.”⁵¹⁶ When al-Azhar senior scholars responded formally that such a change would not comply with Islamic law, a firestorm broke out in the government-controlled media, with some commentators going so far as to demand al-Tayeb’s resignation for daring to oppose Sisi.⁵¹⁷ A subsequent attempt to clip the grand imam’s wings through draft legislation that would have limited al-Azhar’s autonomy failed when Parliament backed down in May 2017; an attempt to put similar restrictions into 2019 constitutional amendments was also abandoned after reported concessions by al-Tayeb, leading to the departure of some senior al-Azhar figures deemed too independent.⁵¹⁸

Disagreements between Sisi and al-Tayeb over specific issues and broad teachings—and control of al-Azhar—have continued ever since, and in mid-2020, they played out in Parliament as well. At an international conference early in the year, al-Tayeb once again publicly rejected efforts to revise religious discourse in the manner Sisi and his supporters were asking for, by clashing with Cairo University President Mohamed Othman Elkhosht, who was reported to be carrying Sisi’s water.⁵¹⁹ More media attacks on al-Tayeb from prominent Sisi supporters followed.⁵²⁰ Then in July 2020, the regime-dominated Parliament gave initial approval to a bill that would have taken the mufti’s office, Dar al-Ifta, out of the control of al-Azhar and put it more clearly under presidential authority.⁵²¹ Al-Tayeb once again resisted this challenge to his authority, demanding an opportunity to address deputies before a final vote. In late August, the Parliament postponed further action on the bill until the next assembly was seated in late 2020, as discussed above.⁵²²

Controlling the Egyptian State

Sisi presents his initiatives regarding religion in Egyptian politics and public life as being about modernity, interfaith relations, and opposing extremism, but in the end, they might be fundamentally about who wields authority—and a sense that al-Azhar and the religious establishment as a whole should accept his leadership.

Since Sisi took effective control of Egypt in the July 2013 coup and later became president in May 2014, he has brought government institutions to heel to a remarkable extent. It is not surprising that Sisi has exerted far more control than his democratically elected (and later deposed) predecessor Morsi, but Sisi has been far more controlling than Mubarak, who was president from 1981 until the 2011 uprising. While Mubarak’s rule was far from democratic, some government institutions—such as the judiciary, Parliament, and diplomatic corps—cultivated pride in their competence as well as their heritage as some of the oldest institutions in the Middle East. Staffed by the elite, they enjoyed some limited margin of independence, for example, in determining senior appointments and observing their own internal procedures.⁵²³

Under Sisi, those institutions have been taken down a peg, and in some cases more than just a peg. The judiciary, previously considered the branch of government with the most integrity and public

respect, has been hit hard. Constitutional amendments in 2019, followed by implementing legislation, restructured judicial bodies in ways that increased presidential control over senior appointments—a process one unnamed judicial source described as “constitutionalizing dictatorship.”⁵²⁴ Another of Sisi’s major takedowns was that of Central Auditing Organization head Hesham Geneina, fired in 2016 and then imprisoned in 2018 for supposedly spreading false news after he claimed to possess evidence of corruption by senior leaders.⁵²⁵

The Parliament, a politicized but occasionally feisty body that had opposition representation in most of its iterations under Mubarak, is allowed only to color within the margins sketched by government policy. The judiciary dissolved the first freely elected Parliament as unconstitutional in 2012, and after Sisi took control the next year, successive steps to outlaw or otherwise exclude opposition parties (as well as electoral law changes) ensured that only Sisi supporters would serve as parliamentary deputies.⁵²⁶ Parliamentary elections in late 2020, which excluded even the few independent deputies from the assembly elected in 2015, brought in a new pro-regime party to organize more effectively those elected. The elections also filled a recently re-instituted and partially appointed upper house with loyalists, completing Sisi’s control of the legislative branch.

Even Egypt’s diplomatic corps—always loyal to the state but used to enjoying a margin of independence allowed to the intelligentsia—has been humbled under Sisi. A series of purges began in 2014, removing many prominent diplomats suspected of sympathies with the 2011 uprising; for example, then foreign minister Nabil Fahmy resigned after only one year in the job after he reportedly refused to cooperate in politically motivated investigations, reassignments, and dismissals.⁵²⁷

In Egypt’s public and private universities, the extension of executive control has become overt and crude after the failure of the youth-led 2011 uprising; tenured faculty may be fired for political activity and the state intelligence services have formal oversight over everyday matters, such as whether professors may speak at conferences abroad or invite foreign lecturers to campus.⁵²⁸

Another notable aspect of Sisi’s control of government institutions is that it is more overtly military in nature compared to the more political control of his predecessors. Sisi deploys military officers with formal or informal authority over civilians and has introduced programs to indoctrinate civilian bureaucrats about the necessity of military control. Military officers or retired officers have long occupied influential positions throughout the Egyptian system from the level of national ministries down to local governments, but the trend has been deepened and formalized under Sisi.⁵²⁹ An amendment passed in July 2020 mandated, for example, that the minister of defense assign a military adviser to each provincial governor to ensure that military priorities are implemented.⁵³⁰ Part of the adviser’s duties is to oversee instruction in military affairs for secondary school and university students—part of a broad web of national security indoctrination, often taught by military officers, for young professionals as well as senior civilian bureaucrats such as judges.⁵³¹ The religious realm has not been exempt from this effort, with the Ministry of Religious Affairs sending some of its personnel to receive training.

Al-Tayeb's Tenacity

Sisi's efforts to control the Islamic establishment are far from remarkable; what is remarkable about the Sisi-al-Tayeb sparring is the fact that Sisi has not won every round. Sisi has cut into al-Tayeb's authority, bringing the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Dar al-Ifta ever closer to the presidency rather than to al-Azhar (without any legal or formal change) and forcing al-Tayeb to dismiss several close associates.⁵³² Al-Tayeb has so far successfully resisted, however, in accepting changes to interpretations of Islamic law or teachings—and more to the point, he has kept his job despite Sisi's well-known desire to replace him with a more malleable grand imam.

Al-Tayeb has picked his battles. The traditional deference that many Sunni scholars show to the ruler and indeed to all state bodies—the principle of *wali al-amr*—is based on an understanding that however imperfect political authorities might be, they are responsible for protecting the social order in a manner that makes it possible for believers to live righteous lives.⁵³³ But when state officials begin to tread on doctrinal turf or seek to curb the autonomy of religious institutions, al-Tayeb has pushed back.

Why has al-Tayeb been relatively successful in resisting Sisi to date? He appears to have four sources of resilience: legal, institutional, personal, and international. First, the Transitional Military Council that ruled the country after Mubarak passed a decree in January 2012 that strengthened al-Azhar's independence in several ways, including by giving the grand imam lifetime tenure.⁵³⁴ Although that step was taken out of fear of Muslim Brotherhood dominance, it is not an easy one to undo partly due to the second factor: the combination of widespread popular support for al-Azhar, its symbolic role blending religious authority with national pride, and its nationwide network of schools and alumni give it a loyal following that few other state institutions can match. Moreover, al-Tayeb personally has managed to preserve a modicum of integrity while navigating tumultuous political and religious conditions for a decade; his language, even when sharp, has been respectful and seemingly above partisanship.

A final factor allowing al-Tayeb to resist Sisi's control is the grand imam's international prominence. In the past two decades, as many international political leaders were eager to find credible, prominent Muslim figures to speak out in various ways, al-Tayeb has found two particular champions: Roman Catholic Pope Francis and the United Arab Emirates' Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed (MBZ).

Pope Francis first met al-Tayeb in May 2016, after nearly a decade of tense relations between his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI and al-Azhar.⁵³⁵ Instead, Pope Francis and al-Tayeb have developed a warm friendship

and collaboration, resulting in many meetings, exchanges, and major initiatives, such as a joint declaration on “human fraternity” in April 2019.⁵³⁶ When Pope Francis launched his new encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” in October 2020, he cited his joint declaration with al-Tayeb, who in turn praised the new encyclical.⁵³⁷

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The United Arab Emirates and MBZ have encouraged the joint Vatican-al-Azhar activities—for example, by hosting the launch of the 2019 joint declaration—and have otherwise cultivated warm ties with al-Tayeb since at least 2013. Shortly before the July 2013 coup against Morsi, al-Tayeb traveled to the UAE to receive a major award, provoking criticism from pro-Brotherhood circles in Egypt.⁵³⁸ Since then, Emirati leaders and particularly MBZ (who is strongly focused on efforts to stamp out the Muslim Brotherhood regionwide) have showered al-Tayeb and al-Azhar with attention, praise, and funding.⁵³⁹ Apparently in return, al-Tayeb has provided religious approval not only for MBZ’s campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood but for other UAE initiatives as well, such as the boycott of Qatar that began in 2017.⁵⁴⁰

There are recent indications of some limits, however, to how far al-Tayeb is willing to go to please his Emirati patrons. As of this writing, al-Tayeb had not reacted publicly to the UAE’s October 2020 normalization of relations with Israel, and there are rumors that this Emirati move has disrupted the relationship.⁵⁴¹ In addition, al-Tayeb reportedly resisted pressure to issue a statement calling the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization after Saudi and Emirati clerics did so in November 2020 (in an apparent last-ditch effort to encourage former U.S. president Donald Trump’s administration to declare the group a foreign terrorist organization before Trump left office).⁵⁴²

MBZ and Pope Francis appear to have had somewhat different motivations for cultivating al-Tayeb—for example, the pope is probably more concerned about Muslim-Christian relations in Europe and the fate of Christian communities within the Middle East rather than the UAE’s potential stake in broad ideological or regional rivalries in the Middle East—but the effect on al-Tayeb’s fortunes in Egypt has been similar. Having an enormously popular international figure like the pope and a major diplomatic and financial backer of Egypt like MBZ in al-Tayeb’s corner has undoubtedly strengthened his hold on his office. When Sisi mandated that senior officials obtain his permission before traveling abroad in January 2019, it appeared to be aimed at least in part at al-Tayeb.⁵⁴³

Impact: Are Sisi’s Religious Reforms Changing Hearts and Minds?

Sisi’s religious reforms have served his own political agenda: putting all institutions under his control, eliminating any residual influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, and cultivating his image in the West as the hoped-for Islamic reformer. The question remains, however, as to whether the steps taken so far have diminished radicalization of youth in the country or materially changed the way Egyptian Muslims practice their faith.

