



MALCOLM H. KERR
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VOLUME 1

A Restless Revival: Political Islam After the 2011 Uprisings

Maha Yahya and Mohanad Hage Ali, editors

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This publication was made possible with the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY). The articles contained herein were previously published on Carnegie's website as part of the CCNY-funded Political Islam series.

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“

Remember that you are not mere actualities.
You were born as potentialities.
Dare to be and dare to know.”

Vartan Gregorian

1934–2021

President, Carnegie Corporation of New York

*This publication is dedicated to the memory of
Vartan Gregorian.*

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INTRODUCTION

MAHA YAHYA AND MOHANAD HAGE ALI

The Arab uprisings in 2011 heralded a new era in the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa. Long-standing autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt were forced to step down under mass public pressure. Overnight, closely and forcibly regulated spheres of political debate and political action were cracked open. The space was filled by a multitude of new actors, both civic and religious, proclaiming a variety of agendas and forms of political action. Institutions, modes of governance, and societies in often authoritarian, fragile, and conflict-ridden states were thrown into a vortex of sometimes epic changes, including those brought on by catastrophic wars and humanitarian disasters. The effects of these changes at both the national and regional levels have been significant and will be long-lasting.

Islamist movements initially appeared to be the best poised to take advantage of the political openings provided by the uprisings. In recent decades, Islamist groups have increasingly focused on service provision in their local communities. This has taken place as many Arab regimes liberalized their economies. In the process, the regimes restricted political freedoms and clamped down on civic organizations that they believed were seeking political change, while quietly encouraging nongovernmental organizations, especially Islamist organizations, to expand their social services. Consequently, Islamist-leaning parties developed formidable organizational capacities, with the ability to muster hundreds of thousands of supporters at any given moment.

Such singular capacities and broad social appeal enabled the Muslim Brotherhood, the region's largest transnational organization operating under the banner of political Islam, to win post-2011 elections in several Arab states. The Brotherhood came to govern in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco for the first time since the organization's establishment in Egypt in 1928. Other Islamist currents, such as Salafism, also found new and fertile ground for their political activities.

The meteoric rise of different branches of the Muslim Brotherhood to positions of power, coupled with the growing restlessness of Arab populations across the region, reignited enduring concerns in some Gulf

countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The latter cracked down on local affiliates of the organization and, along with other Gulf countries such as Kuwait, sought to empower Salafi organizations in conflict areas, particularly in Syria and Libya. More recently, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have come to consider the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. These developments presented an opening for Turkey and Qatar, who support the Brotherhood, to extend their influence in parts of the Middle East and North Africa. The Syrian conflict and the emergence of a strong Islamist element on the ground complicated matters further.

Such widespread regional upheaval triggered a shift in past trajectories or highlighted a specific quality in, or reaction to, Islamist politics. These took place along five different axes—each one of which is a theme of this volume of work. The first is that the uprisings brought about previously unimaginable shifts in regional alliances and national politics for Islamists. The second is that religious authority in a number of Arab states was transferred to Salafists. A third is that once Islamists came to power in certain Arab capitals in the post-2011 period, and even in some cases when they were removed from power, they often showed an uncanny ability to be pragmatic and flexible. Fourth, Islamist groups showed they could maneuver and thrive within tribal and local contexts. And fifth, Arab states sought to expand their own control over the religious sphere, to ensure that religion could not be turned against them.

One consequence of the Arab uprisings was that they reshaped the regional alliances of a number of Islamist organizations. As Tamer Badawi and Osama al-Sayyad assert in “Mismatched Expectations: Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood After the Arab Uprising,” the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood never considered the Sunni-Shia divide an impediment to forging ties with Iran. For the Brotherhood, good relations with a regional power that shared a similar ideological mindset with respect to the role of Islam in politics and society provided it with leverage in the Arab world. For Iran, in turn, extending a hand to the Muslim Brotherhood was a “low-cost investment” in widening its own regional influence. However, the Brotherhood and Iran have always differed over relations with the largely Sunni Arab world. Following the Arab uprisings, Iran demonstrated an eagerness to use its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood to further its agenda in the Middle East, while the Brotherhood was more cautious, particularly as it had sided with those opposed to Iran’s allies in certain countries, most notably in Syria.

Another significant realignment to emerge from the Syrian conflict involved Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, as Brotherhood organizations came to power in Egypt and Tunisia, Hamas’s alliances with Iran and the Bashar al-Assad regime became a burden. It was untenable for Hamas to support the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings while continuing to support the Syrian government, which violently repressed protesters and dissidents, including Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood, with Iran’s and Hezbollah’s help. Hamas antagonized Tehran and Damascus by supporting Syria’s opposition, undermining a three-decade-old relationship. The consequences of this linger on, as Iran now seeks to reconcile Hamas with the Assad regime.

A second theme of this volume is how some Gulf states, to counteract the growing political power of the Muslim Brotherhood, sought to empower smaller, seemingly apolitical Islamists, such as the Salafists. Their cooptation by ruling elites greatly boosted the transnational financing of Salafist networks as well as political and armed groups across the region. As Zoltan Pall explains in “The Emir’s Gift: Given a Greater

Role, Kuwait's Salafis Face the Costs," Kuwaiti Salafists, enjoying the state's political backing and financial support, extended their networks throughout Pakistan, Afghanistan, and even into Cambodia.

