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The Sunni Religious Establishment of Damascus: When Unification Creates Division

Laila Rifai

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Summary

The uprising in Syria, which began in 2011 and is ongoing, has altered the Sunni Muslim religious landscape of the capital, Damascus, beyond recognition. Ironically, both the regime and the Islamic opposition have achieved an important goal: The regime has fashioned, and asserted control over, a religious establishment previously made up of disparate and competing fiefdoms. Meanwhile, long fractious Damascene religious institutes and individuals, now forced into exile, have united within a single opposition organization, the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC).

Key Themes

For the first several decades of Baathist rule in Syria, starting in 1963, the regime generally sought to prevent the creation of any kind of cohesive Sunni Muslim religious establishment. Instead, it preferred to play Islamic institutions off against each other and to allow the favored entity of the day a measure of autonomy.

The regime began to reverse course in 2008, a process that accelerated in the years following 2011 and has since reached completion. Today, there is a Damascus-based Sunni religious establishment that bears the imprimatur of the Syrian state.

The regime's fashioning of such a Sunni religious establishment entailed a purge of several Islamic institutions deemed insufficiently subservient. Many of these institutions' leading figures have since resurfaced in exile as members of the SIC—to date the largest and most broad-based Syrian religious opposition organization.

Findings

The regime may have succeeded in imposing its will on the myriad Islamic entities (mosques, educational institutions, and charities) of Damascus and subsequently fusing them into a cohesive religious establishment, but the latter suffers from a glaring lack of popular legitimacy.

The Islamic opposition, for all its success in creating a broad-based movement and winning international recognition, is hamstrung by the fact that it operates largely in exile.

The religious sphere in Rural Damascus Governorate is poised to become a political battleground. This is where a new cohort of Sunni clerics has become prominent. Both the regime and the SIC view such a class of independent-minded figures as a valuable asset.

The Sunni Religious Landscape Before 2011

Syria, whose majority is Sunni Muslim, was under French Mandate from 1923 until 1946.¹ During that period, Sunni religious authorities in Damascus enjoyed a degree of institutional and economic independence from the state. This independence, a legacy of Ottoman rule, saw prominent *ulama*, or religious scholars, act as intermediaries between ordinary people and state authorities, which granted them a margin of autonomy and enabled them to maintain their influence over society, particularly in Damascus.²

The *modus vivendi* lasted until Syria's independence in 1946. Thereafter, successive regimes sought to organize and institutionalize these religious authorities through legislation. The process culminated in 1961 with the passing of a law establishing the Ministry of Religious Endowments. But it effectively ended two years later with the Baath Party's ascension to power.³ The Baath relied on a security apparatus to control and censor the clergy by placing their Friday sermons under strict surveillance, requiring them to obtain approval to establish charities or engage in fundraising, and even obliging them to file reports on their activities. Pointedly, however, the Baath did not further institutionalize religious organizations. Two considerations underlay such a strategy. Because the Sunni urban elite (which effectively controlled the economy) would oppose top-down monopolization of their associations and institutions, the Baathists refrained from embarking upon such a project. They also had little desire to do so, given their Marxist-inspired belief that their social engineering programs would eventually give rise to a society that voluntarily rejected "regressive religious scholars."⁴

This marked a turning point in the modern history of Syria's Sunni religious establishment. Under the Baathist system, there was no longer an official, overarching religious authority. Nor was there a professional hierarchy of *ulama*, such as Egypt's Al-Azhar or Saudi Arabia's Council of Senior Scholars, to appoint and rank individual members. On the institutional level, the Baath regime did not set up a representative body or union for the country's *ulama* akin to those it created to monitor other sectors of society: writers, teachers, students, artists, women, farmers, and workers. Nor did the *ulama* become part of the state, integrated into the Ministry of Religious Endowments (apart from the latter's 200 to 300 or so staff). Instead, religious figures remained financially reliant on the private sector, particularly their own charitable foundations but also various merchants' associations, thus preserving their traditional financial independence as well as their administrative autonomy.⁵

This became the framework for relations between the *ulama* and the state as well as among the *ulama* themselves. The Damascus religious establishment became divided into entities—charities, Sufi orders, Sharia institutes, an official Sharia College that was part of Damascus University, and prominent individuals—at varying distances from the regime. Operating within the confines of a security

state that closely monitored collective action and organization, they were not unified under a single umbrella. Acting as rivals, they competed among themselves for influence. The regime also redirected the entities' attention to social, rather than political, affairs. This effectively brought an end to decades of political activity on the part of Islamic institutions—from organizing demonstrations to fielding candidates in parliamentary elections—and created resentment among the Sunni urban elite.

