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**OFFICIAL ISLAM**  
**IN THE ARAB WORLD**  
**The Contest for Religious Authority**

Nathan J. Brown

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## About the Author

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## Summary

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

### Religious Institutions in the Arab World

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

### **Regimes' Relations With Religious Establishments**

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

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## Introduction

In summer 2016, readers of the Egyptian press were regaled with daily stories about a very public confrontation between the ministry of religious affairs and the leadership of Al-Azhar, the sprawling educational and research complex that is constitutionally recognized as Egypt's main authority on Islamic affairs. The ministry sought to have a single, ministry-written Friday sermon delivered in all mosques throughout Egypt. Al-Azhar harshly criticized the move and soon gained the upper hand in the battle between the two powerful institutions. The Egyptian state appeared to be battling itself in full public view over who was responsible for determining what preachers say from the pulpit.

It was a bewildering incident, touching on a controversial subject. State religious institutions in the Arab world provoke strong but contradictory evaluations, not merely in the countries where they operate but also throughout the world. Are they partners in the struggle to counter violent extremism, discredited regime mouthpieces, or incubators of radicalism? All three of these descriptions contain a germ of truth. But above all, such institutions are sprawling bureaucracies that are hardly irrelevant to religious and political life, even as they are difficult to steer in any particular direction. Their authority is often contested by individuals and organizations outside of the state, but these bureaucracies are present in many different realms. Generally loyal to existing regimes, they also show signs of autonomy. Normally hostile to radical forces, they are at best lumbering bulwarks against them.

Those who follow politics in the Arab world are accustomed to encountering religion. Matters of faith seem closely connected with many political controversies. Religion, in turn, has served as a rallying point for opposition groups and social movements as well. But focusing only on religion as it relates to personal faith and political opposition means overlooking other ways that it is woven into matters of governance in Arab states. Ministries of education write religious textbooks, ministries of religious affairs administer mosques, state muftis offer interpretations of religious law, and courts of personal status guide husbands and wives as well as parents and children in how to conduct their interactions in an Islamic way.

Yet while states structure religion in many diverse fashions, official religious establishments, such as Al-Azhar, have encountered a two-sided challenge in recent years. Supporters of existing political orders view them as useful tools.

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Arab regimes have sought to use the panoply of state religious institutions to cement their own rule. They have also come under international pressure to counter violent extremism through the religious institutions that they oversee. At the same time, official institutions are compelled by their religious publics to represent authentic voices of religious truth. A host of unofficial actors have shattered the monopoly over religious authority that religious officials had grown accustomed to enjoying.

In this environment, official religious establishments have retained significant influence but are unlikely to be able to wield it in any coherent fashion, whether to serve their own agendas or those seeking to use them for their own ends. Egypt and its religious institutions are particularly helpful in illustrating this reality, but other countries in the region also deserve consideration when examining the different patterns of behavior of their religious establishments.

## The Modern Roots of the Religion-State Complex

It is not unusual for states to show an interest in religion. Almost all constitutions in the world make some reference to religion, mostly in a manner that accommodates religious beliefs and practices, while deeply shaping their structure. Official religions are not uncommon in many countries, and state support for, and regulation of, religious institutions comes in many guises.

What is unusual in the Arab world is not the public role of religion but the extent and range of that role. Some of the distinctive ways that relations between the state and religion are structured might be traceable from before the modern era to Islamic doctrine, the experience of the early community

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of believers, and core principles derived from sacred texts. But as the process of state formation began across the Arab world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in each place it developed differently. As a consequence of this, official religious institutions evolved quite differently as well. In its particularities—and even in many of its most general features—this evolution was rooted substantially in the process of modern state formation. Indeed, state formation and the organization of religion have gone hand in hand, so that “modern religion in Muslim countries is positioned on the platform of the state.”<sup>1</sup>

The commonalities among Arab states are straightforward. Most grant Islam official status, have institutions that offer advisory interpretations of Islamic law (*fatwas*), administer religious endowments and charities, oversee mosques, and apply some version of Islamic family law. State muftis are largely a nineteenth- and twentieth-century innovation. It was then that states began

appointing such religious officials and establishing a designated bureaucracy for issuing legal interpretations, at times to replace or expand upon the Ottoman religious bureaucracy.

Ministries of religious affairs and the nationalization of religious endowments (*awqaf*) and almsgiving (*zakat*) are rooted in modern history as well. As complex bureaucratic states and legal apparatuses were established in the 1800s and 1900s, adjudicative, educational, training, and charitable functions—along with the regulation of public space, gatherings in mosques, and public broadcasting—resulted in state institutions active in religious spheres. Western imperialist powers, seeking to rationalize the administration of states they controlled in the region, particularly between the two world wars in the twentieth century, also sought to regularize religion, sometimes by defining its scope.

While family relations in the region had long been governed in part by Islamic legal teachings, the existence of a separate category of personal status law—perhaps the most essential element of Islamic law for many adherents today—simply did not exist before colonial rulers and independent states began marking off distinctive legislation and courts for family matters during the nineteenth century. There is no doctrinal reason to claim that conducting marital relations in an Islamic manner is more important to God than trading goods in an Islamic way. However, as different state authorities introduced legal reforms in the modern era, marriage, divorce, and inheritance were areas in which they moved most carefully. They did so by creating a legal field of family affairs for which they took care to formulate rules in terms of older Islamic jurisprudence.

In some places, the creation of Islamic law governing personal status was fostered by imperial powers, such as the French in Algeria, who were not anxious to involve themselves in such matters. In other places, for example Egypt and Iraq, ambitious local rulers sought to assert a stronger role for the state and legislated personal status law. They drew on Islamic sources and scholarship to be sure, but still ordered courts to rule according to a written code of personal status rather than according to their own individual interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>2</sup>

But even in this distinct field, there is quite significant regional variation in who writes the law, what it says, and who implements it. For instance in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, which were never under Western imperial control, Islamic religious, or sharia, courts theoretically remain the courts of general jurisdiction today. However, they have been assisted in Yemen through a body of legislated codes and in Saudi Arabia (which remains resistant to codification) through specialized quasi-judicial bodies that enforce regulations and decrees. Thus, the precise institutional arrangement has varied according to the timing, nature, and extent of state building, as well as the degree and makeup of external control.

Historical footprints have been left in an often unique set of structures and nomenclature in Arab countries, each of which has a different institutional map for official Islam. Even where there are similarities between countries, there are also distinct arrangements. In Saudi Arabia, for example, an organization that is generally referred to as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) acts as what can be termed a religious police. It has no real equivalent elsewhere in the Arab world. Many countries, in their turn, have official bodies responsible for religious research in which senior scholars are gathered. However, they take all sorts of forms. In Morocco, the council—known as the Supreme Council for Religious Knowledge (Al-Majlis al-‘Ilmi al-A‘la)—is headed by the king. In Egypt, a similar institution, the Body of Senior [Religious] Scholars, or Hay’at Kibar al-Ulama, names its own members.

The structures are not only diverse, they are also complex. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Egyptian state apparatus, which provides a particularly emblematic religious environment in the Arab world, is littered with imposing-sounding religious bureaucracies, some of which defy easy translation. These include the Office of the State Mufti (Dar al-Iftaa al-Misriyyeh), the Office of the Sheikh al-Azhar, Al-Azhar University, the Supreme Islamic

Council, the Body of Senior Scholars, the Islamic Research Academy (Majma‘ al-Buhuth al-Islamiyya), and the Fatwa Committee (Lajnat al-Fatwa).

Each of these has a particular history that sometimes requires an almost archeological sensibility to understand. The Office of the State Mufti, headed by an official often referred to as the Grand Mufti, was established at the end

of the nineteenth century for reasons connected with legal reform, but also to emphasize autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. Al-Azhar was founded as a Shia mosque in the tenth century, but now presents itself as the preeminent Sunni authority in Egypt and even the entire Muslim world. The Supreme Islamic Council is actually not supreme, but an advisory body within the ministry of religious affairs. The Body of Senior Scholars is an older body within Al-Azhar that was resurrected in post-2011 Egypt by military decree to give the Al-Azhar leadership the autonomy it sought from a political process that at the time promised a rise in the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood.

There are clear patterns that emerge in this bureaucratic welter. In the Arab world, religious education is generally mandatory through secondary school. Mosques are licensed by the state and frequently treated as state property. The state also monitors sermons and certifies preachers, who are often provided with official guidance. Most formal higher religious education occurs within state institutions. Charitable institutions and activities are regulated and sometimes directly administered by the state. The immersion of the state in religious

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affairs has helped create a landscape of institutional complexity throughout the region. Official religious institutions have taken on a wide range of tasks, yet their intricacy has created overlapping authority and frequently hampered their aims.