It is difficult to ascertain whether attempts to reform Islamic discourse or control religious institutions have helped to address Egypt’s persistent problem with extremists turning to violence. Simply looking at the numbers, violent attacks related to Islamic extremism have gone up and down since Sisi has taken control; they reached a particular peak of lethality in 2017–2018 but were still going on as of 2021 and seemed to vary largely due to factors such as the shifting fortunes of the Islamic State.⁵⁴⁴

While it is impossible to know whether Sisi's attempted reforms have turned Egyptians' hearts and minds away from extremism, other factors known to contribute to extremism have not only continued but increased in recent years. Human rights abuses—including detention of tens of thousands of youth in poor conditions, forced disappearance and lengthy pretrial detention, unfair trials, torture, and sexual abuse—have continued since 2013 and in some ways gotten worse over time.⁵⁴⁵ Moreover, socioeconomic conditions that contribute to radicalization, such as high poverty and youth unemployment, have deteriorated in the last five years amid government austerity measures.⁵⁴⁶

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Religion remains an important part of Egyptian public life, and Egyptians describe themselves as “religious” to a high degree, in comparative terms according to public opinion polling.⁵⁴⁷ Indeed, religious identity and support for general terms like sharia, or Islamic law, have been high for some time. There are signs that religious observance is beginning to fall—not precipitously, but in a manner that causes concern in official religious circles.⁵⁴⁸ Indeed, a general regional trend of gradual declines in reported levels of religiosity and trust in religious leaders is evidenced in Egypt.⁵⁴⁹ While religious officials and political leaders routinely decry atheism, the real threat (at least for religious leaders) lies less in repudiation of religion than the possibility of creeping irrelevance. A younger generation of Egyptians is simply less inclined than their elders to embrace regular religious practice such as prayer. For instance, according to the Arab Barometer, 53 percent of Egyptians over fifty respond that they always perform the dawn prayer; only 8 percent of those between eighteen and twenty-nine report doing so. A similar but slightly smaller gap exists over the practice of reading or listening to the Quran.⁵⁵⁰ If there is a signal from the elite, it might actually be encouraging a subtle but definite diminished public role for religion, with women's head covering, for instance, being seen in some circles as politically incorrect.⁵⁵¹ If personal practice might be growing lax in some circles, though, conservative and repressive social practices associated with military culture persist in others.⁵⁵²

But general attitudes toward Islam are now operating in a different political and social context, one that causes some concern in official religious circles. The closure of independent religious spaces (with nongovernmental organizations, mosques, and other locations more tightly monitored) means that when Egyptians hear about religion in public, they generally hear official voices, even if some of those voices try to show some autonomy from the regime. The religious revival that took place since the 1970s had both very public and more private aspects, but personal observance, informal groupings, and social activity provided much of the energy. The changes imposed by the regime have affected daily lives, for example by denying Egyptians access to thousands of independent mosques, now shuttered, and cutting off services from hundreds of Islamic charitable institutions accused of connections to the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁵³ Zakat, one of Islam's five pillars, has also come under tighter official oversight than before as the regime tries to redirect giving toward the state and donors become allergic to politicized giving.⁵⁵⁴ The shift is not absolute—some autonomous spaces for religious inquiry and practice remain in Egypt—but the

levels of monitoring and control have increased markedly, with constricting effects on religious activity in Egyptian society.⁵⁵

Official Islamic institutions cannot always fill the gap, and the close association of some with the regime and its policies can undercut their credibility. Al-Azhar can bring some standardization to public Islam in Egypt, but homogenizing all forms of religion in the country is a task that is likely beyond al-Azhar's ability and probably beyond its ambition, except in the very loose sense of promoting beliefs and practices that seem politically safer. Presidential efforts to toe a specific security-oriented line—or even a broad presidential embrace of a vaguely defined “renewal”—are not likely to do much more than steer some official manifestations of religion. In the end, it seems unlikely that Sisi's attempt to fully control religious institutions and discourse will bring about any lasting change in the country's Islamic culture or affect the possibility that dissent, including violence, might again take on a religious tinge in the future.

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Algeria's Sufis Balance State Patronage and Political Entanglement

ANOUAR BOUKHARS

Introduction

“He who boycotts the December 2019 election is a disbeliever and enemy of the nation and the people,” proclaimed the Algerian National Syndicate of Zawaya on Facebook.⁵⁵⁶ The fatwa, or legal opinion on a point of Islamic law, issued in the run-up to the presidential contest sparked widespread online uproar in an election cycle already marred by protests and shunned by most Algerians. This was not the first time that some Sufi zawaya (singular zawiya, or religious schools, lodges, or orders that play an important social role in their surrounding communities) stirred up indignation and controversy. In 2016, disgraced former minister of energy and mines Chakib Khelil, who left Algeria in 2013 embroiled in a corruption scandal that led to an international arrest warrant being issued against him, kicked off his return to the country with a highly controversial tour of several zawaya in different parts of Algeria.⁵⁵⁷ But not all Sufi orders or their followers are aligned with unpopular political causes or tarnished politicians. The Khelil case, in particular, was met with deep consternation even among zawaya that view bargains with men of power transactionally.

The reality is that Sufi orders are not monolithic in their viewpoints, interests, and agendas. Throughout Algerian history, some Sufi orders have resisted political co-option while others have struck Faustian bargains with the powers that be. Zawaya's societal reach and influence in politics also vary and tend to ebb and flow according to historical events, situational constraints, and political opportunity structures. This analysis illustrates how the structural environment determines the weight and political visibility of Sufi leaders and Sufi orders. It also shows how context-dependent constraints, incentives, and pressures shape Sufi preferences and define their engagement in politics. In so doing, it highlights how the roles, interests, and significance of Sufi orders in Algerian politics are intricately intertwined with the interests, policies, and motivations of the regime in both the national and international arenas.

Sufism in the Colonial Era

For ages, Sufi orders and temporal political powers in Algeria have been in constant interaction, interwoven with periods of integration, connivance, and conflict. The kinds of interactions that arose depended on the circumstances. In times of crisis, Sufi orders tended to come to prominence, either as grand legitimators of the status quo or challengers to authority that they perceived as undermining their distinctiveness or credibility among their adherents. As pillars of power, they were responsible for integrating and regulating differing interests in society. During the reign of the Zayyanid dynasty (from 1235 to 1556), they were recognized as special actors who helped structure relations between political authority and local populations.⁵⁵⁸ The Ottoman Empire also employed their ability to mediate and organize social and political interactions during the empire's 300 years of presence in Algeria.

The onset of French colonialism after 1830 ignited insurgent consciousness in some Sufi orders who feared political and social obsolescence by a new colonial regime that exhibited deep suspicion and distrust toward what it considered occult and subversive political-religious organizations. This sense of danger was a driving force behind some orders' transformation into the main locus of resistance to the French conquest of Algeria.

In many ways, Sufi orders were the best equipped of any social group to take on this insurgent role given that they were the only ones with enough organizing capacity, resources, and deep social connections.⁵⁵⁹ It came as no surprise, then, that for the better part of the nineteenth century, the so-called prophets of military resistance all belonged to Sufi brotherhoods. Emir Abd el-Kader (who lived from 1808 to 1883) of the Qadiriyya Brotherhood, who led the war of liberation at the age of twenty-five, embodied the preeminent political-military role that some *zawaya* came to play.⁵⁶⁰ During the 1830s, he exerted control over large swaths of territory in central and western Algeria thanks to both military victories and skilled negotiation with the French. At the same time, he managed to organize and build the essential trappings of a functioning state and army. Abd el-Kader's experiment of statehood came to an end with his defeat by the French in 1847.

The insurgent mantle was taken on by other Sufi brotherhoods such as the Ouled Sidi Cheikh, which in 1864 directed its military struggle toward subverting the French presence in the south of the port city Oran.⁵⁶¹ The most notable act of revolt, however, transpired in eastern Algeria and was led by Mohamed Al Hadj al-Mokrani (who lived from 1815 to 1871), the leader of the Kabyle revolt of 1871–1872.⁵⁶² He did not initially oppose French colonization, but that changed when his local power and administrative prerogatives were curtailed. After the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), al-Mokrani saw an opportunity to challenge the colonial dominance in his region. In March 1871, he assembled a war council and sought to rally the support of local chiefs, notables, and religious figures.

The endorsement of Cheikh al-Haddad (who lived from 1790 to 1873) of the Rahmaniyya Sufi brotherhood was key to al-Mokrani's war efforts, leading several Kabyle tribes to join his revolt. Al-Mokrani amassed significant manpower (150,000 warriors), allowing his insurrection to sweep eastern Algeria and extend to different regions of the country. His revolt, however, largely dissipated after he was killed in battle on May 5, 1871.⁵⁶³ The 1870s saw other insurrections erupt in the mountainous area of

the Aurès range in eastern Algeria and at the gates of the Sahara Desert, but they failed to garner the tribal support and buy-in of the influential Sufi orders that had fueled al-Mokrani and el-Kader's rebellions.

By the 1880s, however, the Sufi-led revolts against French rule had lost momentum and petered out. The French managed to consolidate their power and neutralize the resistance that emanated mostly from recalcitrant Sufi orders. The colonial administration had honed its divide-and-rule tactics and policies, thanks in part to the development of

a more fine-grained understanding of how *zawaya* functioned, including their distinctions and internal dissensions.⁵⁶⁴

Each individual *zawiya* had its particular position and strategy for dealing with colonial machinations. Some had quickly

adapted to colonial rule, preferring collaboration, even if on unequal terms, to hedge against French abuse and arbitrary expropriation of their land. This pursuit of self-interest and expediency created rifts between and within *zawaya*. There were some instances in which Sufi orders were internally divided between those who fiercely resisted co-option and those who facilitated colonial penetration. Even within major orders like the Tidjaniyya, which was considered more amenable to accommodation and collaboration with the French than the Rahmaniyya or the Qadiriyya were, there were some adherents that refused to facilitate French incursion into the south of Algeria.⁵⁶⁵

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In the end, the French strategies of repression and divide and rule ended up vexing, co-opting, and exhausting Sufi orders. By the end of the nineteenth century, *zawaya* had come to terms with colonial domination, even if most of them continued to resist France's aggressive attempts to supplant Algeria's cultural identity.⁵⁶⁶

The early twentieth century brought a different kind of intellectual, cultural, and religious challenge to the *zawaya*. The reformist Salafiyya intellectual movement—whose prominent spokesmen, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (who lived from 1838 to 1897), Muhammad Abduh (who lived from 1849 to 1905), and Rashid Rida (who lived from 1865 to 1935), militated for religious revival and reform—began to take root in Algeria. The movement exhibited hostility to the doctrines and practices of Sufi orders. Between the two world wars, Sheikh 'Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis (who lived from 1889 to 1940) became the leader of the Islamic Reform Movement in Algeria. Initially, he was open to collaboration with Sufi orders as long as they pursued a program of moral and religious renewal. To run this renewal, the Ulama Association was created in 1931, with Ben Badis as its head. Soon after, however, this cooperative relationship soured as differences over strategies and agendas became irreconcilable. Toward the end of the colonial era, the Islam of the reformers had supplanted that of the Sufi orders as the main determinant of Algerian national consciousness.⁵⁶⁷

The emergence of the movement for independence during World War I (lasting from 1914 to 1918) posed another major challenge to the *zawaya*. As the struggle for liberation intensified, the *zawaya* came under immense pressure by both the liberation movement, which demanded support for the Algerian War of Independence (lasting from 1954 to 1962), and French colonial rulers, who sought their collaboration

in blunting the momentum for independence. An appreciable number of *zawaya*, however, adopted a neutral position, limiting their role to the realms of education and religion. This proved highly unpopular, instigating the wrath of the liberation movement and discrediting Sufi orders.⁵⁶⁸

Trials and Tribulations of Sufi Orders

The Algerian liberation movement was robust but by no means a unified resistance movement. Yet, groups that were reticent or did not adhere to the movement found themselves on the wrong side of history and paid a steep price once independence was achieved in 1962. In the first two decades after the end of 132 years of colonial French rule in Algeria, the Algerian government marginalized *zawaya* and imposed severe restrictions on their activities.⁵⁶⁹ To be sure, the new rulers of independent Algeria were wary of all religious actors and were intent on controlling a religious field whose societal role could be conducive to resisting central power. Under the brief reign of Algeria's first prime minister and later first president Ahmed Ben Bella (who ruled from 1962 to 1965), the government's strategy was to manage religious conservatives, co-opt their cultural agenda, and tighten control over the apparatus of worship and education.⁵⁷⁰ The goal was to make the *zawaya* irrelevant.