However, the expansion of such networks was most apparent in Syria, where Salafists recruited thousands of young fighters. As Thomas Pierret notes in "Brothers in Alms: Salafi Financiers and the Syrian Insurgency," the decision of Gulf-based Salafists, particularly Kuwaiti Salafists, to financially support Syria's rebel groups in 2011 was rooted in their aim to expand and strengthen their transnational links. They facilitated the formation of a network that "tapp[ed] into a larger pool of donors than the low-profile networks that usually funded radical Islamist militancy." The backing provided by this network was a key factor in the rise of Salafism's popularity in mainstream Syrian opposition politics. Though this large and visible Salafist network saw a decline in 2014 because of growing U.S. apprehension and a changing public mood in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, such networks could almost certainly be revived in the future.

A third theme of the volume is that when Islamists, specifically Brotherhood members, came to power in Arab states, or saw their influence grow, they faced challenges that compelled them to take a more pragmatic approach to politics, at the expense of ideology. For instance, Imad Alsoos and Nathan Brown point out in " Hamas: Constrained or Nimble?" that Hamas employed ambiguous wording when referring to the eventual shape of the Palestinian state in its new charter in 2017. For a party that was vehemently opposed to a two-state solution between the Palestinians and Israel, this indicated a softening of its position. In parallel, Hamas attempted to strengthen its ties with the Palestinian Authority. It also dropped any mention of links to its mother organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, to assuage Saudi Arabia.

Hamas's pragmatism was also on display after the Egyptian military helped to bring down Egyptian president Mohammad Morsi, a Brotherhood member, in July 2013. Hamas was forced to shift direction. One way it did so, as Maren Koss explains in "Flexible Resistance: How Hezbollah and Hamas Are Mending Ties," was to mend fences with Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia organization. Both organizations had parted ways over the uprising in Syria but subsequently grasped the mutual benefit of an entente despite this. They began to improve their ties by the first half of 2017, culminating in a meeting between Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and the deputy head of Hamas's political bureau, Saleh al-Aroui, in Beirut on October 31, 2017.

Hezbollah, too, has long been characterized by a pragmatic streak. This was particularly evident in its relationship with Syria, as Mohanad Hage Ali writes in "Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship." Hage Ali sees their ties as having long been "characterized by a pragmatic recognition of shifting power dynamics and the parallel pursuit of divergent political interests." The relationship has been through tumultuous phases, but despite such mistrust both sides understand that if one of them is weakened the other would also lose power. However, this does not impede permissible competition, as the Assad regime will ultimately "seek to rebalance relations with Hezbollah and regain its previous advantage" in Lebanon, which it enjoyed prior to its withdrawal in 2005.

Ali Hashem, in "Hezbollah's Journey From Syria's Battlefield to Lebanon's Political Minefield," explores how Hezbollah is managing the tension between the party's regional agenda and its increased involvement in domestic politics. In what Hashem calls a "balancing act," the organization is now giving greater weight

to domestic Lebanese affairs, as it seeks to guarantee local stability in order to facilitate its regional roles and interventions. Yet, as Hashem argues, this effort poses genuine risks: In a country where services are declining and the economy is faltering, it can entail being blamed for the system's many shortcomings. At the same time, playing a more active role in domestic politics may potentially transform the party's interests and even its make-up, while clashing with the party's priorities outside of Lebanon.

Tunisia's Ennahda also adapted to the pressures of national politics and accusations that it had dual loyalties to Tunisia and to the international network of Muslim Brotherhood organizations that had inspired it. As Hamza Meddeb observes in "Ennahda's Uneasy Exit From Political Islam," the party sought to distance itself from identity politics and gravitated toward more prosaic matters. Its pragmatic approach allowed it to claim legitimacy without resorting to religious arguments, specifically after separating both realms. During the party's Tenth General Congress in May 2016, Ennahda ceased religious proselytism and "specialized" in political activities. However, as Meddeb points out, "diluting the emphasis on Islam in Ennahda's ideology has led to an identity crisis, which will continue to create considerable challenges for the party as it reevaluates Islam as a frame of reference, grapples with the party's neutralization as a driver of social change, and manages its core supporters at a time when it must also appeal to a broader electorate."

Courtney Freer also discusses the pragmatism of Islamist movements in "Challenges to Sunni Islamism in Bahrain Since 2011." She argues that Bahrain's "leading Sunni Islamist blocs appear to have retreated to the safety of loyalism rather than promoting intra-Sunni unity to press for substantive political reforms. They have again become part of the rentier system, exchanging political independence for political access and economic privilege in a regional environment where Sunni Islamists are in an increasingly precarious position."

Even outside of power, Islamists have proven surprisingly adaptable in their desire to survive. A striking example of this was provided by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. In 2015, when a younger generation of Brotherhood members challenged the organization's older leadership, the latter proved flexible enough to institute change. In "Surviving Repression: How Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Has Carried On," Barbara Zollner suggests that among the main reasons for the Brotherhood's survival after the 2013 military coup in Egypt was the leadership's move away from a rigid structure toward nonhierarchical networks and lines of communication. This willingness to give ground created space for younger members to contribute to the organization in substantive ways, thereby averting a potentially disastrous generational rift.