## Mapping Official Islam

Official religious institutions play multiple roles throughout the Arab world. The array of religious duties taken on by the state has spawned a series of sprawling bureaucracies that do not always have the ability to act as parts of a coherent whole. Because official Islamic institutions developed as a consequence of, and in parallel to, the rise of the modern state, so too have they reflected the reality of expanding states. This includes strengthening state control and supervision over a variety of religious activities, even if the power of the state is never absolute.

Official institutions not only have to worry about each other with their overlapping responsibilities and claims to authority. Each of these religious bureaucracies also faces competition from outside the state apparatus, adding a further layer of complexity. In particular, religious institutions' involvement in endowments and charity, advice and interpretation, education, prayer, family law, and broadcasting is noteworthy.

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### Endowments and Charity

Official religious actors—generally based in a given country's ministry of religious affairs—play a vital part in overseeing charities. This they do in two ways. First, they regulate and frequently administer religious endowments often set up to support mosques, schools, or charitable causes. Indeed, in most countries of the region, those establishing a legally sanctioned endowment find themselves having to act through such a ministry. The consequences are not merely religiously significant, but also economically and fiscally so, with large amounts of real estate and other holdings donated for charitable purposes falling under state control. Ministries in some countries have branched out from traditional endowments to engage in broader developmental projects designed to help the poor or unemployed, such as establishing producer cooperatives.

Second, almsgiving is often organized by ministries of religious affairs as well. In some countries, this function might be decentralized and run through local mosques, while in others there is a greater effort to engage in central oversight. The religious obligation to give alms, however, need not be fulfilled in an officially sanctioned setting, but is also permitted in less formal, private contexts. State actors are caught between pious donors, some of whom are leery of the efficiency and rectitude of official structures, and security-minded

officials, who have faced increasing international pressures to ensure that such funds are not used in ways that are politically unsafe (such as supporting radical or violent groups).

### **Advice and Interpretation**

Fatwas—scholarly interpretations of religious law on a particular question—are traditionally nonbinding. However, it is this very fact that can enhance their moral authority, as, ideally, they are vountarily sought out by the faithful and delivered by disinterested scholars without regard for the particular circumstances of a case.<sup>3</sup> Fatwas have emerged as a critical medium for arguing about religious issues, since they are the form in which scholars develop their interpretations most fully. Most states in the region have a mufti (which in Arabic translates as a fatwa giver), whose opinions are sought by state actors needing guidance on questions of religious law. But there is no way to compel believers to resort to official bodies or designated figures in search of such guidance.

Unofficial scholars from a variety of orientations—whether Salafi, modernist, autodidact, feminist, literalist, or other sorts—have grown popular. They use a variety of means to answer questions, including face-to-face interaction, talk shows, emails, and Facebook. The leading Shia scholar Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has a website where followers can submit questions on any matter of concern to them.<sup>4</sup> The popular Al-Azhar scholar Salim Abdel Galil smiles compassionately through his Islamic legal guidance given in rapid succession to callers to his television program. The youthful Saudi Ahmad al-Shuqayri claims no particular religious knowledge, but gives ethical and religious exhortation and advice on television in an earnest, lively, open, and inspirational manner. In this competitive environment, officially designated muftis have sometimes established websites, staffed telephone hotlines, and appeared on broadcasts—running hard to stay in place and make themselves accessible.

Talk of “unregulated fatwas,” which are portrayed by religious authorities as being of poorer quality than those produced by official religious representatives, has intensified in official media in many Arab countries. Some states have sought to combat such fatwas because they often advance interpretations that are unusual or radical. For many top religious officials, the forest of fatwas simply confuses ordinary believers. Thus, fatwas from competing sources, which might seem a rarefied set of scholarly writings about the fine points of religious teachings, are actually part of an intensely political struggle about who should speak in the name of Islam.

### **Education**

Religious education is a mandatory subject in official curricula throughout the Middle East. And with most educational systems highly centralized, the vast majority of students are taught versions of Islamic belief and practice codified

in texts written within specialized structures of education ministries. Some countries have separate networks of religious schools for children from especially religious families, such as those overseen by Al-Azhar in Egypt. When it comes to higher education, state institutions predominate over nonstate centers of learning. While there has been an increase in private universities, these generally do not tread on religious ground. That is why nonstate faculties of Islamic law or other religious subjects are few in number and small in terms of enrollment.

Yet the official monopoly is not complete. Non-Muslims are exempt from official instruction about Islam, and if believers of other religions are sufficient in number, the state may allow them their own parallel religious classes and books, sometimes organized and licensed by a given country's ministry of education. States generally do not have a full monopoly over education—many countries also have a network of private schools, sometimes more prestigious than public ones. Such schools are generally required to hew to the official curriculum in all subjects, including religion, but some still manage to evade significant official supervision. Outside of schools, whether public or private, also stand less formal systems that offer lessons in mosques, churches, and study groups. Since the late twentieth century, these informal groupings seem to have grown in popularity, perhaps driven by the simultaneous spread of education and piety.

### **Prayer and Control of Mosques**

When believers pray in the Arab world, the state often asserts its presence. Congregational Friday prayer, like some regular weekday prayers, occurs in mosques—or, if space is insufficient, in public spaces—that are regulated, licensed, managed, and monitored by the state. Ministries of religious affairs generally oversee the staffing, maintenance, and operation of mosques. At politically sensitive times, security agencies might lend a hand to observe preachers and watch those who gather outside of prayer time.

In theory, a ministry's control over Muslim houses of worship is nearly complete, with many Arab governments not recognizing mosques that they do not oversee. But the ability of states to monitor, staff, and maintain all mosques varies considerably. Unofficial or unrecognized mosques (or those recognized but not effectively overseen) are common, especially in more populous, fiscally strapped countries in the region.

### **Personal Status Law**

When religion offers guidance on family life, it often does so through state structures. (This is even true in the one Arab country that does not have an official religion, Lebanon; see box 1.) In most countries, personal status law is handled in courts that are simply a branch of the regular court system. However,

in a few countries—such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine—a completely distinct (though still official) court system, or set of systems for recognized sects, deals with marriage, divorce, and inheritance. For Arabs wishing to have such matters officially recognized, there is no way to avoid the monopoly of state structures. The codification of religious law in the realm of personal status can be contentious. Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, for instance, have all seen public debates in recent decades often focusing on sensitive issues, such as the rights of women and the mechanisms of divorce.

This framework does not exclude unofficial actors, however, who may be sought out for mediation or arbitration, especially in family disputes. Courts and other official actors, such as prayer leaders in mosques, have sometimes recognized the need for unofficial or nonbinding mediation, and they have sometimes offered such services or sought training for their personnel in family counseling or mediation.

## Lebanon: An Exception That Proves the Rules

**Nathan J. Brown**

Lebanon is the one state in the Arab world that does not have an official religion. But while the Lebanese arrangement is distinctive, it is hardly secular. Rather, it amounts to granting official status to various sects.

Lebanon's constitution not only avoids any mention of an official religion but, as amended in 1989, commits itself to the abolition of political "confessionalism."<sup>5</sup> Though confessionalism is not comprehensively defined in the text, it is understood as a system in which specific shares in state institutions are reserved for different religious communities and political arrangements are, effectively, negotiated among their leaders. Despite the commitment in the revised preamble to ending political confessionalism, the constitution's fine print suggests that religious sects will be recognized in matters of personal status (Article 9) and education (Article 10); that religious leaders can challenge the constitutionality of some laws connected with religion (Article 19); and that even after the current sectarian representation in parliament is abolished, sects will continue to be granted some form of representation in a newly created senate (Articles 22 and 24).

Today, the Lebanese state recognizes eighteen different religious communities—five Muslim, twelve Christian, and the Jewish community. Most have a leadership recognized by the state. There are fifteen sets of personal status laws and courts. In recent years, some Lebanese have launched legal campaigns for civil marriage, securing some limited victories. But for the most part, Lebanon's civil courts and its political authorities defer to the sectarian courts and allow them full autonomy.<sup>6</sup> The courts and religious leadership are thus organically linked to their own communities, but they speak with the power and authority of the Lebanese state on matters under their purview.