Following Hafez al-Assad's seizure of power in 1970 through an intra-Baath coup known as the Corrective Movement, both the regime and the army's officer corps came to be dominated by minority Alawites (an offshoot of Shiite Islam) and individuals of peasant origin.⁶ This development further angered the Sunni urban elite, who, in the late 1970s, began to throw their weight behind demonstrations, strikes, and riots organized by the Muslim Brotherhood, which sought to establish an Islamic state.⁷ In 1980, the Brotherhood launched an armed rebellion, and in October of that year, a group called the Islamic Front in Syria was founded in Saudi Arabia to support it.⁸ This constituted the most successful attempt to date to bring dissident *ulama* into a unified political body. Behind the initiative were the Brotherhood itself and around one hundred exiled clerics, including the leadership of the Zayd Group, a Damascus-based and merchant-backed Islamic education network that was opposed to the regime at the time.

But the project failed with the fall of the rebel-held city of Hama in 1982 and the subsequent defeat of the uprising. The Brotherhood moved closer to the secular opposition and helped establish the National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria, thereby fracturing the Islamic Front. With many of its members in Syria defecting amid the regime's attempts to quash the group as the 1980s progressed, the Brotherhood itself suffered a split. By the mid-1980s, the Islamic Front had fallen apart and the Syrian security services had forced what remained of the Brotherhood to go underground.

Despite the regime's weeding out of Islamists and suspected Islamists, it was careful to seek religious cover. The Baathists' capture of power in the 1960s had resulted in the rise of Ahmad Kuftaro, head of the Abu al-Nour Islamic Educational Complex (also known as the Kuftaro Complex) established by his father as well as a prominent sheikh of the Naqshbandi Sufi order in Damascus.⁹ He had already proven his loyalty to the Baath Party as the only member of the capital's *ulama* to support party candidate Riyad al-Maliki in the 1957 parliamentary elections. He also broke ranks with his peers by challenging the influential Sheikh Hasan Hanbaka al-Midani for the post of mufti of the republic.¹⁰ Kuftaro gained both the job and the favor of the government but in the process lost his symbolic status and legitimacy among broad segments of Syrian society. This meant that during the turbulence of the Brotherhood-led uprising of the 1980s, which challenged the regime's political and social legitimacy, the regime turned to a figure seen as more acceptable, relatively speaking, by the *ulama* and Sunni society at large: Mohammed Said al-Bouti.

Bouti was a graduate of both the local Al-Tawjih al-Islami Institute and Egypt's Al-Azhar University, making him well-versed in both traditional and modern Islamic scholarship. He also commanded respect beyond Syria's borders. Bouti came to the regime's aid at a critical moment. In exchange, his status was elevated. In addition to receiving permission to take over the pulpit of the Umayyad Mosque—the most prestigious Sunni post in Syria—he was granted hours-long audiences with then president Hafez al-Assad, a level of freedom of speech denied to most of his peers, and a weekly television show on the official Syrian station. Notably, Bouti proved able to mediate on behalf of prisoners and exiles, including senior members of the Brotherhood as well as leaders of the Zayd Group, who had been exiled over accusations of belonging to the Brotherhood and supporting its uprising.¹¹

In 2000, Hafez al-Assad died. As expected, Bouti led his funeral prayers. But the cleric's subsequent meeting with Assad's son and heir, Bashar, was the first and would be the last for some time. Bashar found himself at the helm of a more religious society than that of his father, and he wanted to chart a new course for himself. Bouti fell out of favor as Bashar selected new and unexpected allies drawn from the ranks of his sometime rivals at the Zayd Group, whose exiled leaders had been allowed to return to Syria in the 1990s.¹² Bashar also had to contend with then U.S. president George W. Bush's designation of Syria as part of an "axis of evil" in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks; the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003; and the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005 and subsequent ouster of Syrian forces from Lebanon—all of which threatened his regime. This spurred him to cultivate a relationship with a religious figure who enjoyed broader social legitimacy than Bouti. He found such a person in Osama al-Rifai, head of the Zayd Group, with whom he forged a strong bond.¹³