An important subtext of the pragmatism of Islamist organizations is their approach to economic issues. The Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt after 2011 required that the organization articulate an economic agenda. However, this ended in disappointment for marginalized segments of the population. In "Lost Capital: The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Neoliberal Transformation," Wael Gamal recounts how the Brotherhood cultivated ties to the corrupt business class at the height of president Hosni Mubarak's time in office. This led to the implementation of neoliberal policies during Mohamed Morsi's presidency between 2012 and 2013, helping the Brotherhood assume a significant role as a power broker. However, this approach also undermined the interests of the country's middle and working classes, detaching the organization from popular demands such as social justice and protective state policies.

The main Salafist organization in Egypt, Hizb al-Nour, also gave great importance to economic matters, though in its case that interest was more recent. As Francesco Cavatorta and Valeria Resta write in “Money and Morals: Salafi Economics in the Arab World,” the party’s electoral manifesto, formulated in 2012, constituted “the most comprehensive economic framework offered by any Salafi party.” In addition to neoliberal, business-friendly policies, the Salafists appealed to Egypt’s poorest communities by calling for a higher minimum wage to match the rising cost of living. Notably, the group’s economic manifesto included policies shaped by Keynesian economic theory—that government has an active role in counterbalancing negative effects of the business cycle, such as by investing in job-creation projects, education, and housing.

This volume’s fourth theme is the tribal and local politics of Islamist groups. In the Yemeni and Syrian conflicts, Islamist militants have exploited opportunities for recruiting new members and expanding their base, demonstrating a remarkable ability to navigate tribal and local networks. In “Yemen’s Houthis Used Multiple Identities to Advance,” Ahmed Nagi examines how Ansar Allah, more often referred to as the Houthi movement, forged alliances with local players across the areas it controls, including Sunni tribes. The Houthis also allied with their former arch-enemy Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen’s former president, until their rift in 2017. This allowed them to benefit from Saleh’s tribal networks.

The Houthis also gained from the rift between the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on the one side and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other. The Saudi-backed Yemeni president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, initiated secret contacts with the Houthis as part of his effort to weaken tribes loyal to Islah, an Islamist party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood that also opposes the Houthis. Nagi describes how the Houthis played on multiple identities—as a local religious group, a political party, a revolutionary movement, and an official government. This strategy was “particularly effective in light of the multiple divisions and rivalries in Yemen at the time.”

Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) employed similar tactics in Yemen in its relationship with the tribes of Bayda Governorate. In “Our Common Enemy: Ambiguous Ties Between al-Qaeda and Yemen’s Tribes,” Nadwa al-Dawsari outlines the alliance between the Bayda tribes and AQAP, which is often rendered as the latter making advances in the region. Dawsari provides the compelling example of AQAP’s collaboration with Tariq al-Dhahab, an aspiring tribal leader. This relationship was not one of ideological affinity but resulted from AQAP’s efforts to build up support in Bayda, whose tribes had successfully contained the group previously. AQAP’s efforts ultimately did not bear fruit, as the tribes forced most AQAP militants to leave their areas. Yet when the Houthis sought to take control of Bayda in 2014–2015, AQAP returned and helped local tribes to fight the invasion, which reflected its capacity to adapt to a changing situation.

Raphaël Lefèvre focuses more on local dynamics in examining how militant Salafism in the Lebanese city of Tripoli emerged at the intersection of urban segregation, political marginalization, and local grievance. In “The Sociopolitical Undercurrent of Lebanon’s Salafi Militancy,” Lefèvre argues that while the discourse, appearance, and violent tactics of these militants look and sound Salafi, when one looks closer, some of them appear more driven by local grievances, identities, and solidarities than by ideology. In this sense, religious ideology has become an element in the struggle for urban power. In time, Lefèvre argues, the coupling of such ideology with the ongoing conflict in Syria or prison can drive locals to have greater affinity with more radical groups such as al-Qaeda or the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

A fifth theme of the volume focuses on the effort of Arab states to maintain or expand their control over the religious sphere, as a way of ensuring that religion cannot be turned against them. One factor that has loosened government control, particularly during the Syrian conflict, is the expansion of localism. Islamist groups expanded, as rebels in rural areas facilitated the rise of local religious leaders by encouraging them to break away from the official religious establishment. In “Localism, War, and the Fragmentation of Sunni Islam in Syria,” Kheder Khaddour shows how during the conflict many clerics bypassed state religious institutions even as they resisted religious radicalization in rebel strongholds. Tensions between urban and rural areas about who would have “the strongest voice in shaping Islam in Syria” superseded theological debates.

In “How Syria’s Regime Used Local Clerics to Reassert Its Authority in Rural Damascus Governorate,” Hadeel al-Saidawi examines the way local clerics responded to the state’s efforts to reassert control over rebel areas. She focuses on how the regime exploited local clerics in its policy of “reconciliation,” a euphemism describing the submission of opposition areas to government control. Local clerics, Saidawi writes, “proved to be influential participants in such negotiations, whether in official committees formed within rebel-held areas or through informal contacts with the government or clerical networks in regime-held areas.” Ultimately, the Syrian state, by passing Law 31 of October 2018, sought to co-opt local clerics and recentralize religious authority.