Other religious affairs are administered in a similar manner, by recognizing sectarian autonomy but also giving sectarian leaders a degree of state authority. Sunni Muslims, for instance, are governed by legislation

that recognizes their full independence in religious affairs and charity. The law effectively designates a single authority, the General Directorate for Islamic Religious Endowments, to administer endowments, mosques, and preaching in the community.<sup>7</sup>

Lebanon does have state schools, but many Lebanese prefer to enroll their students in private schools, which a majority of schoolchildren attend—and where religious affiliation is common. The multiconfessional nature of Lebanon makes it impossible for the state to teach religion. Moreover, even a unified account of Lebanese history is elusive, with the result that—as with other areas—schools are effectively licensed to develop their own set of teachings for each subject.

Unlike in most Arab countries, state broadcasting is relatively weak in Lebanon, with television and radio in particular largely consigned to the private sector.<sup>8</sup> The country appears anomalous in regional terms of the degree to which it allows communal autonomy. But that anomaly is not as severe as it first appears. It does not separate religion from the state so much as it folds religious leadership into the state apparatus and allows some religious leaders to speak with a measure of state authority. The effect is more cacophonous than coherent.

## Broadcasting

State-controlled radio and television in the Arab world are often full of religious programming. Quran readings, major congregational prayers, and religious lectures are a staple of the airwaves. For the most part, official broadcasters turn to official religious institutions for the content of their programming. This can include major mosques where heads of state might attend for important congregational prayers or where sermons are delivered by senior religious officials or scholars.

Starting in the 1990s, such state broadcasting was joined by satellite broadcasters, who often introduced alternative approaches to disseminating their messages. These broadcasters were backed by particular states seeking ways to reach across borders. In the first decade of this century, private broadcasters from a wide variety of perspectives entered the fray. Newer web-based media and social media outlets further increased the cacophony, with a particularly wide range of religious orientations and formats. Everything from call-in fatwa programs to inspirational studio discussions, and even religiously themed cooking and language instruction, attracted audiences. One outlet, Iqraa TV, began as a widely watched religious broadcaster in the 1980s, while beginning in the 1990s, the Egyptian religious scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi hosted an influential religious program addressing Islamic law on Qatar's Al Jazeera channel. But these stations have since been joined by legions of preachers, inspirational speakers, advice-givers, talk-show hosts, fatwa-givers, and more didactic broadcasters.

Official Islam still has a powerful voice, but it is now only one among many. Arab states continue to have many means of speaking authoritatively

on religion. Judges, muftis, scholars, ministers, and university officials all lay some claim to such authority. However, none can do so in an uncontested way. Indeed, the number of unofficial competitors has grown in recent years, as has their influence. However, the line between official and unofficial religion is sometimes difficult to draw, with unofficial leaders appearing on state-owned media and religious officials attempting to build a following through unofficial broadcasters and social media.

Just as notable is the diversity *within* the state apparatus. Officials often have differing orientations, overlapping or competing jurisdictions, clashing senses of mission, personal rivalries, and distinct institutional interests. These forces each pull hard, but not always in the same direction.

## Official Islam and Regime Islam

The Arab world's large official religious structures sometimes seem ubiquitous. When Arabs wish to pray, make pious donations, educate their children, or listen to the radio, it is often state employees and bodies that they encounter, even if there are sometimes ways to avoid them. Regimes in the region have considerable sway over official religious structures. However, the impact of this is, at best, mixed in terms of Arab regimes' ability to use unwieldy official religious institutions to achieve their security or policy objectives, or to bend the religious parts of the state apparatus to suit their own purposes. Even when a regime undertakes a reform widely seen as successful, such as Morocco's 2004 family law (see box 2), the motives and ramifications are complex.

Regimes generally have three concerns in the religious realm, all related to the nature of religious space as heavily regulated yet not completely controlled by the state. First, they wish to obtain support for their policies and ideologies. Second, they seek to prevent political opponents from using religious spaces to mobilize in pursuit of their own agendas. Failing that, they seek to monitor such activity. And third, in recent years especially, they have shown special concern about radical groups, some of which may be transnational in nature. In the current parlance of Western policy circles, Arab regimes view religion as a battleground to counter violent extremism and state religious institutions as a weapon they can employ.

### Administrative Oversight of Religious Structures

In attempting to use the state's religious presence to pursue these goals, regimes have a series of imposing—but also quite clumsy—tools. They can engage in administrative oversight of official religious structures, along with control over fiscal and personnel issues. Top religious officials—such as ministers of religious affairs, senior religious court judges, and state muftis—as well as senior educational officials are often directly appointed by a country's chief executive

or governing structure. Budgeting and hiring pass through high-ranking officials, enabling political and security vetting of religious personnel.

But these levers of control are difficult to use with precision. With so many religious institutions folded into state apparatuses, they are subject to control but also become constituencies and power centers in their own right. Moreover, they are not always coordinated, as different parts of the religious establishment find themselves making rival claims. Senior figures in official religious institutions risk losing credibility if they tailor their teachings to suit a ruler's whims. Lower-level courts, student bodies in state schools, and local preachers might not mechanically follow top-level guidance. In short, religiously discordant voices appear within state apparatuses themselves.

## Reasserting State Control Over Official Islam in Morocco

**Dörthe Engelcke**

Morocco's family law of 2004 is likely the most discussed law in the kingdom's history. The monarchy garnered considerable domestic and international praise for reinforcing women's rights. While the law improved women's formal legal status, attention to the context within which the reform took place suggests far-reaching repercussions for an ongoing effort to reform the religious sector.

The aim of this process of legal reform was twofold. It was geared toward reinstating state control, especially the king's authority, over the religious sector. It aimed also to modernize religious institutions so as to revive them and create a moderate official Islam that could be a motor for reform, not an obstacle to change.

The Casablanca terrorist attacks of May 2003 that killed forty-five people made it apparent that firm control over the religious sector was crucial for regime stability. The reform of the religious sector began immediately after the attacks. Two new departments were set up within the ministry of religious affairs: the department for mosques and the department for traditional education. The first is in charge of bringing mosques under tighter control, while the second controls the content of religious education.<sup>9</sup>

The 2004 family law reform was also an effort to consolidate the king's power over the religious sector. The monarch, who is referred to as the commander of the faithful (*amir al-muminin*), and who traces his lineage back to the Prophet Mohammad, is viewed as the highest religious authority in the country. The reform of 2004 was officially achieved through *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, carried out by the king himself. The king's claims to authority over family law are based on the legal code being perceived as Islamic law, and therefore not open to secularization. A report by the parliamentary Committee for Justice, Legislation, and Human Rights has claimed that the family law confirms the three pillars of the Moroccan system: "Islam, the democratic choice, and the institution of the commander of the faithful."<sup>10</sup>

The process of reinstating royal authority over official Islam was further consolidated by a 2011 reform of the constitution that specified that the Supreme Ulama Council, headed by the king, was the only institution in Morocco allowed to issue fatwas (Article 41). This reinforced the king's monopoly over religious opinions.

A further step toward reform of the religious sector was undertaken in education in order to revitalize the religious sector. Religious education had been in decline since the colonial period. This was the result of two principal factors. First, competition with modern schools, set up by the French colonial administration, devalued degrees issued by traditional religious schools. Second, after Morocco's independence, the monarchy attempted to devitalize traditional centers of Islamic learning such as the University of Al-Quaraouiyine. It did so by curtailing their academic ambitions in order to weaken the body of religious scholars, or *ulama*.

The state attempted to reverse this trend in the first decade of the century. In 2005, Dar al-Hadith al-Hasaniyya, a state institution for religious learning, underwent significant reform when its curriculum was amended. Since then, future imams have had to study non-religious subjects such as psychology, history, languages, logic, and communication. This reform was deemed necessary because graduates were seen as ill-equipped to manage the tasks arising in a changing social environment. Minister of Religious Affairs Ahmed Taoufiq declared that this reform would help halt the institution's decline.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in 2006, the Mohammadia League of Ulama (Al-Rabita al-Mohammadia lil-Ulama), an institution that focuses on religious research, replaced the prior League of Ulama of Morocco (Rabita des Ouléma du Maroc). After 2006, twelve research centers—among them a center for the study of Sufism and women's studies—were set up to produce high-level religious knowledge and to re-endow the state-controlled religious sector with an important role in addressing social problems.