For their part, the *ulama* of Damascus continued to try to unify their ranks. They sought to resolve the issue of the religious scene's fragmentation by setting up big tent representative bodies whenever conditions permitted it. In 2004, Moaz al-Khatib, a cleric and former imam of Damascus's famed Umayyad Mosque, called for the establishment of a Union of Scholars, Imams, and Preachers.¹⁴ This harked back to the Association of Ulama (of which Khatib's father had been a member) established by reformist Sheikh Kamel al-Qassab, a former student of renowned Egyptian Islamic modernist Muhammad Abduh, in that it sought to unify the country's clergy and preachers in a single body with a clearly political nature. Among the basic demands enumerated in a proposed charter (not publicized at the time) were the restoration of public liberties; the release of political prisoners; the repeal of emergency laws, special courts, and arbitrary arrests; and the abolition of one-party rule.¹⁵ However, as most *ulama* were preoccupied with blunting secular cultural trends and limiting the opening up of society, Khatib's proposed project found few takers and never materialized.

A couple of years later, prominent Damascene *ulama* made another attempt at unity—one that went public and received official backing. April 2006 saw the founding congress of the League of Ulama of the Levant, an event attended by then minister of religious endowments Ziad al-Ayyubi and representatives of the main religious networks (Fatah, Zayd, and Midan), as well as Islamic scholar Mohammed Rateb al-Nabulsi and Bouti.¹⁶ According to Bouti, the new association would serve as a “reference” (*marjaiyya*) to protect Islam from external ideological threats and internal disputes. In other words, the association was not interested in political matters but rather aimed to strengthen the influence of the *ulama* in the face of secular cultural trends and factional squabbling. In any case, the association did not last. As with similar projects, internal divisions, manipulated by the regime, brought it to an end.

Essentially, when it came to Islamic entities and social currents, the regime would favor one group or set of *ulama* at the expense of another, according to its needs at any given moment. This meant that one rose to prominence for a time before falling from grace, with each group carving out its own geographic stronghold. In pursuing this approach, the regime proved able to manipulate the country’s religious sphere in an unobtrusive manner.¹⁷ From the regime’s perspective, the various Islamic entities and social currents granted the regime religious and political legitimacy in exchange for the preservation of conservative religious social norms, the elevation of their *ulama*, and any advantage they could obtain when it came to their rivalries. To stay relevant, the entities’ had to constantly exploit whatever space was temporarily given to them by the regime as part of its manipulative strategy. Yet even this limited maneuverability was soon to be circumscribed.

In September 2008, an explosion took place near an intelligence services building in Damascus. The regime claimed it was carried out by Fatah al-Islam, a jihadi group that had been active in Lebanon the previous year. A member of the group made a televised confession, apparently under duress, saying that his studies at Damascus’ Fatah Islamic Institute (until then not suspected of having any link to Fatah al-Islam) had played a role in pushing him toward jihadi ideology, due to the presence of “extremist Arab students” he met there. He said that Fatah al-Islam “gathered donations through charities.”¹⁸ Shortly thereafter, in a move widely seen as a response to the bombing, the regime replaced Ziad al-Ayyubi, minister of religious endowments and a Kufaro supporter, with Mohammed Abdulsattar al-Sayyed, the mufti of Tartous. Earlier that year, presumably at the behest of the Office of National Security, Sayyed had called for a return of state authority to the religious sphere, which he claimed included bodies that were “creating states within the state” and fomenting chaos.¹⁹ One of his key requests was the appointment, within the Ministry of Religious Endowments, of a deputy minister of religious education who would unify the religious curriculum. The request was now granted.