The centralization of religious authority is also the focus of Laila Rifai’s article, “Syria’s Regime Has Given the Fatah Islamic Institute Influence, but at What Cost?” She contends that 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.

In “The Religious Domain Continues to Expand in Syria,” Harout Akdedian examines the impact of Law 31. He notes that while the law is designed to co-opt local clerics, “what is likely to emerge is a more powerful religious domain that not only shapes religious expression but also increasingly intervenes in state-society relations and everyday life.”

In some countries, however, the state’s co-optation measures have also opened it up to undesirable outcomes. In “Morocco’s Islamist Party: Redefining Politics Under Pressure,” Intissar Fakir points out that the monarchy sought to rein in the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), after the latter, given its popularity and electoral gains, led a government in 2012. The monarchy wanted to protect its own dominant political position. It did so “by disrupting the formation of a second PJD-led government [and] neutralizing the party’s leader, Abdelilah Benkirane.” However, Fakir notes, “by undermining the government, the palace leaves itself exposed to criticism, anger, and, potentially, accountability.”

In Mauritania, the state’s model for co-opting jihadists remains more flexible, although not without risk, as Frederic Wehrey argues in “Control and Contain: Mauritania’s Clerics and the Strategy Against Violent Extremism.” Wehrey writes that “Mauritania has proven remarkably resilient against jihadism, despite the presence of factors that breed extremism.” The state attributed this perceived success to an “adroit mix of dialogue and rehabilitation with some imprisoned jihadists and harsh judicial punishment for others, along with greater surveillance and control over mosques and Islamic schools.” However, the

state's relative permissiveness in allowing Salafist jihadists to lecture and publish media statements could have negative future repercussions.

Dalia Ghanem, in "The Shifting Foundations of Political Islam in Algeria," also describes a relatively pragmatic approach toward Islamists. She points to the fact that the Algerian government was successful after the civil war of the 1990s "in neutralizing the more extremist jihadi manifestations of political Islam by combining a soft and a hard approach." Military means were adopted along "with conciliatory measures aimed at disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating former extremists into society." She concludes that "by letting Islamist parties enter parliamentary politics and even participate in government coalitions," the authorities "succeeded in defusing moderate embodiments of political Islam."

In Iraq, the situation was more complicated and took place in the context of a change in the country's religious endowments after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003. As Harith Hassan argues in "Religious Authority and the Politics of Islamic Endowments in Iraq," the restructuring of religious endowments toward greater autonomy from the state led to divergent impacts on the Sunni and Shia religious establishments. While it led to fragmentation and deeper rivalries among Sunni religious actors, it prompted the consolidation and centralization of Shia religious authority and the consolidation of the Najaf seminary's role within the community.

Across this volume's multiple themes, the condition of the state—whether it is repressive, weak, or disintegrating—is central. The generational divide as well as the external-internal rift within Islamist organizations is also a common feature. These organizations' hesitant participation in the uprisings was remarkable given that they emerged as prime beneficiaries of the resulting political permutations. Meanwhile, across the Middle East and North Africa, the crisis of authority generated by the Arab Spring will continue to have ramifications. The extent of these ramifications will depend in large part on the nature of governance in individual countries and the ways in which regional fault lines develop. Any prolonged instability could create power vacuums that will be filled by Islamist movements that position themselves as champions of the underprivileged.

This volume of work aims to shed light on the changing dynamics within and among some of the Arab world's major Islamist groups, as well as their interaction with state and society following the 2010–2011 uprisings. Seismic shifts unleashed by the uprisings fueled Islamist groups' protests and power but also resulted in their repression and conflict. The volume ultimately reveals some important nuances of Islamist politics and parties in a tumultuous period for the Middle East and North Africa.

THEME 1: SHIFTS IN REGIONAL ALLIANCES AND NATIONAL POLITICS

FLEXIBLE RESISTANCE: HOW HEZBOLLAH AND HAMAS ARE MENDING TIES

MAREN KOSS

Since the so-called Arab Spring gained momentum across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, two historically aligned Islamist resistance groups—the Shia Lebanese group Hezbollah and the Sunni Palestinian group Hamas—have had a more turbulent relationship. The short-lived rise of the Muslim Brotherhood under former president Mohamed Morsi in Egypt prompted Hamas to deepen ties with Cairo. This exacerbated a growing rift that separated Hamas from Hezbollah and their traditionally shared allies, Iran and Syria. Only recently have the two Islamist resistance organizations started to pursue rapprochement. This shift can be explained by Hezbollah’s and Hamas’s ambitions to maintain their positions of power¹ in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, respectively.

FLEXIBLE INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAMIST RESISTANCE

Hezbollah and Hamas both emerged during the 1980s, regard themselves as Islamist resistance organizations, and are long-time allies. Yet they have different religious orientations. Hezbollah’s political thought is closely aligned with the concept of *wilayat al-faqih*, or the guardianship of the jurist, developed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran. According to this concept, a leading Islamic jurist who enjoys absolute authority should act as supreme political leader of the Islamic state until the return of the twelfth imam, who is believed to be currently living in secret according to Twelver Shia doctrine. Hamas, meanwhile, is a Sunni organization. Its political thought is based on the views of the Muslim Brotherhood, which regards Islam as the solution to political and social problems. This is evident from the key slogan “Islam is the solution,” which the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has frequently used in campaigns.