A final aspect of religious sector reform has been the feminization of the religious field. Women have been admitted to the Supreme Ulama Council as well as local *ulama* councils. In 2006, the first class of female religious guides, or *murshidat*, graduated from a program initially hosted by the ministry of religious affairs. In 2015, the program moved to the newly created Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidins and Morchidates. *Murshidat* primarily provide religious instruction in mosques. This effort was aimed mainly at creating a nonviolent Islam and should not be confused with an attempt to spread Islamic feminism. Furthermore, a fatwa from the Supreme Ulama Council stated that the Imamate is reserved for men—in other words, women cannot lead Friday prayers.<sup>12</sup> This demonstrated the limits of reform, which has not challenged traditional interpretations of Islamic law.

Many of the recruited *murshidat* were members of Al-Adl wal-Ihsan, the Islamist Justice and Charity movement, the largest Islamist movement in Morocco. The members of the former women's circle of the movement are reputed to be among the best university students in Islamic studies. It also may have been that the state targeted members of Al-Adl to weaken their efforts to emancipate women within an Islamic framework, by recruiting the organization's members that are most active in this regard. To the authorities, emancipation should, if at all, happen only within a state-led framework.

Religious-sector reform in the 2000s touched on very different elements of the religious sector. Even though some of these reforms were portrayed as feminist projects such as the family law reform, these seemingly disparate efforts all shared one decisive element: they increased royal control over the religious sector. Religious-sector reform illustrates that the Moroccan monarchy's religious legitimacy operates not only on a belief in the sanctity of the monarch, but also requires royal control over official Islam.

Overall the reform has led to new divisions between religious institutions that have undergone reform and those, such as the sharia faculties of ordinary universities, that have not. Morocco needs to adopt a holistic approach to religious-sector reform that impacts all centers of religious learning, including the sharia faculties of universities if the aim is not only to achieve state control but also create a tolerant and moderate official Islam.

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For example, Saudi Arabia's CPVPV has periodically embarrassed the regime and has been reined in from time to time. An especially notable set of restraints in 2016 deprived it of some police powers. However, such public restriction of its role has been constrained by the regime's simultaneous wish to mollify important religious constituencies. While diminishing the visibility of the CPVPV, the restrictions on its police powers still allow it to engage in heavy monitoring.<sup>13</sup>

### **Supervising Local Religious and Education Officials**

Another tool available to regimes is the policing of lower-level religious or educational officials, which entails using the religious bureaucracy and the security apparatus to dictate the content of sermons or regulate what is said in classrooms. To carry out such surveillance comprehensively, however, is difficult and highly intrusive, as recent struggles in Egypt over control of mosques has shown. For instance, in recent decades, a stream of proclamations by Egyptian ministers of new monitoring initiatives suggests they have never been able to exercise the control they promised. Preachers and religious officials in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Palestine report that the state guidance they experience is often crudely applied and less than fully effective. High officials shape the content of what is said, to be sure, but not in a way that generally requires preachers to be mechanical mouthpieces. And when central control is detailed and effective, it can generate resentment. Generally, imams report that official concern tends to be episodic. It can also be very bureaucratic. Egyptian imams have said that the sternest and most specific language they have received about sermons concerns their time limit—and some have been disciplined for verbosity.<sup>14</sup> In 2016, an Egyptian imam confided that there was virtually no training or continuing education provided to preachers once they were placed in positions of responsibility.<sup>15</sup>

The Egyptian experience is hardly unique. Palestinian mosques have experienced heavy-handed management, but only on specific occasions. One

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**Another tool available to regimes is the policing of lower-level religious or educational officials.**

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Palestinian imam in Nablus interviewed in 2015 reported that under the rule of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority he was fairly free in what he could say, as long as he avoided obvious political subjects.<sup>16</sup> The same was true when Hamas formed the Palestinian government in 2006. Only the government of former prime minister Salam Fayyad, who served from 2007 to 2013, was highly restrictive, since it regarded mosques as Hamas-friendly turf. A worshipper in a major mosque in Ramallah complained that a Salafi preacher had been installed in his mosque, simply in an effort to find a credible religious figure not sympathetic to Hamas.<sup>17</sup>

In most countries, positive guidance, such as suggesting topics for sermons, tends to be vague, consisting of general themes (such as problems of youth) that need to be addressed. Negative guidance can be much more onerous. Some imams have reported visits from security officials, especially after delivering a sermon that was interpreted as being political. Moreover, the definition of what is deemed political can itself be very political. As one imam observed wryly after Egypt held a constitutional referendum in 2014 that was backed by the post-coup regime: “If I endorse the constitution, that is not political. But if I oppose it, that is political.”<sup>18</sup>

When more direct controls have been imposed, they have generated deep resentment. In interviews with several imams in Egypt after the overthrow of then president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, one imam from a small mosque in Cairo was close to tears in 2015 when describing how tightly he was being monitored.<sup>19</sup> Another, from the outskirts of Cairo, became visibly nervous when the conversation tilted in a political direction, before making a zipping motion over his mouth.<sup>20</sup> In 2016, a third imam, who served at a major Cairo mosque, sighed as he explained how the ministry of religious affairs, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Tourism all demanded a say in how the mosque was being administered. A religious official who sympathized with the new regime complained in 2014, “We definitely have to root out radical preachers. But we do not need an intelligence officer in every mosque.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Propagating Ideological Messages**

Finally, regimes can use state control of the religious apparatus to propagate ideological messages. School curricula, dictated by education ministries, are generally written in ways that are likely to be politically pleasing to rulers. But while religious curricula in the Arab world have drawn international criticism, the efficacy of the messages they contain is rarely probed. Saudi Arabian textbooks, for example, hew close to a Wahhabi interpretation in a manner that marks sharp divisions not merely between Muslims and non-Muslims, but even takes a strict line on what is held to be correct Muslim practice and belief. But most other state curricula include a far more generic view of religion, one that teaches the basics of beliefs, history, and practice while blending religion, nationalism, and good manners.<sup>22</sup> In conversations with graduates of various

school systems in the Arab world, one may hear as many comments about the ways in which students do not take religion seriously as a subject as about the content of instruction.

States also can promote their own religious messages in other ways. Two international efforts to do so were the Amman Message of 2004 and the Marrakesh Declaration of 2016.<sup>23</sup> Both were statements stressing inclusive themes along with strong denunciations of radicalism and violence in markedly religious language. These statements were formulated under the patronage of the hosting monarchs and included leading religious officials from throughout the Islamic world. Indeed, the broad participation achieved in Amman seems particularly impressive in light of the sectarian and polarized environment that prevails today, drawing as it did from an array of leading religious figures as well as non-official religious leaders and intellectuals. However, the effectiveness of the messages was limited. The consensus achieved may have been impressive then, but it was also short-lived.

A cynical reader might cite the pleasing but fairly general language of the declarations issued in Amman and Marrakesh and conclude that their main effect was to satisfy international audiences. However, it is likely that the exact opposite was true. In both cases, the impact was probably greater in the host countries. While references to the statements in other countries were rare, they are frequently cited by the Jordanian and Moroccan regimes, who seem eager to associate national pride with fairly liberal statements of religious themes and to enhance the prestige of their own religious establishments.

The credibility of official religious institutions is a matter that all regimes must consider carefully, as they use their control of such bodies to solidify their own rule. The paradox of official religious institutions is especially visible in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country. It is there that one can best examine a religious establishment that looms both largely and also often incoherently.

## The Struggle Over Religious Authority in Post-2013 Egypt

Egyptian regimes have steered religion in the public realm, but have habitually done so in an unsteady manner. This reality was distinctly visible in a number of controversies following the military coup of July 2013—touching on the control of mosques, “the renewal of religious discourse,” and the aforementioned disagreement over written sermons. This protracted series of episodes saw the Egyptian presidency, Al-Azhar, and the ministry of religious affairs each struggling to assert themselves in a guiding role, sometimes in coordination with each other and sometimes as rivals.

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**Regimes can use state control of the religious apparatus to propagate ideological messages.**

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### **Al-Azhar and the Crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood**

With a dominant presence in Egypt and carrying influence beyond its borders, Al-Azhar was a particularly significant player in these events. Its willingness to join the battle was a test of strength for various actors. The effect on the religious realm was real, but perhaps the dominant player in the end proved to be Al-Azhar itself. While it is a part of the state and has a leadership that is loyal to the regime, Al-Azhar still managed to assert a measure of autonomy and demonstrate that its closeness to the centers of power did not make it totally subservient.