When Houari Boumédiène became president of Algeria in July 1965 following a coup d'état, his regime pursued the co-option strategy of his predecessor, amplifying the reformist religious agenda of the heirs of Ben Badis while aggressively combating recalcitrant religious voices. Boumédiène became even more intolerant of Sufi orders, whom he equated with superstition, obscurantism, and perfidy.⁵⁷¹ Major *zawaya* like the Tidjaniyya and the Alawiyya bore the brunt of his administration's religious policies, which confiscated their lands, excluded them from all religious programs, and prohibited their leaders from leaving the national territory. The Algerian government, for example, harassed Sheikh Mehdi Bentounes (who lived from 1928 to 1975) of the Alawiyya order, whom the authorities suspected of disloyalty. Similar to the French preoccupation with the *zawiya's* transnational networks of Sufi adherents, the Algerian authorities were suspicious of the number of international visitors to this Sufi order. What the French feared as potential insurgents Boumédiène considered as spies. As such, Bentounes was viewed with intense scrutiny and suspicion. On February 18, 1970, he was arrested after a months-long investigation and a vehement media campaign that accused him of conspiracy with foreign forces. Even after his release on November 10, 1970, he remained for several years under the close watch of the authorities.⁵⁷²

The death of Boumédiène in 1978 brought the *zawaya* respite from years of state-led ostracism and marginalization. His successor, Chadli Bendjedid, displayed tolerance to Sufi orders thanks in part to the president's own purported spiritual affinity to Sufism; his association with *Zawiya* Sheikh Belahoual in Mostaganem, which he frequented; and his own wife's kinship ties to the *zawiya* of the Bourokba in Mazouna.⁵⁷³

There were also political and strategic reasons for relieving the siege on the *zawaya*. The late 1970s saw the emergence of political Islam as a formidable opposition force, as exemplified by the dramatic events that shook the greater Middle East in 1979, namely the Iranian Revolution, the siege of the Grand Mosque at Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan that provoked an Islamist rebellion

supported by widespread Islamic international solidarity. During this time, Algeria began to witness the resurgence of the politicization of religious conservatism as well as cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identities that had been repressed during the first decades of independence as Ben Bella and Boumédiène strove to construct a unitary and unified state.

This context facilitated the gradual rehabilitation of Sufi orders. In office, Bendjedid publicly visited the Zawiya Belkadia in Tlemcen and Sidi Mohamed Belkebir's zawiya in Adrar in the Sahara Desert.⁵⁷⁴ In 1984, he authorized a large international conference devoted to the Tidjaniyya order, which boasted millions

of followers in West Africa alone. The goal of the gathering was to revitalize the Tidjaniyya zawiya as an instrument of Algerian foreign policy, particularly against its neighboring rival, Morocco. Indeed, the idea behind the event was to amass support in West Africa for Polisario Front guerrillas who were fighting Morocco over control of the Western Sahara. Morocco—which quit the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union) in 1984 over its admission of the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in 1982—had secured the support of the most important African Tidjani leaders for its sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Bendjedid also contributed to financing one of the largest Quranic schools that was affiliated with the Niassene branch of Tidjaniyya in Senegal and that, at the time, served hundreds of students, mainly from Ghana, Niger, and Nigeria.⁵⁷⁵

The evidence of a state-led push for a revival of zawaya became notable as public confidence in government plunged and the political and security threats emanating from Islamist groups became more pronounced. Indeed, exactly one year after the Algerian Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), swept provincial and municipal elections in June 1990, the Algerian government sponsored a national conference that brought together nearly 300 Sufi sheikhs.⁵⁷⁶ This was the clearest demonstration yet of the gradual rehabilitation of Sufi orders.

Historically, at times of crisis, Sufi orders rose to the occasion to resist colonial rule and safeguard and valorize Algerians' cultural and religious identity. So, Bendjedid banked on the revival of Sufi orders to serve as counterweights to revolutionary Islamism. Sufi orders also hoped to seize the moment, creating in the process the National Union of Algerian Zawaya and vowing to “fight all those who, in the name of Wahhabism and Shiism and all other imported rites, have tried to introduce deviations in the Maliki rite, the common denominator of the majority of our people.”⁵⁷⁷

The subsequent electoral triumph of the FIS in the first round of parliamentary elections on December 26, 1991, dashed Bendjedid's hopes, leading to his forced resignation and a military takeover. The coup triggered a devastating decade-long civil war where Islamist insurgents targeted Sufi orders, forcing their adherents to keep a low profile. But even under siege, Sufi orders did not fade away into irrelevance.⁵⁷⁸ The military regime needed to shore up its authority and weaken and delegitimize the insurgents. In 1997, the general Liamine Zéroual, who had been elected president in November 1995, appointed Sheikh

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Bouabdallah Ghlamallah of the Zawiya Chaldoulia of Sidi 'Adda in Tiaret as the minister of religious affairs.⁵⁷⁹ This was the first time since Algeria's independence that such a strategic ministry was entrusted to someone not steeped in the reformist tradition of Ben Badis's Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama. The move marked yet another signal in the government's determination to elevate the status of Sufi orders.

The Renaissance of Sufism

Sufi orders' path back to rehabilitation blossomed into prominence under the reign of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika (who ruled from 1999 to 2019). Unlike his mentor, Boumédiène, who combated Sufi orders, Bouteflika had a personal affinity to Sufism.⁵⁸⁰ His father worked in a zawiya and his family had always been connected to this kind of Islam. When he was sidelined by the military after the death of Boumédiène in 1978, he reportedly frequented a number of zawayas like those in Adrar in the Algerian desert. Strategically, Bouteflika embraced Sufi orders for their potential mobilizing effects in their roles as purveyors of Algerian religious authenticity; mitigators of societal conflict; galvanizers of votes, especially in rural areas; and force-multipliers for Algeria's diplomatic influence internationally.⁵⁸¹

To cultivate his relationship with Sufi orders, Bouteflika poured state money into shoring up popular mausoleums, refurbishing shrines and tombs of Sufi saints, and propping up Sufi schools and educational centers. His allies in the business community helped bankroll some of these financial initiatives to revive Sufi networks and in the process advance the former president's political objectives. Notable politicians such as former prime minister and current President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, former minister of foreign affairs Abdelaziz Belkhadem, and other senior military officers enthusiastically and publicly jumped on Bouteflika's Sufi bandwagon.⁵⁸² This significant turnaround in the fortunes of Sufi orders was captured best in 2003 by Omar Mahmoud Chaalal, who helped found in June of that year the National Union of Algerian Zawayas. "Now that our zawayas have recovered their ancestral religious and spiritual legitimacy," he said, the union can "finally call on those self-proclaimed modernists and those who wrongly call

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themselves reformists [Salafists] to rectify their approach" and acknowledge "the harmonious and ancestral tandem relationship between Zawiya and Algerian society."⁵⁸³

Bouteflika's push to elevate the status of Sufi orders and acquaint the public with their positive social and cultural history became more pronounced with the mushrooming of

Sufi cultural events and seasonal festivals. The Ministry of Culture sponsored dozens of international cultural events that brought together Sufi actors and notable Algerian and foreign experts in Sufism.⁵⁸⁴ The goal, according to culture minister Khalida Toumi (who held office from 2002 to 2014), was to revive Algerians' historical memory and the values of their ancestors, both critical components to safeguard the public against the "external dangers of religious extremism."⁵⁸⁵ For anthropologist Zaim Khenchelaoui, who played an important role in the organization of such events, the Algerian public had to be reintroduced to Sufism as "the bearer of a theology of liberation."⁵⁸⁶

After 2014, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Waqf assumed a more prominent role in the promotion of Sufism. Under the tenure of Mohamed Aïssa (who was minister from 2014 to 2019), the ministry accelerated its support of cultural meetings and commemorations that encouraged a “return to [Sufi] ancestral Islam.”⁵⁸⁷ During a national meeting on the Rahmaniyya brotherhood organized by local zawayas and held in Tizi Ouzou in 2015, Aïssa extolled Sufism as an “Islam of tolerance and peace” and the “only remedy for religious extremism,” urging the faithful to favor Sufism and the Rahmaniyya brotherhood in particular which, he specified, “played an important role in the fight against French colonialism.”⁵⁸⁸ In 2016, he sponsored the organization of an international Sufism conference in Mostaganem whose goal was the creation of a world body of Sufism “to strengthen it in the fight against radical Islam.”⁵⁸⁹ He also founded an observatory against sectarian aberrations and religious extremism.

Aïssa also intensified efforts to rectify the distorted historical record that denigrated the role that zawayas played in fighting colonialism. Several conferences were organized to brandish the historical contributions of Sufism to thwarting the colonial machinations that undermined national identity. Speaking at the opening of an international seminar in Ouargla Province in 2019 on “Sufism and its role in the preservation of religious references and national identity,” the minister praised the patriotism of Sufi orders and their critical role in the preservation of national identity. He also applauded the “African dimension of the Sufi brotherhoods in Algeria and their role in spreading Islam in Africa.”⁵⁹⁰

Unlike Toumi, wrote Thierry Zarcone, Aïssa’s actions were “more political than cultural.”⁵⁹¹ Aïssa worked to prop up the role of the Union of Zawaya, which was an ardent supporter of Bouteflika. The latter understood early in his tenure that courting Sufi orders could help him consolidate his electoral base as well as counter accusations “that he was too lenient towards Islamists.”⁵⁹² In presidential elections often marked by low turnout, influential Sufi sheikhs had the potential to shore up support for the president from their constituencies, especially in the non-metropolitan hinterland of Algeria where Sufi adherents still represent a non-negligible electoral mass. Indeed, Sufi orders ardently supported Bouteflika’s presidential campaigns and promoted his major national reconciliation initiatives and general amnesty for militant Islamists who agreed to lay down their weapons. Chaalal, the president of the National Union of Algerian Zawaya, gave Sufi orders the credit for facilitating the government’s conflict mitigation activities and reconciliation processes. Chaalal also claimed credit for Bouteflika’s electoral successes.⁵⁹³

Sufism as a Foreign Policy Resource

Bouteflika re-activated Sufi orders for external reasons, as well. A few notable studies have already demonstrated how his regime has incorporated the Algerian branch of the Tidjaniyya order into Algeria’s foreign policy conduct in the Sahel and West Africa.⁵⁹⁴ Bouteflika saw in this Sufi order a means to upgrade Algeria’s soft sources of power and contest Morocco’s decades-long dominance of the transnational networks of Tidjaniyya. Under his reign, efforts were made to challenge the dominance of the ancient Moroccan city of Fes—which houses the tomb of the founder of the Tidjaniyya order—through transforming Aïn Mâdî (the birthplace of the founder of Tidjaniyya) in the Algerian desert into a major learning center and pilgrimage site for the followers of Tidjaniyya in West Africa and beyond. In 2006, exactly twenty-two years after Bendjedid organized an international conference about the Tidjaniyya,

Bouteflika reinvigorated the African significance of Aïn Mâdî through the organization of an important gathering of intellectuals, notable personalities, and disciples of Tidjaniyya from Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sudan. The Bouteflika regime also tried to expand its Tidjaniyya network into the West African diaspora of France.⁵⁹⁵

Less studied, however, is how Bouteflika came to rely on the Alawiyya Sufi order to bolster Algeria's influence on the international stage as an exporter of a tolerant and modernist version of Islam.⁵⁹⁶ Like Tidjaniyya, Alawiyya boasts a significant following outside of Algeria. The school is well established in the Algerian diasporas of Europe and enjoys a reputation for promoting "interreligious dialogue, gender equality, environmental protection and peace."⁵⁹⁷ Its spiritual leader, Sheikh Khaled Bentounes, is "the initiator of the International Day of Living Together in Peace, unanimously adopted by the 193 member states of the United Nations, celebrated every year on May 16."⁵⁹⁸

In 2005, Alawiyya came to be tightly interwoven with the Algerian regime's diplomatic calculus. The impressive celebration that the order organized in November in Mostaganem in northwest Algeria to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Mehdi Bentounes was notable for the high-profile attendees. The presence of the wali (prefect) of Mostaganem and the minister of religious affairs Bouabdallah Ghlamallah—who likened Mehdi's travails and trajectory to that of the great revolutionaries Ben Bella and key independence organizer Abane Ramdane—was a strong indication of the full official rehabilitation of the Alawiyya Sufi order.⁵⁹⁹