Despite their differing religious views, Hamas and Hezbollah share certain beliefs. Specifically, they share an acceptance of *ijtihad*, the rational interpretation of the main Islamic sources, which helps make their political thinking adaptable. Thus, Hezbollah and Hamas do not apply the main Islamic sources in a

literal or fixed sense, but reinterpret them. In addition, the concept of resistance has been central to both organizations' identities since their inception.

Three factors were decisive in Hezbollah's emergence. First, Lebanese Shia Muslims were marginalized economically and politically in post-independence Lebanon and were, therefore, responsive to the revolutionary ideas of Shia Islamism, which had been gaining ground in the country since the 1970s. Second, the 1979 Iranian revolution had a catalyzing effect on the evolution of Hezbollah, which Tehran has supported financially and militarily since the group's early days. And third, Hezbollah emerged in response to Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Hamas, in turn, was founded in 1987, during the first Palestinian intifada, and shortly thereafter began portraying itself as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had established a broad network in Palestinian areas as early as the 1940s.

Hezbollah's and Hamas's respective understandings of resistance overlap in two ways: both groups directly relate resistance to the fight against Israel, and both organizations have a military wing that functions outside the confines of the Lebanese state for Hezbollah and the Palestinian National Authority for Hamas. Military resistance is the most important aspect of Hezbollah's and Hamas's resistance identity. Having and maintaining an independent military capability is a core objective for both groups because doing so allows them to maintain their positions of power. In addition, Hezbollah and Hamas claim to engage in nonmilitary resistance, which they frame as cultural or political resistance.

Despite the similarities in Hezbollah's and Hamas's understandings of resistance, there are differences in how the organizations interpret and apply this concept. These differences are linked less to their respective Shia or Sunni Islamist political ideologies than to the contexts the two groups operate in and the strategic interests they pursue. This dynamic has injected flexibility into their concepts of resistance, as both organizations have adjusted to changing environments while trying to legitimize their actions and maintain their independent armed status.

Hezbollah: Resistance Reinterpreted to Maintain Power

Since its founding, Hezbollah has redefined its understanding of resistance several times. Originally, the party described the aim of resistance to be the liberation of southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation, which lasted from 1982 until 2000. When Israel unilaterally withdrew in May 2000, Hezbollah portrayed this development as a victory for the resistance and Lebanon as a whole.

Yet the Israeli withdrawal also threatened to render obsolete Hezbollah's original justification for retaining its weapons. Consequently, Hezbollah insisted that Israel was continuing to occupy Lebanese land, but the Shia organization also expanded its definition of resistance to encompass deterrence of Israel, claiming that Hezbollah's weapons would help keep Lebanon secure from a permanent Israeli threat. Hezbollah even managed to integrate this dual notion of resistance—liberation and deterrence—into the 2005 inaugural ministerial statement² by the Lebanese government, the first government in which Hezbollah had ever participated.

In 2013, Hezbollah again expanded its understanding of resistance amid further political changes. By then, the party had officially entered the Syrian conflict in support of President Bashar al-Assad, a decision

that did not fit well with Hezbollah's long-standing claim to be fighting on behalf of the oppressed. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah reframed the organization's conception of resistance to portray Hezbollah's military operations as a fight against the threat of Salafi jihadists³. To that end, he claimed the party's engagement in Syria would reinforce Lebanon's stability.

By reinterpreting resistance according to changing circumstances, Hezbollah has managed to retain some room to maneuver. The organization has adapted to new threats so as to legitimize its military agenda with its own base, as well as with other groups in Lebanon—an important step in a divided society. In addition, Hezbollah's dynamic reinterpretation of resistance has allowed the group to retain its military wing and, thus, the power it wields in Lebanon.

Hamas: Resistance as a Conflict Management Strategy

Hamas has not changed its main conception of resistance much since its establishment in 1987. However, like Hezbollah, Hamas has used the idea of resistance flexibly. The organization has emphasized or deemphasized resistance depending on the situation, especially at critical junctures, such as during Palestinian elections, when Hamas took over governing responsibilities, and in the group's attempts to reconcile with its rival, the secular organization Fatah. (Fatah controls the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank and recognized Israel in 1993 in the context of the Oslo Accords.)

A few specific examples are worth highlighting. References to resistance were largely missing from Hamas's political platform for the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. During the electoral campaign, Hamas was seeking to appeal to a wide range of voters from different political camps in the Palestinian territories, voters who did not all support the military struggle against Israel.

By contrast, Hamas employed the resistance concept very differently after the organization militarily took over Gaza in 2007. The group institutionalized resistance in the territory's political structures. Its armed wing, the Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades, became responsible for guaranteeing the external stability of Gaza's political order against both Israel and Fatah, as well as internal stability in the face of violent Salafi groups. The Hamas government in Gaza understands the difficulty of being both a government and a resistance movement. Accordingly, Hamas has differentiated between what it calls tactical and strategic resistance. While Hamas tactically accepts the premise of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, strategically the group still aims to liberate all of pre-1948 Palestine. This distinction between tactics and strategy enables Hamas to manage the tensions inherent to its dual role in Gaza.