Indeed, the 2011–2013 period greatly increased the desire of Al-Azhar’s leadership to protect its autonomy from the political sphere and consolidate its internal control. The institution gained tremendous nominal power—in the short-lived 2012 constitution, it was given a defined role in interpreting Islamic law that it had not requested—but it also viewed the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism as threats that it had to confront. It did so not only in relation to the Brotherhood-controlled presidency but also within Al-Azhar’s own student body and faculty.<sup>24</sup>

In the wake of Morsi’s removal from office, the official religious establishment found that it had become a battleground for what was taking place in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership was largely from outside the religious establishment, but the movement did have supporters within it. And some religious officials, even those suspicious of the Muslim Brotherhood, came to feel that the struggle taking place between the Brotherhood and the country’s new political leadership had become one between religion and secularism and, therefore, that it was necessary to take sides.

Al-Azhar’s top leadership was less torn, but still evinced reservations. Ahmad al-Tayyib, the sheikh of Al-Azhar, and therefore the figure at the head of its vast network of educational and scholarly institutions, sat beside then–field marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi when Sisi announced Morsi’s removal. However, in subsequent weeks, as Morsi’s supporters gathered in encampments and demanded his release and return to power, the Al-Azhar leadership, and Tayyib personally, called for dialogue and a peaceful resolution to the crisis. When the encampments were broken up by violent means, Tayyib absented himself from Cairo in what some observers took to be a silent protest against the new regime’s harshness.<sup>25</sup>

### **Sisi’s Efforts to Shape Religious Life**

In the following year, the Sisi regime continued to move against Muslim Brotherhood supporters throughout the religious establishment, dismissing them from positions of authority, seeking to end their influence over the educational curriculum,<sup>26</sup> and shutting down a strong protest movement among Al-Azhar students. While the largest national protests against Morsi’s overthrow

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**Egyptian regimes have steered religion in the public realm, but have habitually done so in an unsteady manner.**

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were suppressed in August 2013, protests continued on the Al-Azhar campus all throughout the following academic year. The regime responded with expulsions, arrests, and the deployment of a private security force. In fall 2014, the new academic year brought a particularly severe wave of repression that all but ended organized protests at the institution, but left even regime supporters affected. Today, it is uncommon to meet an Azhari who cannot tell of having friends, colleagues, or family members detained, wounded, or expelled.

At the time, Religious Affairs Minister Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa led a campaign to shut down unlicensed mosques, bar preachers who did not have official permission to preach, reorganize charitable and support activities undertaken by committees associated with leading mosques, and close mosques during periods between prayers.<sup>27</sup> Today, even supporters of the campaign acknowledge that its reach was incomplete, with the monitoring and staffing capacity of the ministry of religious affairs, even buttressed by security bodies, simply insufficient to implement the full control intended. While there have been complaints from religious officials and others about the heavy-handedness of the regime campaign, religious spaces in Egypt—especially mosques and broadcasters—are far more tightly controlled than they were a few years ago.

By the beginning of 2015, Sisi—by then Egypt’s president—felt bold enough to move beyond policing and control and seize the initiative. He waded into the realm of religious teachings when, before an audience of religious leaders at Al-Azhar, he spoke of the need to “renew religious discourse.”<sup>28</sup> The president’s words were strong—he warned his listeners that God and the world were watching them—but also very general. It was clear they were aimed at religious thinking that Sisi held responsible for promoting extremism, terrorism, and violence. However, it was not clear if his target was the so-called Islamic State, the Muslim Brotherhood, radicals within Al-Azhar’s own ranks, more traditionally minded scholars seen as obscurantist and ineffectual rather than threatening, or a combination of these.

The leadership of Al-Azhar itself was somewhat perplexed over how to respond. A direct call from the president was difficult to ignore, but many top officials did not welcome the hectoring tone of the comments from a figure with military rather than religious training.<sup>29</sup> Nor did Al-Azhar’s leadership feel the message needed to be directed at the institution. The call for experts and scholars to refute radical ideas, strengthen Al-Azhar’s curriculum, and interpret Islamic teachings in a manner appropriate for social needs was one the institution’s leadership had championed itself. When Sisi’s speech was followed by press criticism of prevailing religious discourse in Egypt, many members of Al-Azhar came to feel that their institution was facing unjustified attack.<sup>30</sup>

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Over the subsequent year, Egypt's leading religious institutions took up the idea of renewing religious discourse in a manner that echoed the president's words. Yet they did so in very different ways. In conferences and public statements, the ministry of religious affairs echoed the call with enthusiasm, with the minister seemingly anxious to prove himself to the regime. The Office of the State Mufti remained more guarded. The strongest and most detailed response came from the leadership of Al-Azhar, which embraced renewal but also strove to assert that this was already under way and best left to the experts within Al-Azhar itself. That is, rather than taking the president's request as a challenge to its way of doing things, officials at Al-Azhar, led by Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib himself, worked to appropriate the language in a manner that affirmed their own leadership.<sup>31</sup>

### **Egypt's Bureaucratic Struggle**

The barely hidden struggle among Egypt's religious institutions came into full public view in summer 2016 in the contest over written sermons. The minister of religious affairs issued a directive that all preachers in the country read from a single printed sermon authored by the ministry. This step caused enormous controversy. It did earn some support from those who argued that the level of sermons was unimpressive and that their length was excessive, but the real motivation seemed as much political as it pertained to the homilies themselves.

Even three years after the regime's efforts to bring about strong centralized control over religion, officials acknowledged there were still Salafi, Muslim Brotherhood, and other preachers opposed to the regime able to make their voices heard. While officials within the religious establishment were divided over the call, there was no mistake where leading government officials stood. Gomaa heartily endorsed the effort, even mounting pulpits in major mosques holding a copy of the authorized sermon to deliver. The leadership of Al-Azhar initially voiced doubts about the move, arguing it would free preachers of any need to educate themselves and reduce them to automatons in the eyes of worshippers. Turning Sisi's words to its advantage, Al-Azhar added that a single official sermon would freeze religious discourse, not renew it.<sup>32</sup>

The battle, accordingly, turned into a bureaucratic fight over which institutional voice was supreme. And here the sheikh of Al-Azhar was able to outmaneuver the minister. He began by summoning the Body of Senior Scholars to endorse his position. Then the sheikh met with the president, but now not merely as the head of the country's most prestigious and constitutionally mandated voice of Islamic teaching, but backed by a group of scholars charged with speaking and acting authoritatively in doctrinal and personal matters. The one-on-one meeting between the two men was followed by a second in which the sheikh, now acting with clear presidential backing, met with the religious affairs minister. Gomaa tried to save face by making the written sermons not obligatory, but he had clearly lost in the unusually public confrontation. It soon

became clear that the clash was not over. Sermons might be delivered without an official text (though admittedly under the watchful eye of the Ministry of Interior), but Al-Azhar and the ministry of religious affairs renewed their dispute within days over who was responsible for renewing religious discourse.<sup>33</sup>

The struggle and its outcome may have provided a rare window into the kinds of disagreements that occur on a regular basis in Egypt's official religious domain, but also in the Arab world generally. Rumor mills are often replete with accounts of personal, institutional, and doctrinal rivalries among key official religious actors in most countries of the region. Just as interesting was the result. The minister of religious affairs, a member of the cabinet and serving at the pleasure of the president—a figure willing to identify with the president's policies, rhetoric, and priorities—was still bested by the sheikh of Al-Azhar, a figure also close to the regime but far more autonomous in substance than other branches of the Egyptian state. Their struggle illustrated how official religious institutions are not merely tools of the regime but also arenas of conflict. It also showed these entities as having a sense of institutional mission and interests, sometimes different from each other and, while generally in line with the regime, still distinct from it.

In critical matters, not least obstructing mosques from becoming focal points for opposition mobilization and activity, state religious institutions in Egypt provide critical support. But the path from a ruler's interests to institutional outcomes is not always smooth. Some institutions have separate priorities, while efforts to enhance their effectiveness and credibility often increase their autonomy—and thus their ability to pursue separate agendas and even provide some limited, protected space for dissident groups within their own ranks. And when official religious actors engage with opponents, they often do so in a manner that treats their ideas seriously and might even incline in their direction. Official religious institutions and Islamist organizations may be political opponents, but they are also often ideological cousins.<sup>34</sup> In short, by building institutions with a wide reach and allowing them some measure of specialization and autonomy, the state apparatus shows it is not a coherent body. Rather, it is one that can express many different interests, orientations, and voices—even, on occasion, some opposed to the regime.