The 2009 centennial commemoration of the founding of the Alawiyya was another occasion to showcase the growing visibility and influence of the Alawiyya order. Before the event officially began in July, the Association Cheikh Alawi embarked on an itinerant project entitled "Caravan of Hope" that crisscrossed several towns of Algeria and organized several cultural, artistic, and spiritual activities.⁶⁰⁰ In parallel to the Caravan of Hope, the Muslim Scouts of France that Khaled Bentounes founded in 1990 made their way throughout Algiers, Paris, Rome, Tripoli, and Tunis. This was part of their project, called "Flame of Hope," that was intended to connect scout movements on the two shores of the Mediterranean as well as garner the support of state representatives. In Europe, the authorities have welcomed the order's emphasis on the construction of a European Islam and its efforts to inculcate a nonideological, nonpolitical, and nonsectarian teaching of religion to the thousands of girls and boys in Europe who are part of the Muslim Scouts movement. This was evidenced when the Flame of Hope that made the rounds from Paris to Berlin was "welcomed by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany."⁶⁰¹

In Algeria, Khaled Bentounes also saw his status elevated, as demonstrated in the July centennial celebrations in Mostaganem, which mobilized six thousand people, including two thousand foreign participants from Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, several countries in Europe, Indonesia, Japan, Morocco, and Palestine. In the first two decades after Algeria's independence, the transnational and dynamic nature of the Alawiyya order unnerved the authorities, who feared the political implications of the order's mobilization capacity. As seen earlier, Boumédiène distrusted the order, suspecting it of acting as a likely vector for foreign spying. So, it did not go unnoticed that such an international gathering was allowed to take place, and most importantly, it was held under the high patronage of Bouteflika, who according to Khaled Bentounes, insisted that the centenary be celebrated in Algeria, and precisely in Mostaganem, the birthplace of the founder of Alawiyya.⁶⁰²

Importantly, the president's sponsorship of the event came on the heels of a heated controversy over Khaled Bentounes's book, *Sufism, A Common Inheritance*.⁶⁰³ The book's content, and especially its cover, which features a picture of the Prophet Muhammad, infuriated Islamists, Salafists, and even some Sufi orders, who called for the book to be banned and the president to withdraw his patronage of the event.⁶⁰⁴ Reportedly, Bouteflika intervened to put an end to the firestorm over the book and the order's centennial festivities by summoning Sheikh Bouamrane of the High Islamic Council and Sheikh Chibane, head of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars and former minister of religious affairs, and instructing them to cease their virulent attacks on Bentounes. The fact that Bouteflika, who also sought to accommodate and co-opt socially conservative forces, stood by Bentounes spoke volumes about the importance he accorded to this Sufi order.

In 2014, it was again under the patronage of Bouteflika that the L'Association Internationale Soufie Alawiyya (AISA) organized the International Women's Congress for a Culture of Peace in Oran. During that same year, AISA became an officially accredited partner of the United Nations' Economic and Social Council. In 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization organized a special conference to pay tribute to the Alawi Sufi order, "a school for tolerance and interreligious social interaction."⁶⁰⁵ In the meeting, Aïssa portrayed Alawi "as a humanist reformer whose prospective vision continues to arouse the interest of new generations and is a valuable contribution to meeting our common challenge: to restore confidence in Islam in the face of religious extremism."⁶⁰⁶

Losing Ground

Bouteflika's strategy toward Sufi orders was designed to be a win-win situation.⁶⁰⁷ The most influential Sufi orders had been buoyed by the amenable environment that Bouteflika created for their spiritual, social, and financial development. Under his reign, Sufi orders enjoyed more freedom to operate and gained appreciable political influence to advance their priorities and their policy agenda. The zawaya, for example, acquired for their students the right of access to higher education, which facilitated their entry into the civil service as imams of mosques.⁶⁰⁸ For a zawiya such as that of Adrar in Algeria's south, where the number of students trained is estimated at 1,000 students per year, such a strategic alliance with the state not only secured jobs for its school graduates but provided a critical avenue for the school to extend its social influence and exercise indirect powers from within state-controlled institutions.

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For the Bouteflika regime, the appointment of Sufi imams in state institutions helped advance its goal of institutionalizing the function and training of imams as well as limiting the presence of Salafist preachers in places of worship. The proliferation of Sufi welfare associations also served state interests as they help to "fill vacuums in the state's provision of welfare and educational services" as well as reduce the advantage that Islamist social welfare institutions had in expanding their base.⁶⁰⁹

This close-knit relationship between Sufism and politics, however, carries risks for the credibility and reputation of Sufi orders. In the scramble for access to the regimes' patronage networks and distribution schemes, Sufi orders compete with each other over the pie of patronage. Indeed, the regime's privileging of one order over another created resentment between Sufi orders, prompting some to organize collectively to contest the influence that Bouteflika's favored Sufi orders and associations, such as the National Union of Zawaya, enjoyed. Some Sufi orders took advantage of Algeria's competing power centers and clientelist networks to advance their own interests.

Playing the political game can also end up discrediting the orders, particularly those who unabashedly pursue the privileges that accrue from developing cozy—and at times corrupting—relations with ministers, politicians, and businessmen.⁶¹⁰ There are a number of cases where Sufi sheikhs lobbied for appointments into positions as senators, High Islamic Council members, and other lucrative state positions. Some, like Kaddour Gouaïche, president of an association of zawaya who was appointed as counselor to Bouteflika, even became entangled in corruption cases. Some zawaya also served as convenient platforms to whitewash politicians, such as Khelil, who were tainted by corruption allegations.⁶¹¹

Toward the end of Bouteflika's era, there was a noticeable disconnect between Algeria's increasingly young and urban population and the zawaya, especially those close to the regime.⁶¹² The zawaya's decline in influence could also be seen in Algeria's peripheral regions, where they are nonetheless still well-established. In 2013, for example, the regime enlisted influential Sufi sheikhs in southern Algeria to help de-escalate tensions stemming from protests against worsening unemployment in that vast region. In 2018, state energy firm Sonatrach began "courting Sunni Muslim Sufi masters from communities in areas near prospective southern gas fields to win over locals worried about possible disruption from exploration work."⁶¹³ In both cases, Sufi orders had little impact on reducing street tensions or resistance to shale exploration. The support of several Sufi orders was also not enough when Bouteflika sought a fifth term in office despite the fact that he was paralyzed after having suffered a stroke in 2013.

Conclusion

Sufi orders still have influence in Algerian politics, but the challenges to their moral credibility are mounting and will only deepen. Under Bouteflika, an appreciable number of zawaya have seen their footprint expand in the political and cultural square. Influential Sufi sheikhs found in the former president a reliable partner in advancing their spiritual activities, social agendas, and economic activities. But their braided political relationships and alignments, at times with unpopular causes, have alienated an increasingly young and urban population. They have also caused angst within some Sufi orders whose adherents found it troubling that their zawaya strayed from their religious vocation and charitable and social functions. To be fair, some Sufi sheikhs have resisted placing their zawaya at the service of politicians. Thus, in 2016, for example, the zawiya of Sidi Bahloul refused, amid mounting citizen pressure, a visit from Khelil, the former minister involved in the corruption scandal.⁶¹⁴ Citizen mobilization also disrupted Khelil's tour of zawaya in Chlef and Annaba.⁶¹⁵ In 2019, some zawaya resisted supporting an ailing and nearly incapacitated Bouteflika to run for a fifth term.

The onset of the pro-democracy movement known as the Hirak, which led to Bouteflika's fall, was a warning to Sufi orders that too close of an association with politicians and unpopular causes was self-defeating. The challenge for zawaya today is how to balance their religious, cultural, and social activities with political engagement. In many ways, zawaya are faced with the same dilemma that other religious and social actors confront. In an authoritarian context where the material incentives for promoting top-down regime policies is significant and the risks for resisting the state is high, several Sufi orders feel they have no choice but to toe the line to advance their priorities and agendas.

The 2019 presidential election showed how difficult it is to withdraw from political controversies or resist being co-opted by political agendas. For the first time in the history of Algerian elections, four out of the five candidates contesting the presidency decided to launch their electoral campaign from the south of the country in Adrar, which houses the influential Zawiya of Sheikh Belkhebir. The candidates attributed this choice of location to the importance and influence of zawaya in Algeria's Sahara. Tebboune, who won the contested and unpopular election, has also enlisted supportive zawaya to back his political initiatives while continuing his predecessor's selective financial support for Sufism.⁶¹⁶ Tebboune's gestures of selective patronage will likely continue to constitute part of the regime's strategy to hobble the persistent protest movement and prevent the emergence of credible social forces that can threaten its hold on power.

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The Moroccan Monarchy's Political Agenda for Reviving Sufi Orders

INTISSAR FAKIR

Introduction

Historically, Sufism's heterodox set of Islamic beliefs and practices have been key political and social features of Morocco's religious landscape. The often inextricable and fluid relationship between Morocco's sultans and Sufi leadership has run the gamut from key political partnerships to outright antagonism and open conflict. The political and societal influence of Sufi orders and *zawaya* (singular *zawiya*; referring to religious schools, lodges, or orders that play an important social role in their surrounding communities) has ebbed and flowed over time.

Since the country's independence, Morocco's monarchy has played an active role in managing the country's religious sphere, including its Sufi orders. Building on its historical role, Morocco's monarchy has asserted itself as the institutional embodiment of national religious authority based on its claims of descent from the Prophet Muhammad. This religious authority is an important element of the king's political authority as embodied in cultural customs and codified by the country's constitutional design. Inherent to these efforts is the goal of building a strong political basis for the monarchy. While the appropriation of religious authority to serve political purposes is a common theme in the Middle East and North Africa, the Moroccan monarchy's claims about its lineage, together with its long history, grant it a concrete reason to insert itself in religious affairs. The monarchy's self-touted claims of religious authority tend to garner broad popular acceptance, and the monarchy's management of religious affairs tends to be largely viewed as part of its function.

Still, the character of the Moroccan monarchy's religious management has evolved over time. Before the period of French colonialism, Moroccan sultans often formed mutually beneficial and constantly changing alliances with politically influential Sufi *zawaya*. In the decades after Morocco gained independence,

however, the political fortunes of many Sufi orders waned for various reasons as competing religious traditions including fundamentalist Salafist strains of Islam grew in popularity. At times, the monarchy even actively encouraged and abetted this erosion of Sufi influence in Moroccan society.

But the specter of Salafist-inspired religious extremism and terrorism since the turn of the century has prompted the Moroccan monarchy to shift gears again. Since the mid-2000s, the Moroccan government has undertaken a series of religious reforms to curb the appeal of Salafist religious extremism as part of the global war on terror. Counterterrorism became a pressing domestic issue as well in the aftermath of a prominent 2003 domestic terrorist attack in Morocco.

A central aim of these reforms has been to invoke a consolidated, shared vision of the country's historical Sufi tradition for counterterrorism purposes.⁶¹⁷ Consequently, the government since has been pushing a revival of Sufism as a supposedly less rigid, more moderate, and more inward-focused approach to spiritual life that is seen as being less prone to radicalization and violent extremism than Salafist traditions. The Moroccan monarch has sought to send a strong message that it sees Sufism as the true indigenous character of Moroccan Islam over foreign, more radical, strains of Salafism.

The Moroccan monarchy's religious authority also confers broader political benefits. Reforms meant to promote and instrumentalize Sufism also augment the monarchy's religious authority by emphasizing and strengthening the king's links to Sufi orders. An important collateral benefit of popularizing Sufi networks is that the king can mobilize Sufi adherents to advance his domestic political agenda when needed.

The king's religious reform agenda has taken important societal, institutional, and diplomatic forms. In societal terms, the state has sought to repopularize previously marginalized Sufi beliefs and practices in different aspects of Moroccan social and political life. In everyday communal life, the state has sought to destigmatize Sufi practices and interpretations, while rebuilding the monarchy's links to prominent Sufi zawaya and communities of adherents.