In the context of adapting its conception of resistance to different situations, Hamas also has introduced the concept of popular resistance. This idea was first raised in 2011, following reconciliation talks with Fatah, by Khaled Meshaal, who was then head of Hamas's political bureau. For Meshaal, popular resistance meant nonviolent civil unrest directed against Israel; the popular dimension of this approach was linked to the demonstrations taking place throughout the Arab world at the time. This position was meant to display Hamas's willingness to compromise with Fatah, which had pursued diplomacy instead of armed resistance. In early 2018, in conjunction with the Great March of Return in Gaza, initiated by Palestinian civil society actors, Hamas has revived the idea of popular resistance. Supporters of this

initiative have demanded a Palestinian return to the territories of 1948. Hamas has prominently called on Palestinians to join this movement peacefully.

In contrast to the concept of popular resistance, Hamas's 2017 "Document of General Principles and Policies"⁴—the first political document the organization has published since its 1988 covenant—underscores that armed resistance remains the group's main focus. At the same time, the document explains that escalating or deescalating resistance is part of a strategy of managing conflict. Armed resistance constitutes the principal part of Hamas's approach, but when other forms of resistance, such as popular resistance, help strengthen the organization's position in the Palestinian territories or abroad, Hamas emphasizes them instead.

A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL, CROSS-SECTARIAN ALLIANCE

Hezbollah and Hamas have long been close allies. Before the Arab uprisings in 2011, the two cooperated politically and militarily and were closely aligned with Iran and Syria. Historically, Hezbollah held the upper hand in the partnership, as it offered military training to Hamas combatants, made political recommendations to the organization, and encouraged Hezbollah-affiliated media platforms to support Hamas and the Palestinian cause. The two groups were so close that Hamas had offices and residences for several high-ranking officials in Beirut's southern suburbs, an area known to be Hezbollah's stronghold. Hezbollah's influence over Hamas was mainly based on its closer relationship with Iran and its ability to serve as an important link between Hamas and Tehran.

Before 2011, Hezbollah and Hamas also cooperated in a broader alliance with Iran and Syria, the so-called axis of resistance. The axis of resistance was not based on sectarianism but derived from the members' shared anti-Western and anti-Israeli orientations and their criticism of the U.S.-friendly alignment of certain Arab states. However, members of the axis of resistance were able to independently pursue their own objectives, as long as they adhered to the broader framework and direction of the alliance.

Both Hezbollah and Hamas were recipients of Iran's military and financial aid. Iranian support became especially important for Hamas following the international economic embargo and political isolation imposed on the organization after its victory in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. This support became even more vital when Hamas militarily took over Gaza in 2007.

HAMAS'S BREAK AND RECONCILIATION WITH THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE

After the March 2011 Syrian uprising devolved into an all-out war between protestors and the regime, Hamas would eventually break with the Syrian leadership and the axis of resistance. The initial signs of a rift appeared in the first half of 2012, when Hamas started openly criticizing the Assad regime⁵ for its military repression of the Syrian opposition. When the conflict escalated, Hamas eventually moved its political bureau from Damascus (where it had been located since 1999) to Doha, Qatar. These decisions were contested within Hamas.⁶ The Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades were especially displeased about

leaving Syria because the move prompted a sizable reduction in Iranian financial and military aid to Gaza and to the military wing itself.

Yet apart from the Assad regime's violent response to the Syrian opposition, Hamas's decision to break with Syria was mainly linked to regional developments, especially in Egypt. Ultimately, it was the rise of former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood that pushed Hamas to sever its relations with Syria and the rest of the axis of resistance. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is Hamas's ideological parent organization, and Hamas believed it would strongly benefit politically and economically from the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent to power in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East. Hamas hoped that a close alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood would increase its international legitimacy and end Gaza's economic and political isolation. Hamas anticipated that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood would be able to replace its former allies: Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah.

Following Hamas's split with the axis of resistance, cooperation between Hamas and Hezbollah reached its nadir. While low-level contacts continued, the two sides publically criticized each other for the breakup. Hamas-affiliated members of the Palestinian Legislative Council underscored that Hezbollah's military support for the Assad regime had nothing to do with resistance, warning that the organization would lose credibility in the Arab world.⁷ Hezbollah, in turn, accused Hamas of betraying the cause of resistance against Israel and of moving too close to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.⁸

Although the relationship worsened for a time, by the first half of 2017, ties between Hezbollah and Hamas had improved. Since then, leading officials from the two sides have met again, most notably on October 31, 2017, when Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah received the deputy head of Hamas's political bureau⁹, Saleh al-Aroui, in Beirut.

This reconciliation followed on the heels of Hamas's rapprochement with Iran. The main reason for this change was that, in July 2013, then Egyptian president Morsi was overthrown in a military coup. This change of government was followed by a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, which left Hamas with its back against the wall. Egypt closed its border with Gaza, making it very difficult for Hamas to manage the territory and provide for the needs of the Palestinians there, even though Hamas received financial support from Qatar. The Qataris have a pro-Muslim Brotherhood and pro-Hamas orientation and remained Hamas's second-most-important sponsor (aside from Iran) in Gaza after 2006.