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**Official religious institutions and Islamist organizations may be political opponents, but they are also often ideological cousins.**

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## The Crisis of Credibility in Official Religious Institutions

Regimes in Arab states can use their governments' powerful presence in the official religious realm to pursue security, policy, or ideological objectives. Even a push for so-called moderation or tolerance often has clear pro-regime overtones (see box 3). However, regimes can manipulate the religious sector at

best quite clumsily because the authority of official religious institutions is not unchallenged. Indeed, official religious institutions do not always serve regime interests efficiently, even when placed in the hands of supporters. Heavy-handed state actions can often undermine the credibility of official religious representatives, becoming self-defeating over the long run.

## The Uncertainty of Enforced Tolerance in Oman

**Anelle Sheline**

Oman's religious sphere is distinctive in two respects. The state gives special emphasis to tolerance and it also exerts greater control over the religious sphere than in most other Arab countries. These features are not unrelated.

Oman's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs conducts similar activities as its counterparts in other Arab countries. It regulates religious spaces, pays the salaries of mainstream Muslim preachers and imams, and contributes to the content of religious education in public schools. However, unlike many other countries where unofficial religious actors compete with the mouthpieces of official Islam, the Omani state has effectively monopolized religious discourse. Few civil society organizations are permitted and political parties, religious or otherwise, are prohibited. The level of control exerted over religious actors is more comprehensive than in many other Arab countries due to Oman's small population, oil wealth, and the sultan's position as an absolute monarch. In this, it is similar to the other small Gulf Cooperation Council states.

In recent years, a narrative of religious tolerance has emerged as a major theme for the Omani state. The regime uses its monopoly over official religious discourse to promote an image of Oman as uniquely supportive of religious freedom. For instance, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs commissioned a film called *Religious Tolerance*, which portrays Oman's Islamic pluralism and tolerance of non-Muslim faiths. It also produces a magazine called *Al-Tafahum* (Understanding) that promotes Muslim and interfaith religious dialogue, as well as a campaign called "Act for Tolerance," which includes T-shirts, Twitter posts, and a traveling exhibit.<sup>35</sup>

The ministry's claims of tolerance are not mere propaganda. Indeed, they are largely corroborated by the State Department's International Religious Freedom Report of 2015,<sup>36</sup> which confirms that non-Muslims worship freely in homes and designated areas. In contrast to most other Arab countries, the ministry brings Christian and Jewish leaders to speak at the Grand Mosque in the capital of Muscat. Oman has experienced no acts of jihadi violence on its soil, nor have any Omanis been recorded fighting for the Islamic State. Conversations with Omanis demonstrate that they view religious tolerance as a key part of their national identity.

Official Islam in Oman dovetails well with the U.S. policy agenda of promoting religious freedom and combating violent extremism. Officials at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs have suggested that Oman could serve as a model for other countries struggling with sectarian tensions and violent

extremism. However, two factors make Oman unlikely to become a regional religious leader: Ibadism and authoritarianism.

First, Oman is unique in that its form of official Islam is neither Sunnism nor Shiism, but Ibadism. Outside Oman and small enclaves in Africa, Ibadism is largely unknown or misunderstood. Oman's official position is that tolerance is the result of the Ibadi religious tradition, combined with trade-based cosmopolitanism. Because Ibadis have historically been a religious minority, Ibadism permits practices that allow for more effective coexistence with non-Ibadi Muslims, including marriage and inheritance. But Oman's official Ibadism makes it less likely to be perceived as a model by other states.

The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs claims that heritage, not calculation, drives Oman's official tolerance, but it may also defuse domestic sectarian tensions. Although Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said is Ibadi, Sunni Omanis likely outnumber Ibadis. No actual count is permitted, and the official estimate is that Ibadis constitute about 75 percent of citizens.<sup>37</sup> However, unofficial sources say Ibadis make up closer to 45 percent of the population.<sup>38</sup> The country's 1984 Publications and Publishing Law forbids writing anything that would "sow discord among members of society," which journalists understand to mean sectarian differences.<sup>39</sup> However, regional sectarian tensions could make such identities more salient.

Second, even if Oman could successfully package its tolerance in a more generic form of Islam, the Omani state's monopolization of religious discourse is a pitfall rather than a strength. In contrast to the multiple unofficial religious actors who compete for influence in many other Arab countries, the Omani government has successfully suppressed alternative sources of religious authority through censorship and authoritarian rule. Oman's promotion of tolerance and its immunity from extremism may not last indefinitely, especially to the extent that both depend on political quietude bought with diminishing oil reserves. In addition, the next sultan is unlikely to enjoy the same support as the current leader, Sultan Qaboos, who has successfully taken credit for Oman's petroleum-fueled prosperity. As a result, current levels of control might not be sustainable. Oman's unified religious discourse could give way to a multitude of views, some of which may be significantly less tolerant.

The fragmentation of religious authority in Arab countries is sometimes viewed as problematic. However, Oman demonstrates that a religious discourse imposed by force, even one espousing values of tolerance, may not be a long-term solution.

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It is not only rulers who face constraints and difficult choices. The way in which religious authority has operated and presented itself in recent years has aggravated problems for official religious actors in Arab states. While dominant in officially sanctioned pulpits, broadcasts, and classrooms, and on officially sanctioned occasions, official religious institutions are not the only places to talk about religion in the Arab world. Discussion takes place in many additional spaces where a variety of voices can be heard. Newer communications

technologies and more traditional mediums (and often the two combined) allow for unofficial voices to make themselves heard on matters of religion. Authority does not easily move from one medium to another. Those authorized to mount the pulpit do not necessarily dominate the airwaves; those who

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**The way in which religious authority has operated and presented itself in recent years has aggravated problems for official religious actors in Arab states.**

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write textbooks or issue judgments do not necessarily command wide Facebook followings. Religious authorities in the region, even when competing against one another, do so on different playing fields.

Many official religious leaders—deans of religious faculties, muftis, and judges—may voice inclusive sentiments and express their horror at violence and extremism. But when they do so, they are regarded—inside their own

countries to be sure, but especially outside of them—as state officials as much as they are religious authorities. They will not be viewed as standing apart from the regime governing their political system. Moreover, they may also be regarded by many younger residents of a region sensitive to a growing generation gap as embodying an older generation—co-opted, ineffective, dated, and authoritarian.

There is no single public square in the Arab world, but a whole array of arenas of contest and argument, many of which are difficult to follow. And power and authority are generally not transferable across spheres. Some of the most influential religious leaders in the Arab world today are more media personalities than they are heads of organizations or venerated institutions. They communicate through call-in programs, Tweets, Facebook posts, and public rallies. These new preachers, as they are sometimes called, are all over the political map (and some stay off the map by avoiding political topics). Other respected religious authorities argue more through the traditional tools of learned treatises or well-reasoned fatwas. The Muslim Brotherhood learned over the course of decades to make its influence felt through a social presence and disciplined organizations. Salafists gather around venerated teachers, focusing on close textual study and correct religious practice. And some religious actors engage primarily in action, which can vary tremendously from charity work to spectacular violence.

Thus, a legally authoritative position does not necessarily confer doctrinal or moral authority. Official institutions occupy a wide variety of spaces in the religious, educational, and legal realms.<sup>40</sup> But they are often challenged. Therefore, in order to enhance their positions, official institutions pursue two strategies.

First, they attempt to adopt new techniques and methods in order to affirm their relevance. The ministry of religious affairs in Kuwait, for instance, has established new forms of almsgiving that have gone beyond charitable donations for individual families in need to include developmental projects designed to benefit communities. Such an approach attracts more voluntary donations.<sup>41</sup> Other ministries in the region have engaged in similar efforts. Some mosques

and sharia courts have trained personnel in family counseling and mediation in order to present a friendly face to troubled spouses. Fatwa-issuing bodies have set up hotlines, websites, and other user-friendly ways of allowing the devout to seek guidance. And Al-Azhar has tried to train younger scholars able to project more youthful, less stodgy personas so they could participate in public discussions.<sup>42</sup>

A second path is for official religious institutions to use whatever autonomy they have to enhance their credibility. They emphasize that however much they might operate within the existing order they are not automatic tools of the regime. Indeed, regimes are not always hostile to such a strategy. It allows them to bring potential dissidents into the ranks of official institutions where they are subject to discipline and oversight. The effect can be to create points of entry for more independent movements within the ranks of the official religious establishment.