The regime proceeded to bring under its control several independent Islamic institutes and charities. Just three days after the blast, Sharia institutes, which teach Islamic law, were placed under the charge of the Ministry of Religious Endowments for “administrative, scholarly, educational, and financial” purposes.²⁰ In other words, they were partially nationalized. Though funding from private donors was still allowed, all donations had to be channeled through and approved by a committee headed by Syria’s grand mufti.

Furthermore, staff at the institutes were placed under the authority of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which gained the right to hire and fire them at will as well as the control over the institutes’ curricula. For the first time since the establishment of Sharia College in 1954, the ministry set up several of its own Sharia institutes, started training preachers, and vastly expanded its bureaucracy. Indeed, thanks to Presidential Decree 180, which was issued in 2009, the ministry multiplied its staff fifteen-fold.²¹ It was also renamed the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Religious Affairs. Clearly, the regime’s new goal was to institutionalize religious life via new laws and decrees that exploited security incidents and political fears, as in the case of the intelligence services bombing.

The second thrust of the regime’s new strategy vis-à-vis the religious sphere was to intensify its surveillance and control of clerics of all stripes and political tendencies and to repress those pursuing a semi-independent line. It shut down the Zayd Group’s Daawa television channel and closed the Islamic Studies Center founded by liberal Islamist sheikh and parliamentarian Mohammed Habash.²² The regime also disciplined several of Sharia College’s teachers for opposing, among other measures, a “Child’s Law” that raised the minimum age of marriage for girls. The National Security Office intervened to prevent the disaffected teachers from setting up an association for Sharia College graduates and banned them from traveling abroad.²³ Separately, Sayyed, the new minister of religious endowments and religious affairs, backed a successful coup within the Kuftharo Complex that made it even more subservient to the regime. Finally, coinciding with efforts to institutionalize the religious elite, measures were taken to decrease overt signs of religiosity in society, such as closing prayer rooms in shopping centers; banning popular religious bumper stickers; outlawing the *niqab*, the garment covering a Muslim woman’s head and body, in schools; and transferring more than 1,000 *niqab*-wearing school teachers to administrative positions.²⁴

Such was the general situation of the Sunni religious sphere in Damascus on the eve of the Syrian uprising. Security agencies had increased their repression of religious figures, a process that showed no sign of abating. At the same time, the regime was busy nationalizing these figures’ institutions and subsuming them into the newly expanded Ministry of Religious Endowments and Religious Affairs.

The Redrawing of the Sunni Religious Landscape Since 2011

The eruption of antiregime protests in early 2011 prompted contradictory reactions on the part of the various entities making up the Sunni religious landscape in Damascus. Not only did a division arise between those who stood by the regime and those who supported the protesters, but, in certain instances, the views of the leadership and rank-and-file of a single institution diverged. Moreover, even among those entities that endorsed the demands of the protesters, participation by their members in actual demonstrations varied significantly.²⁵

The Midan Group, an Islamic education network, endorsed the protesters' demands. In the upscale Mazzeh neighborhood, the landmark Shafii Mosque also became a locus of antiregime activity. Meanwhile, the Zayd Group adopted a wait-and-see approach but was prodded into supporting the protesters by its grassroots membership and arguably even more so by the regime itself, which dispatched thugs to beat up its sheikh, Osama al-Rifai, whom it considered insufficiently supportive of its repressive actions.²⁶

The Fatah Islamic Institute's leadership chose to support the regime. Significantly, however, several of its teachers and administrators, taking their cue from students, broke ranks and openly backed the protesters. The city's various Sufi orders experienced a similar phenomenon, with the clerics supporting the regime even as a good number of ordinary adherents joined the protests. The Kuftaro Complex saw barely any antiregime activity by its members, save for a small group calling itself "The Free Ones of the Sheikh Kuftaro Complex" (Ahrar Mujamma Sheikh Kuftaro).²⁷ For his part, Bouti, still officially the regime's top Islamic cleric, condemned the demonstrators harshly and repeatedly until he was assassinated in a mysterious explosion on March 21, 2013.²⁸

The regime did not spare religious figures who voiced their support for the protesters or whom it suspected of sympathizing with them. It entrusted the security services with the task of rounding up, imprisoning, torturing, and even killing such people.²⁹ Those who escaped arrest had no recourse but to go into exile. In the wake of the regime's clampdown, the Zayd Group, the Midan Group, and the Shafii Mosque in Mazzeh were all subjected to more stringent monitoring.