Since the mid-2000s, the Moroccan government has undertaken a series of religious reforms to curb the appeal of Salafist religious extremism.

A major institutional prong of these reforms has been a long process of bringing zawaya more effectively under state control. To expand its oversight of Morocco's religious sphere, the monarchy has tasked the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs

and the Ministry of the Interior with supervising Sufi orders and zawaya more closely.⁶¹⁸ The king seeks to empower key zawaya and consolidate or reestablish the monarchy's ties with Sufi orders and Sufism more broadly. Some of the zawaya and Sufi orders that have benefited most from this revival are forging or rebuilding patronage networks that support, promote, and increase the legitimacy of the monarchy's religious and political authority.

Morocco's revived Sufi traditions are also affecting the foreign policy arena, as the Moroccan monarchy has been wielding rejuvenated zawaya and Sufi orders as a diplomatic tool abroad, especially in parts of West Africa and the Sahel where these orders are also prevalent.⁶¹⁹ This outreach is aimed at bolstering the

Moroccan monarchy's religious authority by granting it an influential leadership role in global efforts to combat religious extremism. Successfully solidifying such a role would help the Moroccan government market itself as a key partner for Western countries on deradicalization and counterterrorism endeavors, while driving engagement particularly in West Africa and the Sahel.

Sufi Orders and Zawaya in Morocco, Past and Present

Sufism made inroads in Morocco in the eleventh and twelfth centuries as Sufi practices gained prevalence throughout North Africa and elsewhere. Sufism does not constitute its own sect or school of Islam; rather, it is a way of viewing and practicing religion that focuses on individuals' relationships to God. Sufism highlights the spiritual aspects of religion and encourages people to find a path to God through love and devotion.⁶²⁰

As in other parts of the Islamic world, Sufism was established as a powerful tradition in Morocco, and zawaya and Sufi orders became centers not only of learning and community but of substantial political influence at certain times.⁶²¹ Zawaya and shrines, with their long history in the country, are often the physical representations of Sufism and Sufi orders (or *tariqas*).⁶²² In addition to general Islamic tenets and practices, Sufi adherents also employ meditation and isolation, chanting, and other mystical practices that emphasize seeking a direct path to God. Sufi orders form as groups of adherents adopt the ideas and practices of certain religious scholars.⁶²³

The Social Functions of Sufi Institutions

In 2019, Morocco's Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs reported a headcount of the 7,090 Sufi organizations throughout the country, including 1,588 zawaya, 5,471 complexes that combine zawaya and shrines, and thirty-one standalone shrines.⁶²⁴ The number of zawaya and shrines has increased as the ministry has updated its records each year.

Zawaya provide spiritual, religious, and social services for their adherents and constituents. Sufi orders created these institutions as places of learning and meditation for disciples (or seekers) to gather, though they also can provide lodging, food, financial relief, emotional and spiritual support, or even healing to those in need.⁶²⁵ They are considered places of refuge, solace, and contemplation. Zawaya can provide leadership training, spiritual guidance, and educational instruction both in terms of literacy or more religious teaching, such as memorizing the Quran.⁶²⁶ For hundreds of years, then, zawaya have served as community centers and the nodes of social, spiritual, economic, and even political networks.

Zawaya often also host the tomb of a notable scholar from their respective orders who has become a saint and whose proximity is believed to provide a *baraka* (blessing) and a closer connection to God. Some zawaya may offer general blessings from the saint's shrine and his descendants or family (who often tend to manage zawaya or shrines), while others offer educational instruction or some degree of social support. Larger zawaya with state support hold monthly and annual events, including *mawasim* (festivals), which serve important spiritual, social, and often commercial roles. The Ministry of Religious Endowments and

Islamic Affairs, in its 2019 report, explained the importance of gathering and updating information on *zawaya* and shrines as a way to formulate strategies for managing them.⁶²⁷

The Early Political Evolution of Moroccan *Zawaya*

Throughout Moroccan history, Sufism and *zawaya* have evolved as important social and political actors. Looking back at particular historical junctures, it is difficult to separate religious actors from political ones or differentiate their respective roles. Over the course of the country's history, the political functions of certain *zawaya* have ebbed and flowed.

Through the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the political influence of certain *zawaya* grew as Sufism prospered. *Zawaya* were also an important dimension of tribal politics and political contestation in Morocco at this time. Certain *zawaya* shared an important and strong tribal affiliation and were therefore crucial to certain political positions or events.⁶²⁸ *Zawaya* could bestow legitimacy through temporary or permanent alliances with ruling powers, and more importantly they could help mobilize supporters for one political claimant over another.⁶²⁹ *Zawaya* would often become the foundation of power especially during periods when Sufism gained significant political influence through their tribal affiliations and religious legitimacy.⁶³⁰

An important example in Moroccan history of a Sufi order that played a prominent political role is the *Zawiya Nasiriya*. This Sufi order had a mutually beneficial relationship with the Alaouite dynasty, which has claimed control of Morocco since the 1600s and to which the current monarchy still belongs. The *Zawiya Nasiriya* facilitated trade and, by supporting the dynasty's territorial and political expansion, carved out a lucrative arrangement for itself. In these ways, Sufi orders became part of the contest for both temporal and religious leadership in Morocco.⁶³¹ The power of Sufi leaders, through their community leadership roles and their religious credentials, became a source of great influence in shaping popular perceptions of political legitimacy.⁶³² In various instances, they provided an additional religious foundation for the political and religious rule of particular sultans. During this period, the support of *zawaya* was particularly key in areas where the power of central authorities was limited or where allegiances were tenuous.⁶³³ For various ruling powers over the years, certain *zawaya* served as a tool for proxy control in remote areas where the sultan's armies did not have access or support, and in exchange these *zawaya* were able to accumulate financial gains.⁶³⁴

Financial and monetary ambitions were (and continue to be) important aspects of various *zawaya*'s relationships with Moroccan ruling powers. Many relied on the state's largesse—including gifts from the sultan and tax exemptions from the palace—to supplement donations of their adherents and their own assets and to extend their reach, influence, and political involvement.⁶³⁵ As *zawaya* provided religious legitimacy to political actors, in turn these political alliances allowed certain *zawaya* to expand their own influence. Some orders even harbored broader political ambitions that drove them to maneuver beyond domestic politics, at times engaging with foreign colonial powers.⁶³⁶

During Morocco's colonial period from the early 1900s until the country's independence in 1956, the French administration mostly sought to establish similar dynamics with *zawaya* as the sultans had before

them. The colonial administration utilized certain Sufi orders to their own political goals and benefits. In areas where the French administration faced resistance to its presence, French officials either co-opted *zawaya* and Sufi orders; played them off each other to ensure their acquiescence to the French protectorate; or otherwise fought, punished, and marginalized those who opposed French rule.

A Period of Diminished Sufi Influence

As the push for Moroccan independence intensified in the early 1950s and in the early years of independent rule in the 1960s, the societal and political roles of Sufism faced a conversion of sorts as both the Moroccan monarchy and the nationalist movement sought to diminish its influence.⁶³⁷ Within the nationalist movement, rising intellectuals and pro-independence political leaders in Morocco, striving to create an image of modernity and progress, veered away from Sufi practices that were viewed as archaic and even heretical, given the Sufi custom of venerating saints as intermediaries between worshipers and God.⁶³⁸ The Moroccan monarchy, for its part, was in the process of consolidating its rule and facing down sources of opposition that cropped up around the newly independent country; the monarchy also wanted to neutralize Sufi orders that could threaten its supremacy. Similarly, some Sufi orders supported French colonial rule and thus came to be marginalized in the aftermath of independence.⁶³⁹

In terms of religious beliefs too, *zawaya* began to face greater competition, as budding alternative and competing religious and political movements drew support away from Sufism in Morocco. Furthermore, in the 1960s and 1970s, the monarchy allowed the spread of Salafist Wahhabi ideology to drive support away from various far-left opposition currents by introducing competition among the working classes supporting them. Taking a page from the playbook of other regimes, the Moroccan monarchy used Salafist dogma to undermine the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters in Morocco in the late 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁴⁰ The spread of Salafism and even Muslim Brotherhood-style political Islam further diminished the appeal of Sufism during this period, and Sufi orders' influence withered. In response, some Sufi orders found little alternative but to coalesce around the throne.⁶⁴¹

For this variety of reasons, Sufi orders and *zawaya* lost ground after Morocco gained independence. Sufi practitioners had to contend with competing religious currents and ideologies, the rise of an urbanized modern class less receptive to traditional practices, and the consolidation of the monarchy's religious leadership role alongside its political role. These trends also coincided with the monarch's efforts

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to build a centralized religious management apparatus in Morocco. Since independence, Morocco's Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs has gradually assumed and codified an oversight role over *zawaya* and shrines. In an earlier time, some *zawaya* had operated independently by providing blessings or spiritual relief and guidance to local populations. However, this changed gradually as the ministry began to take over the management of *zawaya*. That effort was driven in part by a growing

push for a modern administrative state and by efforts to confine *zawaya* to handling spiritual and social matters.⁶⁴² As the process played out over decades, the ministry came to manage *zawaya*'s income, appoint administrators, and specify which activities, religious or social, that *zawaya* may hold. More recently, government oversight of *zawaya* has also been motivated by efforts to ensure any religious teachings or practices align with the streamlined official version of Islam that the government uses to promote tolerance and counter extremism.⁶⁴³

The Moroccan monarchy's drive to consolidate its power, including over the religious establishment, has played out in multiple ways over the years. These have included establishing tight control on the country's party politics, neutralizing potential opposition by weakening political parties, curtailing political engagement, and limiting freedom of speech. The ascendance of a supreme monarch with the highest political and religious authority in the country has subordinated all other religious and political entities. Extending and streamlining control over these entities has become crucial, particularly for those that straddle the political and religious spheres.

An important element of the Moroccan monarchy's oversight is also to ensure that religious engagement eschews politics. This dimension of overseeing *zawaya* is particularly important in that it allows the monarchy to ensure that it remains the country's main political player with a religious mandate. The country's constitution bans any political parties that are based on religion. The exception to this is the Justice and Development Party, the country's main Islamist party, which has what it refers to as an "Islamic reference," meaning that while the party does not advocate the creation of an Islamic theocracy it does adopt some Islamic principles.⁶⁴⁴ In 1992, the monarchy allowed the party to register and operate as a sort of monarchy-approved religious party that wouldn't compete with or deny the king's religious and political authority, while siphoning popular support away from other and potentially more potent religious political actors.

As the party has become more entrenched in national politics, its religious character has been secondary to and separated from its leading members' political function, as it has served alternately as an opposition party and then as the leader of Morocco's governing coalition (since 2011). The party maintains fluid ties to its religious (*Daawa*) wing that it plays up or plays down in turn depending on the political needs of the moment. Furthermore, the party's religious beliefs initially provided some credibility with the electorate, but this political role does not give its leading members any religious authority. In that sense, the monarchy remains the only actor whose religious and political roles bolster one another. The other main religious political actor in Morocco is a group known as *al-Adl wal-Ihsan*, whose name often is translated as Justice and Charity. The group, which rejects the king's dual role (as king and commander of the faithful), is banned from registering as a political party, but its members continue to operate as an important spiritual and social grassroots opposition group. The group has a powerful ability to mobilize its members, which drives the monarchy's pushback against it.

For a long time, the state's control over *zawaya* was meant to dissuade them from dabbling in political engagement. For example, some of the politically active *zawaya* sought to field electoral candidates in 1984 but were prevented from doing so.⁶⁴⁵ Likewise, some *zawaya* sought to field candidates in 1997, but they were again rebuffed as the country formally moved toward banning political engagement by

religious groups. During this period, *zawaya* continued to provide largely ceremonial and nonpolitical community-oriented support for the monarchy. This state of affairs, however, gradually began to change during the war on terror, as the Moroccan monarchy began to see a more active role for *zawaya* as part of the country's religious overhaul.