There are many examples of such conduct throughout the Arab world. For example, Kuwait's ministry of religious affairs has traditionally been seen as friendly to the country's Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, Jordan's teachers—especially but not exclusively those specializing in Arabic or religion—have been viewed as dominated by Islamists, to the extent that the regime has consistently blocked the formation of a teachers' union.<sup>43</sup> In Saudi Arabia, many of the most strident voices have found perches in the country's universities and religious establishment, protected to a limited extent by the loyalty of the leaders of those institutions to the ruling family.<sup>44</sup> Egypt's Al-Azhar has been politically divided since July 2013 over the country's military-backed regime and the measures it has taken against Islamists. As one Azhari official explained, when he was offered a position it set off a debate among his friends about whether, by accepting, he would be dishonoring those killed in the ruthless suppression of demonstrations in August 2013.<sup>45</sup> While he himself seemed loyal to the regime, the social pressure was sufficient to make him reluctant to accept the post.

The autonomy of official religious institutions has other costs for regimes besides making religious officials unruly supporters. It can turn the leadership of these institutions into lobbyists for the religious sector. While religious officials generally remain loyal to their respective regimes, calm dissident voices propagate a nonchallenging discourse and even toe the official ideological line as they advocate for their institution's own interests and sense of mission. Al-Azhar has asserted a right of cultural censorship in Egypt, Jordan's sharia courts retain the latitude to draft personal status legislation, and the Saudi religious establishment has made the education curriculum one of the most difficult matters for the regime to adjust.

Regimes, for their own part, are faced with what must seem to them a cruel dilemma, or at least one that is difficult to manage. They can allow some

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pluralism and autonomy, enhancing their monitoring ability, raising the credibility of top officials, and providing a measure of protected space to their critics. Or they can be far more intrusive—such as in Egypt and Jordan, where there has been an effort to shut down congregational prayer in smaller mosques and gather all Friday worshippers in a smaller number of more central locations. However, this risks pushing dissidents into underground organizations and perhaps transforming grumbling critics into seething opponents. It is not liberalism or piety that induces regimes to give official institutions a longer leash, but knowledge of the problems that an overabundance of control can bring with it. Even the former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's regime conceded considerable autonomy from state supervision to the Hawza in Najaf, which is made up of leading Shia seminaries and seminarians, so long as it stayed away from political concerns.

## Shaping Islam at an International Level

Religious establishments in the Arab world began to attract international attention after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. Some came to be viewed as protective of radicalism. The Saudi religious hierarchy drew particular attention not simply for its domestic role, but also for lending financial, institutional, and doctrinal support to Salafi approaches that could turn in a sectarian and jihadi direction.

However, with the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, a good deal of the focus shifted to enlisting religious establishments as allies in the effort to counter violent extremism. During an October 2014 visit to Cairo, then–U.S. secretary of state John Kerry articulated the new approach. In outlining the different roles that could be played in combating the Islamic State, the secretary singled out the official Saudi and Egyptian religious institutions as essential participants in such a campaign:

The coalition required to eliminate [the Islamic State] is not only, or even primarily, military in nature, and we welcome everybody's contribution to that effort. Particularly, the effort to counter [the Islamic State's] false claims about Islam, a peaceful religion. There is nothing about [the Islamic State], as the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia said, or the council that issues fatwas said, nothing whatsoever about [the Islamic State] that is related to Islam.

So all of these components have to work together in lockstep. And General John Allen, who is coordinating this—not commanding the military, but coordinating the overall coalition effort—just visited Egypt and other partner countries to make certain that all of the pieces are coming together. As an intellectual and cultural capital of the Muslim world, Egypt has a critical role to continue to play, as it has been, in publicly renouncing the ideology of hatred and violence that [the Islamic State] spreads, and we are very appreciative for the work that Egypt is already doing.

This was all a central topic of our discussion in Jeddah just last month, and again today in my conversations with [Egyptian] Foreign Minister [Sameh] Shoukry, and it is really important that the religious establishments at Al-Azhar and [the Office of the State Mufti] are both fully supportive and understanding of the need to draw these distinctions with respect to religion.<sup>46</sup>

The attraction of this approach to Western diplomats is clear. Official religious establishments are state actors, sometimes with a sense of responsibility for representing religion externally as well as internally. Thus, these are organizations that state-to-state diplomacy naturally thrusts forward as interlocutors. Almost all official religious leaders are authentically horrified (and, of course, threatened) by the rise of more radical movements. Regimes, notably in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both traditional security partners of Western countries, are likely to welcome the idea of holding up their top religious officials as models and moral guides.

The policy of backing existing regimes, and of endorsing their attempts to garner international support by putting their own religious establishments forward as bulwarks against extremism, enjoys bipartisan support in the United States. After President Donald Trump met with Egypt's President Sisi in April 2017, the White House described the meeting as follows:

President Trump and President al-Sisi agreed to continue coordinating military, diplomatic, and political efforts to defeat terrorism. Both leaders recognized that terrorism cannot be defeated solely by military force and pledged to explore ways to address the economic, social, political, and ideological factors that fuel terrorism. President Trump applauded President al-Sisi's courageous efforts to promote moderate understandings of Islam, and the leaders agreed on the necessity of recognizing the peaceful nature of Islam and Muslims around the world.<sup>47</sup>

But those who follow this path are likely to be disappointed. Most Western governments are poorly structured for relationships with official religious institutions in the Arab world, having no precise equivalent of state muftis or ministries of religious affairs. Though European political systems are more likely to have official religious leaders, they tend to view issues through a domestic prism, understanding church and state issues in the Arab world by using European history and institutions as a reference point. Not only does that mean there are no clear peer-to-peer religious interlocutors, it also means that Western officials find themselves in unfamiliar waters when navigating religious politics in the Arab world.

And these waters are simultaneously stormy and murky. It is difficult to tell one side from the other—especially because the struggle over religious authority has so many different and shifting sides. For instance, Muhammad Abu Faris, once identified as a firebrand in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood—and indeed someone who spent time in prison after visiting the funeral tent for the former al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—was extremely

strident in his denunciations of the Jordanian regime. However, in a 2014 interview, he also offered nothing but prayer, patience, and political work as a solution for pious Muslims troubled by their political environment and made clear his disapproval of the Islamic State.<sup>48</sup>

Salafi jihadism and far more quietist versions of Salafism are nearly opposite in their political impact, but not all that far apart doctrinally. They differ primarily in their political sensibilities about the legitimacy of existing rulers, perhaps edging into doctrinal differences in their views of their duties toward a legitimate ruler. The Saudi approach to Islam, for example, has been very supportive of the ruling family. That is why the religious establishment is a pillar of the regime. However, it shares an unmistakable doctrinal overlap with some of the more radical Sunni groups in the region, and the charge that it has incubated some radicalism within its own ranks has a strong foundation.

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In a similar vein, one could listen to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a populist, pro-Muslim Brotherhood firebrand in Qatar, and mistake him for a religious leader associated with the post-coup order in Egypt when talking in the exact same way about *wasatiyya*, or centrism.<sup>49</sup> Both Qaradawi and Egypt's grand mufti, for instance, hold forth about *fiqh al-awlawiyyat*—meaning the jurisprudence of priorities—which denounces the pursuit of minutiae through the extreme literalism of Salafi approaches, thereby missing what are held to be the underlying ethical sensibilities of Islamic law.

However, when it comes to politics, Qaradawi and Egyptian religious officials fall back on mutually insulting language. Qaradawi has also been supportive in some instances of suicide bombings and has supported the Muslim Brotherhood in its struggle against the Egyptian regime. The first position has led some countries to ban him, while the second made Egypt's ambassador to the United States lump him together with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.<sup>50</sup> Qaradawi is a product of, and doctrinally close to, Al-Azhar, and his standing as a lightning rod comes largely from his politics and his sometimes controversial manner in public speech, and much less from his voluminous scholarly writings.

To expect non-Muslim officials to maneuver through this thicket is unrealistic. That would involve building appropriate alliances and relationships, wading into descriptions of what constitutes suitable religious teaching and what is to be discouraged or is simply wrong, and passing judgment on the qualifications and standing of individuals and institutions. It might embroil non-Muslim officials in battles over religious interpretations, and also among states, each of which may sponsor different religious actors and viewpoints.

And even if non-Muslims were able to make it through these complications, it would likely produce few benefits. State religious institutions, and the regimes that have some level of oversight and control over them, have limited

ideological tools at their disposal to confront radical Islamists. Moreover, their priorities are somewhat different than those of actors from outside the region. Existing Arab regimes wish to eliminate radical challengers, but they also work to manage complex overlapping bureaucracies and pious constituencies; patrol public space; regulate, deter, and sometimes repress opposition; and provide a level of material and moral services to citizens. They are as likely to view religious establishments as tools to use domestically and constituencies to mollify as they are to deploy them in regional ideological wars.