The regime's strategy vis-à-vis pro-opposition *ulama* had two major implications for the Sunni religious sphere in Damascus. First, as prominent religious figures were snatched from their mosques or forced to go on the run, new actors who had previously wielded less influence came to the fore. Such a development dovetailed with the regime's strategy of manipulation on an institutional level. In certain cases, the regime seized the opportunity to facilitate the wholesale takeover of a troublesome institution by a more trusted one.

This is what happened to the Zayd Group, which decided, after some hesitation, to express support for the protesters. The regime responded by clamping down on its leadership and subsequently enabling the Fatah Islamic Institute to assert control over several of its pulpits and the bulk of its administration. The institute also finally won official recognition of the certificates it issues, as part of the decidedly pro-regime Levant University for Sharia Studies. In the same vein, Hassan Awad, a lecturer at the institute as well as Sharia College, was appointed preacher at the Rifai Mosque—one of the capital's biggest mosques and long affiliated with the Zayd Group. To signify this break with the past, the mosque was renamed twice.³⁰ Pro-opposition preachers began to lose one pulpit after another, and the Sunni religious scene began to reflect the character and orientation of the regime.³¹

Second, alongside its push to intensify the role of its security apparatus within the religious sphere and replace independent-minded senior religious clerics with more pliant junior figures, the regime accelerated the process of nationalizing religious institutions and other bodies. In this way, it used the spiraling Syrian conflict as a pretext to pass laws and issue decrees bringing all private Islamic entities under the control of the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Indeed, Law No. 31 of 2018 granted it the right to define “correct Islam” and also allowed it a degree of influence over other ministries, such as those of communication and education.³² Thus, disparate and historically fractious Sunni Muslim bodies were reconfigured as parts of a cohesive Islamic religious establishment, albeit one subject to stringent oversight by the regime.³³

Beyond the capital, however, the regime was forced to withdraw from several areas in the face of what had turned into an armed rebellion. As a result, the religious landscape in much of the countryside surrounding Damascus changed drastically. Although most rebel groups were Islamist but not Salafi in orientation, much has been made of the rise of radical groups espousing one or another form of Salafism. This may have to do with Salafist groups' outsized military role in the rebellion. Tellingly, however, with the notable exception of the traditional variant followed by one such Salafi faction, Jaysh al-Islam in Douma, Salafism—particularly the jihadi strain—enjoyed little support among locals and owed its propagation to foreign donors.³⁴ Thus, Salafism virtually disappeared from a given region as soon as its proponents were forced out by non-Salafi rebel groups or by the regime itself.

The more important development, in that it may well prove lasting, was the rise of a new cohort of local religious leaders, many of whom were sympathetic to the opposition's aims. With few exceptions, the religious landscape of Rural Damascus Governorate, which surrounds the capital, had historically served as the backyard of Damascus-based entities, with certain areas regarded as under the sway of specific institutions. Yet armed rebels' takeover of large swaths of the countryside, even as Damascus remained firmly in the grip of the regime, altered this dynamic.³⁵ Local religious figures,

long accustomed to playing second fiddle to more senior clerics based in the capital, emerged from relative obscurity and assumed the roles of Islamic legislators and judges within the dominant political and military bodies governing each of the so-called liberated areas.

Moreover, at the height of the armed opposition's power in Rural Damascus Governorate (particularly the Ghouta area), relations between the center and the periphery were reversed. For example, young members of the Zayd Group living in the Damascus suburb of Kafr Sousa began to move to the rebel-held Ghouta town of Darayya; previously, young men from Darayya had gone to Damascus to further their studies. When the Zayd Group turned against the regime, it made efforts to support rebel groups that had taken control of the town. Despite daily bombardment and the regime's strangulating siege, rebel-held areas such as Ghouta turned into a hotbed of revolutionary activity that attracted political activists and young people who refused to live under President Bashar al-Assad's rule in the capital.