The Monarchy Instrumentalizes Sufi Orders and *Zawaya* Again

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, Morocco (like most Muslim-majority countries) was confronted with the challenge of stemming the extremist religious ideologies that had driven the rise of groups like al-Qaeda who were behind these attacks and other subsequent ones in Europe. The Moroccan monarchy responded with a series of religious reforms and took part in the war on terror under U.S. pressure. Domestically, the Casablanca bombings of May 2003 injected the issue of religious extremism with a strong sense of urgency. An important part of Morocco's religious reforms to recentralize and tighten official oversight over the religious sphere—and perhaps more so religious discourse—was finding a clear religious and more active political function for Sufism following years of stagnation.

Seeking an alternative to some of the more conservative and rigid Salafist interpretations of Islam that had taken root in Morocco, the king gave a notable speech roughly a year after the Casablanca bombings. In it, he emphasized the “Sufi” character of Islam in Morocco. He highlighted the “unique character” of what he called “Moroccan Islam”—a sort of three-pronged foundation that includes the Maliki jurisprudence that Morocco follows, Ash‘ari doctrine, and a Sufi *tariqa* known as the Junaidi path.⁶⁴⁶ The rationale behind the king's clarifying reminder was to emphasize that Morocco's religious tradition has been (and remains) tolerant, open, and separate from more exclusionary and extreme visions of Islam. Regardless of whether Sufism in Morocco was (and is) as tolerant as the monarchy sought to portray it, emphasizing the traditional character of Sufism as a more indigenous and more characteristically Moroccan form of the faith had a certain domestic appeal.

Internationally, too, Sufism, which is widely viewed as less rigid and less prone to extremist tendencies, gained traction as a potential antidote within Islam itself to extremist ideology. In that sense, the Moroccan monarchy was seeking to disempower rigid Salafist religious currents that had found their way into Morocco and that had become associated with extremist ideology and even violent extremism. Incidentally, these are the very currents that the monarchy itself had previously used as tools to weaken other political actors. As Moroccan history has shown, the monarchy tacitly, and at times actively, has embraced various religious trends, currents, and interpretations over time for specific political purposes.

Reviving Sufism

Promoting a more tolerant vision of Islam infused with traditional Sufism became a key element of the Moroccan monarchy's religious reform agenda in the early 2000s. *Zawaya* and Sufi orders ensure that Islamic teachings and practices reflect a tolerant and open version of Islam that can counter radical interpretations of Islam associated with violent extremism.

This reform agenda has included sophisticated and multilayered efforts to centralize and streamline religious authority, guidance, and decisionmaking.⁶⁴⁷ In addition to structural and educational reforms, the monarchy sought to raise awareness of and repopularize various forms of Sufism. Reorienting populations toward Sufi practices and traditions is now once again a mainstream endeavor intended to blunt the appeal of extremist ideologies.

More recently, zawaya have been mobilized for very clear political purposes and continue to support the monarchy's political initiatives and agenda—on matters beyond ideology and security.

continues to provide royal patronage to festivals and other Sufi events. The patronage and support that certain zawaya receive allows the monarchy to maintain links that ensure the monarchy's message and ideals reach some of the country's most remote populations.⁶⁴⁸ Morocco's dedicated religious television channel has promoted Sufi rituals as well, including by broadcasting traditional Sufi music and more contemporary Sufi-inspired artists.⁶⁴⁹

The Moroccan government has strived to elevate the cultural significance of the country's Sufi heritage. Since the early 2000s, Sufi orders have been highlighted as an important part of Morocco's patrimonial legacy and the country's understanding and practice of Islam. To that end, the king himself has participated in Sufi rituals, has visited different zawaya, and

The monarchy's revival of zawaya and Sufi practices is not just about countering violent extremism. More recently, zawaya have been mobilized for very clear political purposes and continue to support the monarchy's political initiatives and agenda—on matters beyond ideology and security. Furthermore, externally, the revival of Sufism has become an important foreign policy tool for Morocco. In other words, the monarchy's Sufi ties and patronage have provided an additional foundation for religious leadership that the Moroccan king has been using heavily in the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa. This type of religious ideological leadership is particularly appealing to Morocco's Western allies, as it provides a definitive type of religious leadership that is often difficult to assert given the decentralized leadership structures of Sunni Islam.

Managing Zawaya and Sufi Orders

The Moroccan government, through the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, oversees zawaya and shrines and allocates an annual budget for their upkeep and management. This budget is supplemented by direct donations and gifts from the king. While zawaya have long garnered outside financial support to one degree or another, the government now considers these funds a key element of the fight against extremism.⁶⁵⁰ Spending on zawaya in 2017 was reported to exceed \$16 million.⁶⁵¹ Zawaya generate income through donations and alms from supporters, hosted events, and land holdings. The question of how much financial support a given zawiya has at its disposal is dependent on the zawiya's resources, reach, and its sociopolitical usefulness—including by virtue of its location. The funding process remains opaque, and there are no clear parameters for which zawaya receive which funding. Some zawaya receive little or no financial support and become either rundown or even abandoned. These zawaya struggle to maintain a steady income, and eventually some face closures and the services they provide—modest as they may be—are lost to the local population. Meanwhile some of the zawaya that benefit most from government support have transformed into even more powerful social institutions.

The Elite Patronage Network of Zawiya Boutchichi

On the domestic front, the Quadiri Boutchichi order is a case in point. The Zawiya Boutchichi is one of the most powerful in Morocco today—its members are long-time supporters of the monarchy, and their role has grown in recent years. This zawiya represents an example of how the monarchy can instrumentalize an order domestically to actively mobilize adherents for clear political purposes.

The Boutchichi order's zawiya is located in Madagh near Berkane in eastern Morocco.⁶⁵² Since the 1970s, the order has gained a strong following among Morocco's educated middle class, due to the efforts of its leader, Sheikh Sidi Hamza, who sought to broaden the order's following especially among young educated Moroccans.⁶⁵³ While the order may have been created without the state's direct involvement, state support has facilitated its popularity and growth.⁶⁵⁴ The order has grown rapidly in recent decades; in 2000, it was estimated to have about 25,000 followers, but by 2009 this number had risen to 100,000.⁶⁵⁵ The order has a wide range of adherents, including members of the Moroccan diaspora.⁶⁵⁶ The order's openness even to non-Muslims showcases its pragmatism and to some extent a novel and somewhat elite-driven approach.⁶⁵⁷

The Boutchichi order has been touted as a Sufi vessel of sorts that exemplifies the very message Morocco wants to broadcast about Islam: traditional and indigenous, yet moderate and tolerant. To that end, the order currently has a semi-formal educational system that includes a summer program focused on religious and spiritual education. The program emphasizes Sufi tenets that support openness and eschew radicalization and extremism. The events that the order organizes appeal to elites, particularly the youth.⁶⁵⁸ The Boutchichi order also organizes an annual conference dubbed "The World Meeting of Sufism," which is held at the same zawiya where the summer program takes place.⁶⁵⁹

The Boutchichi order has created a sophisticated internal structure with branches across the country and an international presence. The order plays an important political and diplomatic role on behalf of the monarch's interest, and in exchange it has benefited from significant state support (through aid and tax exemptions) in addition to the usual donations.⁶⁶⁰ Unlike more traditional zawayas—which rely largely on their respective legacies in their given communities—the Boutchichi order is very much a twenty-first-century zawiya—complete with sophisticated communications platforms, including a magazine, a website, an official spokesperson, and dedicated youth engagement and outreach efforts.⁶⁶¹ The order also benefits from significant exposure through state media, which promotes activities either organized by the order or by foundations close to the order. One foundation, *Espirit de Fez*, organizes the Fez World Music Festival—supported by the king directly—and the Sufi Culture Festival.⁶⁶² These activities emphasize Morocco's Sufi heritage, giving Sufism greater appeal and reorienting domestic and international audiences to Sufi Islam as an open, tolerant, and spiritually fulfilling alternative to rigid religious interpretations.

State support has improved and bolstered the order's organization and even shaped some of its practices. For example, the Boutchichi order downplays Sufi practices that are seen as outdated. For instance, it does not encourage adherents to visit the graves of saints—a common practice for seeking a saint's blessing.⁶⁶³ Sheikh Sidi Hamza effectively has done away with many conditions for adherence, limiting many of the religious strictures that modern and professional supporters may find cumbersome, such as ascetic retreats, daily readings, and limiting one's material possessions.⁶⁶⁴ The leader has emphasized the need to

“enjoy life as you see fit and sometimes, when you want, come and visit the *zawiya*, because proximity eliminates defilement.”⁶⁶⁵

As a result, the order has gained national renown. Its utility to the state has been shaped by its proximity to power, its pragmatism, its capacity to organize, and the extent and power of its adherents’ network. The order’s rise is also the result of the opportunities it provides its members in the sense that membership is increasingly seen as a way to gain professional and social advancement.⁶⁶⁶ The order’s growing reputation as an “ascenseur social” or “social elevator” that seeks out adherents beyond the middle class in elite circles.⁶⁶⁷ The order essentially provides an exclusive patronage network that is ripe with opportunities for advancement. Some of the most notable members of the Boutchichi order include the minister of Islamic Affairs, Ahmed Toufiq; his chief of cabinet, Ahmad Qustas, and Ahmed Abaddi, the secretary general of the Council of Religious Scholars, a religious research body.⁶⁶⁸ Several royal councilors are said to be members of the order.⁶⁶⁹

This religious, and particularly social, identity is bolstered by the Boutchichi order’s relationship with the state—the order is currently the most influential in the country.⁶⁷⁰ Sheikh Sidi Hamza once explained: “We could intervene in Moroccan politics only in three cases: when the Islamic religion, Moroccan territory, or the king are threatened.”⁶⁷¹ This definitive statement makes clear the order’s political purpose: to amplify the monarchy’s message and purpose.⁶⁷² The Boutchichi order also has supported the monarchy by reaching out to hundreds of young Moroccan Salafists to highlight the merits of Sufism.⁶⁷³ One clear example of the Boutchichi order’s political involvement was its support for Morocco’s 2011 constitutional revisions and its efforts to mobilize the order’s adherents to support this proposal and promote a vote in the monarchy’s favor.⁶⁷⁴ The order’s position aligned with the overarching efforts of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs to encourage a yes vote by promoting it during Friday sermons across the country.⁶⁷⁵ This was an example of a very public, official, and organized effort to mobilize the order’s adherents politically on behalf of the state and the monarchy.

The Diplomatic Influence of Zawiya Tijania

Beyond domestic politics, the Moroccan monarchy has also drawn upon another notable Sufi order to bolster its foreign policy agenda: the Zawiya Tijania. The Tijani order—which extends across the North Africa, the Sahel, and West Africa—has played a role in rejuvenating ties between Morocco and its Francophone West African neighbors. Morocco’s foreign policy, over the past ten years, has sought to rebuild and reclaim connections to the rest of Africa by using (among other tools) shared religious practices and highlighting the shared history of the Zawiya Tijania.