In turn, the religious institutions themselves are anxious to augment their authority, protect their budgets, receive appropriate deference, safeguard timeless truths, guide the faithful, prevent perceived moral corruption, and jockey against one another. To those ends, they seek to persuade individuals susceptible to radical messages to follow a calmer path. But they also work to discourage and sometimes suppress cultural expressions, religious sentiments, and political and social movements unconnected with violence or extremism. Indeed, such actions can lead to the very intolerance that official religious institutions claim to oppose.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, those who expect regimes to counter radicalism through their control of the state religious apparatus underestimate the complexity of the issue. Regimes have more far-reaching goals than combating specific groups, and the tools at their disposal are awkward and of uncertain utility. Religious establishments are complex structures with broader agendas, some of which may not be that closely aligned with what international actors pursue. For those who seek to defeat radical ideologies, aligning with authoritarian regimes and the religious establishments associated with them is a feasible and attractive diplomatic task. Over the long term, however, it may offer only the illusion of a solution.

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## Conclusion

The strong presence of official religious institutions throughout Arab societies makes such institutions tempting political allies. Regimes often regard them as instruments, albeit imperfect ones, by which they can counter their political adversaries. Foreign governments, too, view them as potential partners in the fight against Islamic extremism. However, the reality is far less clear-cut. Official religious establishments are highly complex structures with broad and sometimes conflicting agendas, so that attempts to steer them in a particular direction can be heavy-handed and awkward. Indeed, some of these agendas may, in some cases, not be that closely aligned with what regimes wish to pursue over the short term.

This reality creates a dilemma for regimes, which can grant official religious institutions greater autonomy, enhancing their monitoring ability and raising the credibility of religious officials. However, in doing so, regimes lose some

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**Whatever choice regimes make, they leave religious institutions caught among their own priorities, interests, and missions, as well as the demands of competing constituencies.**

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control and allow their critics space for organizing, sometimes from within the confines of official religious institutions. Alternatively, regimes can be far more intrusive and seek to increase their sway over religion. However, all this does is make religious officials appear to be functionaries of the regime, undermining their standing and hardly serving the interests of those in power. Neither path is a panacea. Whatever choice regimes make, they leave religious institutions caught among their own priorities, interests, and missions, as well as the demands of competing constituencies in society, the state, and the international community.

## Notes

1. The phrase is from Jocelyn Cesari, in Jocelyn Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 110–111.
2. For some useful historical background, see Kenneth J. Cuno, *Modernizing Marriage: Family, Ideology, and Law in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015).
3. On the current role of fatwas, see Hussein Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). I have also written on them in Nathan Brown, *Arguing Islam After the Revival of Arab Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
4. The site can be found here: “The Official Website of the Office of His Eminence Al-Sayyid Ali Al-Husseini Al-Sistani,” the Office of His Eminence Al-Sayyid Ali Al-Husseini Al-Sistani, May 3, 2017, <http://www.sistani.org/english/>.
5. “The Lebanese Constitution,” the Office of the Lebanese Presidency, May 3, 2017, <http://www.presidency.gov.lb/English/LebaneseSystem/Documents/Lebanese%20Constitution.pdf>.
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8. William Rugh, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 195.
9. Chafik Laâbi, “Etat et Religion, Comment Lire les Changements Annoncés,” [State and religion, how to Read the announced changes], *La Vie Eco*, May 7, 2004, <http://www.lavieeco.com/news/politique/etat-et-religion-comment-lire-les-changements-annonces-5330.html>.
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11. Malika Zeghal, *Islamism in Morocco: Religion, Authoritarianism, and Electoral Politics*, translated by George Holoch (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2008), 250.
12. “Morchidates: Le Conseil des Oulémas tranche” [Female religious guides : the ulama council Decides] *L’Economiste*, May 29, 2006, <http://www.maghress.com/fr/leconomiste/70877>.

13. Hala al-Dosari, "Saudi Arabia's Struggle for Sunni Leadership," *Sada* (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 7, 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64501>.
14. A revelation made multiple times in private conversations between the author and official preachers in Cairo between 2012 and 2016.
15. Personal conversation, Cairo, 2016.
16. Personal interview, Nablus, January 2015.
17. Personal interview, Ramallah, January 2015.
18. Personal interview, Cairo, 2014.
19. Personal interview, Cairo, 2015.
20. Personal interview, Cairo, 2015.
21. Personal interview, Cairo, 2014.
22. Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett (editors), *Teaching Islam: Textbooks and Religion in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007).
23. For the Amman Message, please see the following website for a variety of documents (such as supporting fatwas) connected with the common message and associated meetings and declarations: "The Amman Message," the Official Website of the Amman Message, September 10, 2016, [www.ammanmessage.com](http://www.ammanmessage.com). For the Marrakesh Declaration, please see: "The Marrakesh Declaration," the Marrakesh Declaration, September 10, 2016, <http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/marrakesh-declaration.html> for the text.
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25. On Al-Azhar's rhetoric and stance during this period, see Basma Abd al-Aziz, *The Power of the Text: The Discourse of Al-Azhar and the Crisis of Governance* (in Arabic) (Cairo: Sefsafa Publishing House, 2016).
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29. I base this conclusion on a series of informal conversations with religious officials and scholars in Egypt in the year following the president's speech.
30. I heard this view from Azharis with whom I spoke throughout 2015.
31. See, for instance, the sheikh's November 2015 speech on renewing religious discourse. "Ghorfeit al-Akhbar| Kelmeit Shaykh al-Azhar fey Iftetah Mo` tamar 'Ro` yeit al` Ema wa al` Olamaa fey Tajdeed al-Khetab al-Deeny" [The Speech of the Sheikh of Al-Azhar Opening the Conference: "The View of Imams and Scholars on the Renewal of Religious Discourse], YouTube video, posted by "eXtra News," November 14, 2015, accessed September 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhH7NLtCtAQ>.
32. See, for instance, Khaled Musa and Mohammed Antar, "Kibar al` ulama tuqarrar bi-l-ijma` rafid `al-khutba al-maktuba' [Senior Scholars' Decide by Consensus Rejection of the 'Written Sermon], *Al-Shuruq*, July 26, 2016, <http://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=26072016&cid=c0f893d3-31e9-4131-8d3d-5609c10485fb>.

33. Said Hijazi and Abdul Wahab Issa, “Marakiz al-awqaf li-“al-khitab al-dini” tujaddid al-khilaf ma’ a al-azhar al-sharif” [Awqaf Centers for ‘Religious Discourse Reignite the Dispute with Al-Azhar al-Sharif], *Al-Watan*, August 31, 2016, <http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/1372009>.
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35. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Oman: July-December 2010 International Religious Freedom Report*, U.S. Department of State, September 13, 2011, [https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168273.htm](https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168273.htm).
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38. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “Oman 2015 International Religious Freedom Report,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258040.pdf>.
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40. See Sarah Feuer, *State Islam in the Battle Against Extremism*, Washington Institute Policy Focus, June 2016.
41. Personal interview, Kuwaiti Ministry of Awqaf official, Kuwait City, December 2011.
42. Personal conversation with Azhari official, Cairo, 2015.
43. I discuss the issue briefly in Brown, *Arguing Islam*, 234–235.
44. Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
45. Personal conversation with official from Al-Azhar, Cairo, 2016.
46. In his original comments, Kerry used the acronym ISIL, for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, not the term “the Islamic State.” John Kerry, “Remarks With Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry After Their Meeting,” U.S. Department of State, October 12, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/10/232898.htm>.
47. “Readout of President Donald J. Trump’s Meeting With President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi of Egypt,” the White House, April 3, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/03/readout-president-donald-j-trumps-meeting-president-abdel-fattah-al-sisi>.
48. Personal conversation with Muhammad Abu Faris, Amman, October 16 2014.
49. *Wasatiyya* is a term that has become widespread over the past three decades. Its meaning varies according to the user but generally suggests that Islamic law is a set of divine commands that are designed to serve the needs of individual Muslims as well as the entire community. Interpretation in legal scholarship should therefore be guided by an effort to find the most appropriate rule for the time and place the legal question arises and not simply the strictest or most demanding one.
50. Yasser Reda, “Countering the Pontiff of Terror,” Embassy of Egypt, Washington, D.C., August 25, 2016, <http://www.egyptembassy.net/ambassador-media/countering-the-pontiff-of-terror>.
51. As Sarah Feuer has observed, “the drive to unify the teachings of state-linked religious institutions can sometimes lead to the very intolerance these institutions are ostensibly condemning.” See Feuer, *State Islam in the Battle Against Extremism*, 10.

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