It is worth considering that the newly ascendant local religious figures, though relatively few in number and operating more as individuals than as a group, may retain a measure of influence and autonomy even with the regime's recent recapture of Damascus' hinterland and despite their sympathy for the opposition. Should this turn out to be the case, credit would go to the respective reconciliation deals that such figures helped to broker between the regime and the notables of those areas vacated by the rebels and the political opposition. Sheikh Bassam Dafdaa, a former lecturer at the Fatah Islamic Institute, used his influence and personal relations with both the local community and the regime to mediate the latter's reentry into the town of Kafr Batna once further resistance became futile.³⁶

A similar phenomenon took place with Anas al-Taweel, Osama al-Dabaa, and Redwan al-Kaheel in the town of Babila; Saleh al-Khatib in Yalda, and Mohammed Nouredin in Beit Sahem. Following a punishing blockade of their areas, these clerics helped to persuade the regime to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid. Subsequently, they oversaw reconciliation deals through which they retained leadership roles, including religious posts, in their communities—at least for the time being.³⁷ And in the town of Saqba, Zaher Abou al-Joz played a significant role during the reconciliation process, urging inhabitants to “return to the protection of the state.”³⁸

Meanwhile, though dislodged by the regime from Damascus's hinterland, the religious contingent of the political opposition was, in 2014, finally able to achieve a long elusive aim: unification of prominent dissident *ulama* into a single body. That year, pro-opposition religious figures convened in Istanbul, Turkey, and established the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC). Despite the geographic dispersal of its members between Turkey, the Gulf countries, Jordan, rebel-controlled areas of Syria, and

elsewhere, the SIC succeeded in bringing together leading figures of the League of Ulama of the Levant, previously headquartered in Damascus, and the League of Syrian Ulama, an organization of exiles established in Amman, Jordan, in 2006 by clerics close to the Brotherhood.³⁹

In terms of both its representation of myriad Islamic currents and its attainment of international recognition, the SIC has surpassed the Islamic Front in Syria of the 1980s. In fact, it is the largest and most significant Islamic opposition grouping to emerge since the Baath Party's capture of power in Syria. Though it has failed to come to agreement with Salafi groups (which remain influential largely because of their aforementioned outsized military role in the rebellion), the SIC constitutes the religious component of the Syrian National Coalition, the chief Syrian opposition umbrella grouping. The SIC's leadership comprises 128 members, of whom fifty remain within rebel-held pockets in Syria. It also claims to represent forty religious associations both within and outside the country.⁴⁰

The SIC has established itself as a religious authority and an educational network in Turkey, where millions of primarily Sunni Syrian refugees now live. This was done in close cooperation with, and possibly funding from, the Turkish Diyanet Foundation. The latter is a nongovernmental organization (albeit one with close ties to the state) dedicated to Islamic education. And in various rebel-held areas of Syria itself, SIC-affiliated religious networks have distributed aid, provided social services and education, operated bakeries, and even helped to run camps for the internally displaced, oftentimes in cooperation with the Diyanet Foundation.⁴¹ Several individuals with connections to the SIC have also played prominent military roles in various non-Salafi Islamist militia groups previously active in Ghouta, including the Islamic Union for the Soldiers of the Levant (Al-Ittihad al-Islami li-Ajnad al-Sham), Ahrar al-Sham, and Faylaq al-Rahman.

One newfound characteristic of the religious sphere, which applies equally to both regime and opposition entities, is its demonstrably transnational nature. In the regime's case, Iran has gained direct influence over Syrian religious life through several ministries. For example, the Ministry of Education has concluded agreements with its Iranian counterpart that allow Iranian participation in the drawing up of the educational curriculum.⁴² This is a remarkable development, given that Syria is a predominantly Sunni and quasi-secular country, whereas Iran is a Shiite Islamic state. The Ministry of Religious Endowments and Religious Affairs also works closely with the Iranians; in March 2018, the ministry's head, Mohammed Abdulsattar al-Sayyed, met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Tehran.⁴³

On the opposition side, Damascene clerics and Islamic scholars have established networks that span several countries, even as they try to maintain those back in Damascus and other parts of Syria. As mentioned, the SIC's activity is concentrated in Turkey. Increasingly, the same holds true of other