It was changes in Hamas's political leadership in 2017 that allowed the organization to revive its relationship with Iran. First, in February 2017, Yahya Sinwar was elected the new head of Hamas's political leadership in Gaza. Sinwar is a founder of the organization's military wing and enjoys significant support within its ranks. Considered a hardliner, he rejects the prospect of a two-state solution with Israel. Sinwar spent more than twenty years in Israeli prisons before being released under a 2011 prisoner deal. The United States listed him as a specially designated global terrorist¹⁰ in 2015. Sinwar's close ties to the Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades made it easier for Hamas to mend fences with the Iranians.

Second, in May 2017, Ismail Haniyeh was elected the new head of Hamas's political bureau. He replaced longtime leader Khaled Meshaal¹¹, who was seen as a moderate. Following Haniyeh's election, the political bureau, which traditionally had been located outside the Palestinian territories, was moved from Qatar to

Gaza. And in October 2017, Saleh al-Arouri, a co-founder of Hamas's military wing, was elected deputy head of the political bureau. All these changes and the political bureau's relocation allowed the Hamas faction in Gaza, especially the Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades, to increase its power within the organization, further facilitating renewed ties with Iran.

For its own part, Tehran had two main motivations for reestablishing its ties with Hamas. First, by supporting Hamas, Iran can increase its power and influence in the Palestinian territories—next door to its archenemy, Israel, whose right to exist Iran rejects. Second, a constructive relationship with Hamas helps Tehran improve its geopolitical influence vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia in the Middle East more broadly.

Coincidentally, soon after Hamas instituted some of these leadership changes, the Qatar crisis¹² broke out on June 5, 2017. This gave Hamas further reason to try to bridge the divide with its erstwhile partners. Under pressure to end their support for Hamas, the Qataris significantly reduced their financial assistance to the organization, although they did not halt such support completely. This setback gave momentum to Hamas members who had always advocated maintaining ties with Iran. By the end of August 2017, Sinwar announced that the relationship between Hamas's military wing and Iran had been restored. The visit to Tehran by a high-ranking Hamas delegation¹³ led by the recently elected Arouri on October 20, 2017, formally marked the reconciliation.

The fact that Hamas managed to renew its connection with Iran impacted its relationship with Hezbollah. Officials from the two groups began meeting again, including the aforementioned meeting between Nasrallah and Arouri in Beirut in October 2017. The following day, Haniyeh participated in the second International Conference of Resistance Scholars¹⁴ held in Beirut. More than 200 people from over eighty countries attended, including Nasrallah and his deputy, Naim Qassem.

THE BENEFITS OF RECONCILIATION

The reconciliation between Hezbollah and Hamas offers benefits to both organizations, particularly the latter. Renewed ties have provided Hamas with a way to reduce its isolation and the fallout of its fateful decision to side with the Muslim Brotherhood instead of the axis of resistance. The resumption of cordial relations may also help alleviate the dire humanitarian and economic conditions in Gaza. Yet despite the benefits of such rapprochement, Hamas has learned from its past mistakes and now is trying to avoid becoming too dependent on any single partner again. That is why, even as it has revived ties with Iran and Hezbollah, Hamas has also recently improved its relations with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Hezbollah has benefited from reconciling with Hamas as well. In recent years, Hezbollah lost popularity and legitimacy in the Arab world. A July 2014 Pew Research Center poll¹⁵ revealed that the share of respondents from around the region who hold unfavorable views of Hezbollah increased markedly between 2007 and 2014—from 41 to 83 percent in Egypt, from 44 to 81 percent in Jordan, and from 20 to 55 percent in the Palestinian territories. Hezbollah's military engagement in Syria probably contributed to its declining reputation.

The same Pew poll revealed that Hamas's own popularity in the Middle East and North Africa decreased between 2013 and 2014. Despite this potential complication, Hezbollah hopes that reconciliation with Hamas may give it greater legitimacy among Arabs beyond Lebanon's Shia community, because Hamas shares Sunni roots with a majority of Arabs and because the Palestinian cause continues to enjoy considerable support across the Middle East. Hezbollah anticipates that moving closer toward the Sunni Hamas may help the Shia organization get rid of the sectarian image it has suffered from since deciding to militarily support the Alawite Assad regime in Syria.

Yet Hamas will likely try to avoid becoming as close to Hezbollah and Iran as it was before 2011. Especially over the last year, Hamas has tried to remain more independent by building or maintaining ties with different (sometimes even antagonist) states, such as Iran, the UAE, Egypt, Qatar, Algeria, and Malaysia. Significantly, Yahya Sinwar, who has long been considered to have a pro-Iran orientation, is the one who has pragmatically fostered ties with Egypt and the UAE. The Hezbollah-Hamas relationship will undoubtedly remain important to both parties, but Hamas likely will simultaneously continue seeking to retain at least some room to maneuver somewhat independently.