Morocco’s efforts to rebuild its foreign policy outreach into sub-Saharan Africa are tied, in part, to one of the country’s top foreign policy priorities: the Western Saharan conflict. The conflict pits Morocco against the Polisario liberation movement, supported by Algeria, in a long dispute over who should rightfully rule the Western Saharan territory. When several African nations supported the Polisario’s claims to sovereignty and Western Saharan independence, Morocco left the African Union in 1983 in protest. Morocco then decided to focus its foreign policy efforts for a time on the Western nations that controlled the

relevant international dispute negotiation mechanisms. In doing so, for years, the Moroccan government overlooked many African neighbors and partners. However, over the past decade or so, Morocco's outreach to its African neighbors has taken on greater focus and importance, and the king has spearheaded several initiatives to reboot and bolster ties to various African nations. The bulk of these initiatives have focused on investment and economic cooperation—with what Rabat refers to as religious or “spiritual diplomacy” bolstering these efforts.⁶⁷⁶

In this religious diplomacy realm, Morocco's spiritual outreach relies on the king's religious authority and his ties to the Tijani order, which is widely followed in West Africa. Although the order itself and its *zawaya* had long diminished in influence in Morocco, they have recently been revived for this particular purpose.⁶⁷⁷ During the Gathering of Tijanis Adepts in Fez, the king emphasized “you can count on Morocco's support in your effort to disseminate [the Tijani] radiant message and expand its scope for the sake of Islamic, Maghrebian and African solidarity. We want the Tariqa Tijania to emerge as a pillar of African unity.”⁶⁷⁸

However, over the past decade or so, Morocco's outreach to its African neighbors has taken on greater focus and importance.

This outreach—through the order and other means—aims to grant Morocco a key role in countering violent extremism as the country's leaders strive to build an alternative religious narrative with a cross-border dimension. In addition to supporting the *Zawiya Tijania*, the king of Morocco has built mosques in West African countries and helped support Sufi events and gatherings, while promoting exchanges on this shared spiritual and religious basis.⁶⁷⁹ The king's role relies on the monarchy's religious authority, which has historically reached what is now Senegal and Mali. Through these historical links and the shared spiritual heritage embodied by the Tijani order (whose founder is entombed in Fez), Morocco has undertaken several initiatives to broader religious cooperation. These efforts have included training imams in Morocco's newly built Imam Training Center, which includes many applicants from West African countries who are either connected to or followers of the Tijani order.⁶⁸⁰

Conclusion

Even as Morocco has made some headway in reshaping Islamic religious discourse both locally and regionally, the results of its efforts have been mixed. The state's promotion of Sufism as a moderate religious force and as an indigenous and more legitimate ideology are evident in the government's broader effort to create a consistent brand of Moroccan Islam. What is less clear, however, is whether this policy has succeeded in curbing the appeal of extremist religious ideology. For example, while it is difficult to precisely measure the spread of extremism ideology, Moroccans were among the highest number of foreign fighters who joined the ranks of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria.⁶⁸¹

Domestically, in the rehabilitation and use of *zawaya*, the Moroccan state has expended significant financial resources to streamline and centralize their management. These efforts are particularly visible in the country's promotion of its Sufi heritage locally and internationally through television programming

and support for gatherings of Sufi orders and Sufi music festivals. However, the role of *zawaya* in providing education and social services to local Moroccans is largely dependent on the extent to which the Moroccan state can offer support and prop them up. Many *zawaya* are not able to fulfill these social and religious functions to the extent that they can influence the population's understanding of Islam without significant state support.

A small but telling example of this took place during the coronavirus pandemic, which brought Morocco's religious institutions to a halt for the better part of 2020. Morocco's decision to close worship spaces affected *zawaya* due to social distancing policies. The *zawaya* supported the state's decision to close these spaces, but they could have been used to provide much-needed social support while complying with national public health guidelines. *Zawaya* could have served as networks for the distribution of goods to the needy, and they could have played a more grassroots role in supporting and amplifying the state's messaging on public health guidelines. Instead, those functions were assumed entirely by the state, with support from some nongovernmental organizations.

In terms of its international engagement, and particularly its support for deradicalization initiatives, the Moroccan monarchy has sought to fulfill its role as the country's religious leader and supporter of education in the ways its international partners have wanted. International partners engaged in countering violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel rely on Morocco to play a leadership role in teaching and retraining imams and preachers in a more tolerant version of Islam that fits in with these regions' history and traditions. Through institutions such as the Mohammed VI Foundation of African Oulema (founded in 2015) and the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines and Morchidates, Morocco has been able to reach hundreds of religious leaders in Africa and Europe with its own brand of spiritual leadership. Similarly, Morocco has signed multiple conventions on "religious cooperation" with some African nations to provide religious education, training, and capacity building for the management of religious institutions.⁶⁸²

Morocco's work, especially supporting other Sahel countries, is supported and praised by Western partners and gives Rabat more regional prestige and influence. On the ground, however, the situation might be more complex. It remains unclear how much of the monarchy's religious authority is truly and readily accepted and how much the king's message of a more moderate and tolerant interpretation of Islam is genuinely embraced by populations throughout the region.

While it remains unclear how effective the promotion of Sufism has been in countering religious extremism, the Moroccan monarchy's use of Sufism for domestic political purposes has been more successful, as the example of the Boutchichi order demonstrates. The monarchy's patronage and sponsorship of *zawaya*, and its ability to wield them nationally and internationally, will likely continue to bolster the monarchy's religious and, by extension, its political authority.

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Glossary

Ahl al-Bayt: the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad

Awqaf (singular: waqf): Islamic endowments, such as financial or property assets, which are typically maintained by a ministry (*wizara*), administration (*idara*), or authority (*haiya*) that is sometimes responsible for regulating mosques and overseeing religious charity

Dar al-Ifta: a government institution responsible for issuing fatwas in a given country

Dawa: Islamic proselytization

Fatwa (plural: ifta): a legal opinion on a point of Islamic law issued by a qualified jurist

Fiqh: human attempts to understand and apply jurisprudence of sharia

Hadith: the narrative record of the sayings and customs of the Prophet Muhammed

Hajj: pilgrimage to Mecca, which is a religious duty for all able Muslims

Ijtihad: the practice of independent reasoning in jurisprudence

Khatib: the person who leads Friday and holiday prayers and who typically delivers a sermon

Mawlid: in Sunni Islam, a minor holiday marking the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad or saint

Mufti: a jurist who interprets Islamic law

Sharia: Islamic law based on the Quran

Sunna: the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, which are used as a source of law

Tafsir: the critical explanation or interpretation of scripture

Ulema: community of religious scholars

Umma: the collective global community of Muslims

Wali al-amr: the ruler or leader of a community

Zakat: the mandatory annual charitable donations made by Muslims

Zawaya (singular: zawiya): religious schools, lodges, or orders, which are most common in North Africa and play an important social role in their surrounding communities

Notes

Introduction

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

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- 387 For a biography of al-Ghariani and his doctrinal influences and ideology, see Wehrey, "Salafism and Libya's State Collapse," 131.
- 388 Local Salafist interlocutors use various terms rooted in politics and doctrine to describe the loose constellation of activist, revolutionary, and militant Islamic actors affiliated with al-Ghariani. At the very broadest level, they include *haraki* (activist) Salafists, as opposed to the so-called "quietist" Salafists embodied by the Madkhali; the Muslim Brotherhood, and the *muqatila*, referring to former members of the now-defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. At a more specific level, some Islamists in his orbit are derisively known by their Salafi opponents as Ma'ribis or the Ma'ribiya because of their doctrinal adherence to the teachings of a Yemen-based cleric Abu Hassan al-Ma'ribi, who was a major player in an intra-Salafist doctrinal schism in the mid-2000s. In contrast to his clerical progenitor in Yemen, Muqbil al-Wadi'i, al-Ma'ribi advocated a more politically active interpretation of Salafism, which carried over into his Libyan followers participating in the 2011 revolution. Among the more prominent of al-Ma'ribi's Libyan followers was an Islamist named Shaaban Hadiya, who played a defining role in Libya's post-2011 Islamist militancy as the head of the self-styled Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room, a coalition of like-minded Islamists drawn from towns and cities in western Libya. From author interviews with Salafist interlocutors, Tripoli, Libya, June and November 2019.
- 389 This took shape as Resolution No. 27 on March 18, 2012. See Libyan National Transitional Council, Resolution No. 27, March 18, 2012, <https://ssf.gov.ly/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85-27-%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-2012-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81.pdf>.
- 390 Francois Murphy and Ali Shuaib, "Libya's NTC Unveils New Government Line-up," Reuters, November 22, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya/libyas-ntc-unveils-new-government-line-up-idUSTRE7AL0JM20111122>. In 2010, religious authorities under Qadhafi prohibited Abu Faris from giving lectures in mosques and issuing fatwas without first obtaining permission from the awqaf authority. See Khaled Al-Muhair, "Libya Stops the Activity of an Islamic Preacher," *Al Jazeera*, August 15, 2010, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2010/8/15>.
- 391 "A Saudi Intelligence Shows That the 'Political Islam Stream' Will Play a Decisive Role in Libya" (Arabic), *Al Wasat*, June 19, 2015, <http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/74227>. The document states, "in the event of the success of the transitional stage through the conduct of the upcoming entitlements, the Islamic and tribal orientation will play an effective and decisive role in drawing the Libyan political future map." See "Saudi Cables," Wikileaks, <https://wikileaks.org/saudi-cables/doc9490.html>. The Saudi intelligence document notes that the Muslim Brotherhood "depends on the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs headed by Sheikh Hamza Abu Faris, a member of the World Federation of Muslim Scholars open to Brotherhood thought, which allowed the Sheikhs and members of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood to take the platforms to deliver lessons to preach, guide and give sermons on Friday, as mosques are overseen by many imams imbued with Muslim Brotherhood thought."
- 392 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli and Misrata, Libya, June 2019, November 2019, and January 2020. See also, Wehrey, "Salafism and Libya's State Collapse," 131.
- 393 Author interviews with Madkhali Salafist figures in Tripoli, Misrata, and Benghazi, Libya, 2017 to 2019. Salafist figures often use a range of complex legal and doctrinal formulations to designate the wali al-amr. For a discussion, see Nathan J. Brown, "Who or What Is the Wali al-Amr: The Unposed Question," *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law, forthcoming, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3346372#.
- 394 For an overview of these tactics, see "Dr. Hamza Abu Fares: The Extremists Usurping *Manabar* [Mosque Pulpits] Are Supported by External Parties," *LawofLibya.com*, April 16, 2012, <https://www.lawoflibya.com/mag/2012/04/16/%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%81%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%84>.
- 395 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli and Misrata, Libya, November 2019 and January 2020.
- 396 Acting as self-proclaimed morality police linked to the Ministry of Interior, the Special Deterrence Force focused on combating vices like narcotics, alcohol, and prostitution on the basis of the Islamic precept of "commanding right and forbidding wrong." A source close to the force put the percentage of practicing Salafists at 60 percent. From author