Islamic entities. For example, stalwarts of the Zayd Group, several of whose mosques and schools the Syrian regime had essentially handed over to the Fatah Islamic Institute, left Syria and established the (SIC-affiliated) Zayd bin Thabet Association in Turkey. They were joined there by other clerics and scholars who broke away from pro-regime Islamic entities. Muwaffaq al-Murabie, former deputy director of the Fatah Islamic Institute, established the House of the Quran and Its Studies, while Mohammed Bassem Dahman, formerly of the Kuftaro Complex, set up the Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro Institution for Scholarship and Daawa as well as the Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro Association for Studies and Culture.⁴⁴

Conclusion: Global Connections, Local Concerns

The conflict in Syria is winding down, with the regime having regained control of most of the areas it lost to various rebel groups. Yet the end of hostilities is unlikely to have an appreciable effect on the regime's redrawing of the capital city's Sunni religious landscape. What remains to be seen is which side, the regime or the opposition, will succeed in harnessing this drastic change to the landscape. The challenge faced by both is great.

For the regime, the most pressing question is how to burnish its Islamic credentials. Leaning on pronouncements by Damascene Sunni religious figures widely seen as its puppets seems like a strategy doomed to failure. As for the religious opposition, it must grapple with the matter of how to parlay its recently consolidated status into political leverage. However united the opposition may be, it operates largely in exile, and bringing about change in Syria necessitates extensive links to similarly minded people of economic means and social influence within the country, particularly the capital.

One arena poised to become a political battleground is that of the religious sphere in Rural Damascus Governorate. This is where the new cohort of Sunni clerics has become prominent—all the more so due to the reconciliation deals they helped to broker between their respective communities and the regime. Many of these figures sympathized with the protesters and later the armed rebels, and some had links to rebel factions. The opposition values them as potential middlemen through whom it might liaise with Sunni communities that formed the backbone of the rebellion. The regime views them with distrust, but recognizes that, given their standing and reputation for independence, it would do well to court them. For a regime keen to cement its control over the religious life of the capital and its environs, and for an exiled opposition determined to retain a link to its popular base, the clerics of the areas around Damascus would constitute a prized possession.

About the Author

Laila Rifai is a Syrian writer and researcher, specializing in Syrian religious affairs.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, the excerpt from Michael Izady, “Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity,” Columbia University, https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Religion_Detailed_lg.png.
- 2 Albert Hourani, “Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables,” in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*, edited by W.R. Polk and R.L. Chambers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41–68. For a detailed account of the role of the *ulama* in Ottoman Damascus, see Steve Tamari, “Ottoman Madrasas: The Multiple Lives of Educational Institutions in Eighteenth-Century Syria,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 5, no.2 (2000): 99–127.
- 3 Founded in Syria in 1947 through the merger of two political movements, the Baath Party fused Arab nationalism and socialism. The party has played a major role in the modern history of Syria, where it remains in power, and Iraq, where it is removed from power in 2003 and subsequently banned.
- 4 Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama From Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17–22.
- 5 For example, the Fatah Islamic Institute was supported financially by the Fatah Islamic Association, both of which were founded by Sheikh Saleh al-Farfour. The Abu al-Nour Islamic Education Complex (Kuftaro Complex) was supported financially by the Ansar Benevolent Association. Sheikh Sarya al-Rifai, a leading figure within the Zayd Group and brother of its leader, Osama, was known as “Sheikh of the Merchants.” For more detail regarding the political economy of the Sunni urban elite, see Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*, Chapter 4, 144–162.
- 6 For the Corrective Movement and the changes it brought about, see Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001). For the peasantry and Alawites in Assad’s regime, see Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 7 Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood first emerged on the scene in 1945. It operated in the open during the 1950s and early ’60s, winning seats in parliamentary elections, before running afoul of the Baath shortly after the latter’s capture of power in 1963. For the Sunni urban elite and its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, see Michel Seurat, *Syrie, l’Etat de barbarie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2012).
- 8 Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*, 189–190.
- 9 The Naqshbandi Sufi order is one of the largest and oldest of its kind in the world. Its name derives from that of its founder, Bahauddin Naqshband Bukhari. It was introduced into Syria at the end of the seventeenth century and today stands as one of the prominent Sufi orders in the country, alongside the Shadhili and Rifai orders.
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