- interviews with Special Deterrence Force personnel, Tripoli, Libya, 2013 and 2016. The commander of the force, Abdelraouf Kara, appears to follow a scripturalist, dawa-based version of Salafism rather than a rigid adherence to Madkhalism. In a 2013 interview with the author, for example, he did not count al-Madkhali as one of his clerical referents, listing instead the Saudi clerics Muhammad bin Uthaymin, Nasr al-Din al-Albani, Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, and the Yemeni cleric Muqbil al-Wadi'i. Also from author interview with Abdelraouf Kara, Tripoli, Libya, May 15, 2013.
- 397 See Igor Chertisch, "Religious Violence in Libya: Who Is to Blame," *Huffington Post* (blog), December 5, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/religious-violence-in-lib_b_2245265.
- 398 Author interview with Libyan scholar of Islamic affairs, Misrata, Libya, November 2019.
- 399 Ibid.
- 400 Author interviews with a former member of the local awqaf committee, Misrata, Libya, January 2020.
- 401 Author interviews with a former member of the local awqaf committee, Misrata, Libya, November 2019.
- 402 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli, Libya, June and November 2019.
- 403 For a bio, see Abdul Salam Al-Asmar Al-Fitouri, Facebook post, February 10, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/Abdussalam.Alasmar/posts/460353040686377>.
- 404 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019.
- 405 Author interview with a former awqaf official, Misrata, Libya, November 2019.
- 406 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019.
- 407 Author interview with a former awqaf official, Misrata, Libya, November 2019.
- 408 Author interview with a former awqaf official, Misrata, Libya, November 2019. For a discussion of factional and armed group challenges to the Zeidan government, see Wehrey, *The Burning Shores*, 160–170.
- 409 Author interview with a former awqaf official, Misrata, Libya, November 2019.
- 410 See Wehrey, "Salafism and Libya's State Collapse," 124.
- 411 The "remote control" moniker was deployed by several Libyan critics of the Madkhalis in author interviews in Tripoli, Libya, 2019 and 2020. For the Trojan horse narrative, see George Joffe, "The Trojan Horse: The Madkhali Movement in North Africa," *Journal of North African Studies* 23, no. 5, (2018) 739–744.
- 412 For the drivers of Operation Dignity and the run-up to Haftar's May 2014 attack, see Wehrey, *The Burning Shores*, 187–205. Also, see Frederic Wehrey, "The Battle for Benghazi," *Atlantic*, February 28, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/02/the-battle-for-benghazi/284102>.
- 413 For an interview account of Haftar's threats to take Tripoli in the summer of 2014, see Frederic Wehrey, "Taking Sides in Libya," *New York Times*, July 7, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/08/opinion/taking-sides-in-libya.html>.
- 414 Wehrey, *The Burning Shores*, 191–205.
- 415 Author interview with the son of a deceased Madkhali cleric in Benghazi, Libya, May 2017; and Frederic Wehrey, "Quiet No More: 'Madkhali' Salafists in Libya Are Active in the Battle Against the Islamic State, and in Factional Conflicts," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 13, 2016, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846>; and Wehrey, "Salafism and Libya's State Collapse."
- 416 Ibid.
- 417 Wehrey, "Salafism and Libya's State Collapse," 133.
- 418 According to one Salafist interlocutor, "The [Special] Deterrence Force protected the Salafis in Suq al-Juma and Gheneiwa [a reference to Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli, a powerful Tripoli armed group commander], protected them in Abu Slim." From author interview with a Salafi interlocutor, Abu Slim neighborhood, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019.
- 419 Author interviews with Madkhali Salafist interlocutors, Tripoli, Libya, June and November 2019.
- 420 Author interview with a former awqaf official, Misrata, Libya, November 2019.
- 421 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli and Misrata, Libya, November 2019 and January 2020.
- 422 Al-Futmani, in particular, had a well-established and polarizing reputation as the head of the May 28 Brigade in Bani Walid, which had committed abuses during the 2011 revolution and had been evicted from the town in 2012 by pro-Qadhafi residents. See Reuters Staff, "Interview—a Libyan Commander Says His Forces Are Gathering to Retake Bani Walid" (Arabic), Reuters, January 28, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/oegtp-libya-walid-ah1-idARACAE80R02320120128>. See also Wolfram Lacher, "Libya's Local Elites and the Politics of Alliance Building," *Mediterranean Politics*, 21, no. 1 (2016): 74.
- 423 Ghweila formed a close alliance with al-Ghariani and currently heads the Guidance and Awareness Department of al-Ghariani's Tanasuh Foundation.
- 424 Reportedly, however, the new awqaf officials left in place Madkhali imams inside Tripoli's mosques—at least initially. "When Fajr took over the capital, the major Salafi ulema left Tripoli for the mountains," according to one Salafi interlocutor. "But Fajr didn't replace the mosque preachers." From author interviews with Madkhali Salafist interlocutors, Tripoli, Libya, June and November 2019.
- 425 Frederic Wehrey and Ala' Arababa'h, "Taking on Operation Dawn: The Creeping Advance of the Islamic State in Western Libya," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Diwan* (blog), June 24, 2015; <https://>

carnegieendowment.org/2015/06/24/taking-on-operation-dawn-creeping-advance-of-islamic-state-in-western-libya/ib0e.

- 426 Author interview with a former awqaf official, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019. See also “The Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs Is Visiting the Southern Region to Follow Up on the Ministry’s Work” (Arabic), *Libya News Agency*, April 4, 2015, <https://ana-news.ly/art.php?id=73903>.
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- 428 For the video, see “Abdel Basit Ghweila, What Is Happening in Libya’s Jihad for the Sake of God” (Arabic), YouTube, posted by Alwasat Channel, August 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paT8BEQP-ow>; and “Libyan Scholars Blast Reports Linking Abdulbaset Ghweila With Manchester Bomber,” *Libya Herald*, June 6, 2014, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/06/06/libyan-scholars-blast-reports-linking-abdulbaset-ghweila-with-manchester-bomber>.
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- 430 Lisa Laventure and Evan Dyer, “Libyan-Canadian Cleric Linked to Manchester Bomber Plans Return to Canada to Clear His Name,” *Canadian Broadcasting Cooperation*, June 4, 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/libyan-cleric-manchester-bomber-1.4143899>.
- 431 Author interview with a Libyan scholar of Islamic affairs, Misrata, Libya, November 2019, and author interview with a former awqaf official, Tripoli, Libya, January 2020. His son’s death has also been reported on social media, including the following photo posted on Facebook. Sirte News Network (Arabic), Facebook post, April 9, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/shabakasirt/photos/%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D9%88%D9%87%D9%88-%D8%A5%D8%A8%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81-%D9%81%D9%8A-/443181309189059>.
- 432 Author interview with awqaf officials, Tripoli and Misrata, Libya, November 2019.
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- 435 A video of the statement was once found via this YouTube link but has now been removed, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqE3fDjx6aw>. See also, Wehrey, “Quiet No More.”
- 436 Author interview with a former awqaf official, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019.
- 437 The cooperation came amid several other instances of low-level outreach and dialogue by the Tripoli awqaf ministry to communities aligned with Haftar, demonstrating the institution’s mediation potential. These included holding a Quran recitation competition in Zintan and facilitating the visit of a Sufi scholar from the east. Some of the initial outreach came from an eastern awqaf official who hailed from the Firjan tribe—Haftar’s tribe. “Haftar couldn’t hurt him because he’s Firjani,” noted one former awqaf official. Even so, coordination remained limited because of entrenched opposition from more hardline voices in the eastern awqaf. Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019 and January 2020.
- 438 Author interview with a former awqaf official, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019.
- 439 See Wehrey, “Salafism and Libya’s State Collapse,” 132.
- 440 Abdulkader Assad, “Tripoli Awqaf: Madkhali Preachers Not Allowed to Give Religious Speeches at Mosques,” *Libya Observer*, November 24, 2016, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/tripoli-awqaf-madkhali-preachers-not-allowed-give-religious-speeches-mosques>.
- 441 Author interview with a former awqaf official from Gharyan, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019.
- 442 Ibid.
- 443 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli and Misrata, November 2019.
- 444 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli and Misrata, November 2019.
- 445 Ibid.
- 446 Al-Qadi was also briefly detained in August 2018 by Tripoli’s General Investigation Department, allegedly over the failure to allow elderly hajj pilgrims to be accompanied by family members. See Safa Alharathy, “Head of Awqaf

- Authority Arrested in Tripoli,” *Libya Observer*, August 4, 2018, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/head-awqaf-authority-arrested-tripoli>.
- 447 Ahmed Elumami, “Tripoli Armed Factions Take Over Rival’s Compound in Heavy Fighting,” *Reuters*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-tripoli/tripoli-armed-factions-take-over-rivals-compound-in-heavy-fighting-idUSKBN16M1NY>.
- 448 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli, Libya, January 2020.
- 449 Ibid.
- 450 Abbani’s brother, a Salafist cleric who was imprisoned for over a decade by the Qadhafi regime, is a confidant of the Special Deterrence Force’s commander, with one clerical source describing him as a “clerical referent” or a “mufti.” Abbani himself described dispatching Salafist clerics to the Special Deterrence Force–run prison to conduct theological reeducation of imprisoned militants. From author interviews with Salafist adherents and former awqaf officials, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019. For an account of this Salafist-led prison rehabilitation, see Frederic Wehrey, “When the Islamic State Came to Libya,” *Atlantic*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/isis-libya-hiftar-al-qaeda-syria/552419>. Some interlocutors also stated that the sacking was undertaken with pressure from another Tripoli armed group leader, Haytham Tajouri, the head of the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade. From author interviews with Salafist adherents and former awqaf officials, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019.
- 451 The most significant of these was the noted Madkhali preacher Majdi Hafala. From author interviews with Salafist interlocutors in Tripoli, Libya, June and November 2019.
- 452 Alison Pargeter, “The Rise of the ‘Madkhalists’: Inside Libya’s Struggle for Religious Supremacy,” *Middle East Eye*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/libya-war-religion-struggle-madkhalists-rise-supremacy>.
- 453 See “Sheikh Abdel-Razzaq Al-Bashti, Director of the Office of Endowments for Al-Zawiya,” *Tanasuh*, April 28, 2020, <https://tanassuh.tv/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%>.
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- 455 Author interview with a municipal official from Yefren, Tripoli, Libya, January 2020. This came on top of an earlier pronouncement from the eastern-based awqaf authority that denigrated Libya’s ‘Ibadi adherents as “infidels.” See Human Rights Watch, “Libya: Incitement Against Religious Minority,” July 20, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/20/libya-incitement-against-religious-minority>.
- 456 Wolfram Lacher, “Magnates, Media, and Mercenaries: How Libya’s Conflicts Produce Transnational Networks Straddling Africa and the Middle East,” *Project on Middle East Political Science Studies 40: Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides*, June 2020, <https://pomeps.org/category/memos/africa-and-the-middle-east-beyond-the-divides>.
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- 458 “Document in Response to the Condemned Gharyani and Abu Ujaili,” General Authority of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, May 5, 2020.
- 459 Author telephone interviews with residents of eastern Libya, November 2019.
- 460 Author observations and conversations with residents and social figures in Benghazi and Bayda, Libya, May 2017.
- 461 Wehrey, “Salafism and Libya’s State Collapse,” 134.
- 462 For the dynamics of this push, see Emadeddin Badi, “General Hafter’s Southern Strategy and the Repercussions of the Fezzan Campaign,” *Middle East Institute*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/general-hifters-southern-strategy-and-repercussions-fezzan-campaign>.
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- 464 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli, Libya, January 2020.
- 465 Ibid.
- 466 Author interview with a former awqaf official from Gharyan, Tripoli, Libya, January 2020.
- 467 For a discussion of this unit’s stance and its reported engagement with Saudi clerical figures affiliated with Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali in Medina, see Wehrey, “Salafism and Libya’s State Collapse,” 23.
- 468 Author interviews with a Salafi interlocutor, Tripoli, Libya, November 2019.
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- 470 Author interviews with former awqaf officials, Tripoli, Libya, January 2020.
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- 472 Author interview with a Libyan scholar of Islamic affairs, Misrata, Libya, January 2020.
- 473 Abdul Hadi Rabie, "Al-Serraj Militia Stormed the Awqaf Offices in Western Libya" (Arabic), *Al-Ain*, May 5, 2020, <https://al-ain.com/article/endowments-alkhums-zawia-terror>.
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- 478 Nathan J. Brown, "Post-Revolutionary al-Azhar," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2011, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_azhar.pdf.
- 479 "Al-Azhar #al-sharif" [#Holy Azhar] (Arabic), video posted on Facebook by al-Azhar al-Sharif, April 1, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=657826174790396>.
- 480 "The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces Decree—Law No. 13 of 2012 Amending Some Provisions of Law No. 103 of 1961 Regarding the Reorganization of al-Azhar and the Bodies It Includes" (Arabic), *Laweg.net*, <http://www.laweg.net/Default.aspx?action=ViewActivePages&Type=6&ItemID=75214&%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%85-%D8%A8%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85-13-%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-2012-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%B6-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85-103-%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-1961-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%87%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%89-%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%85%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7>.
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