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MISMATCHED EXPECTATIONS: IRAN AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

TAMER BADAWI AND OSAMA AL-SAYYAD

INTRODUCTION

Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, despite falling on opposite sides of the Middle East's Sunni-Shia divide, both see benefits in cultivating ties. For Iran, outreach to the Brotherhood, particularly the movement's Egyptian branch, is a low-cost investment in a group that could help Tehran widen its influence in the region. For the Brotherhood, it is useful to have connections with Iran—a regional power that shares a similar, though not identical, ideology on the role of Islam in politics and society—to serve as political leverage with other important actors in the Middle East. However, while Iran is eager to develop a deeper relationship to support its regional agenda, the Muslim Brotherhood remains hesitant to move beyond friendly contacts. This is due to the organization's overriding priorities, notably its unwillingness to alienate the Sunni Arab world.

While the parties have had informal contacts since the founding of Iran's Islamic Republic in 1979, the relationship entered a new phase as the Muslim Brotherhood rose to power in Egypt after the 2011 uprising.¹ When the Brotherhood's candidate, Mohamed Morsi, was elected Egypt's president in 2012, official contacts between Cairo and Tehran increased. But Morsi, forced to heed the views of Egypt's military establishment and traditional allies, proved unwilling to reestablish formal diplomatic ties, which had been severed in 1979, during his first and only year in office. Instead, the new Egyptian administration undertook a more gradual approach toward warming relations with Iran.

Despite the coup that removed the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013, Iran continues to reach out to its members and views the group as a potential ally in advancing its regional goals. The Brotherhood, meanwhile, retains its pragmatism, engaging in informal contacts with Iran that will not sabotage outreach efforts to other influential regional actors. However, the Brotherhood's current weakness and the negative image of Iran among many Sunni Arabs represent obstacles to heightened cooperation.

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND TEHRAN: MORE THAN INTERLOCUTORS

In 1979, Brotherhood branches from several Arab and non-Arab countries sent delegations to offer support to and congratulate Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolution's principal leader.² The writings of influential Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, particularly his framing of Islam as a revolutionary system of political and social governance, also appealed to current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who translated Qutb's works from Arabic into Farsi.³

In subsequent decades, informal contacts continued to take place through emissaries from the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood (IOMB), the body formally responsible for coordinating among the organization's branches worldwide and shaping its foreign relations.⁴ Iran worked with the IOMB's London office to organize interfaith dialogues between Sunni and Shia Muslims. This included the Iran-backed Islamic Unity Forum,⁵ established in 2007 with cooperation from Ibrahim Munir, the secretary general of the IOMB. Such events also allowed Iran to develop and sustain contacts with members of the Egyptian Brotherhood, which as the movement's original branch holds considerable sway within the IOMB and has traditionally served as a bellwether for other Brotherhood organizations in the Middle East.

The shared basis in political Islam between the Brotherhood, one of the world's largest and most influential Sunni Islamist movements, and Iran's Shia Islamic Republic facilitated cooperation between the two sides. Ideologically, both parties advocate for the establishment of an Islamic state, religious proselytism (*daawa*), and Muslim unity. They also share some common geopolitical aims, including the need to confront Israel and liberate Palestine.

However, key ideological differences also exist. In particular, the Brotherhood rejects revolutionary tactics to gain power. Instead, the group has sought to build political influence through elections, while also emphasizing to Western powers skeptical of the group's intentions that it opposes establishing an Iranian model of Islamic governance.⁶ Nonetheless, ideological commonalities outweigh differences for Tehran, which views the Brotherhood as an ideal Sunni partner in its endeavor to "unify the Islamic world politically."⁷

Iran sees the Brotherhood as a bridge for improving relations with the Sunni Muslim world. Given the movement's broad reach and contacts, it could be a persuasive advocate for the Iranian-led "axis of resistance" against U.S. influence in the region, and importantly, a mediator with fellow Sunni Islamist groups hostile toward Tehran.⁸ Many Arab regimes and Salafi-oriented Sunni religious movements have historically depicted Shia Iran as a sinister force in the Middle East. This negative perception has only grown in recent years as a result of Tehran's direct support for President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria against a largely Sunni opposition during the Syrian conflict.

The confrontation with the United States has guided Iran's foreign policy since the founding of the Islamic Republic. To recruit allies, Tehran has historically employed a bottom-up approach in the Arab world that focuses on cultivating ties with nonstate actors and local communities, including Sunni Islamist groups. Alliances with Sunni Islamists are necessary to bolster the nonsectarian nature of Iran's "resistance front" in the region.⁹ Egypt, given its large population, border with Israel, and status as a member of the U.S.-backed regional camp since roughly 1979, remains a highly strategic location in which to make such inroads.

In the Muslim Brotherhood's view, a relationship with Iran serves to underpin the movement's self-appointed leadership role in promoting Islamic unity worldwide.¹⁰ It also considers it practical to maintain good relations with Iran, given its status as a regional power.¹¹ Even the prospect of improved Brotherhood-Iranian ties could serve as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from regional powers opposed to Tehran, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. However, compared to the Iranians, the Brotherhood has displayed less eagerness to increase cooperation due to its wariness over Iran's international isolation and generally unfavorable image among Sunni Muslims. Instead, the Brotherhood has engaged in contacts with Iran when expedient to serve the group's overall interests, as witnessed after the movement's political ascent in Egypt.

MISMATCHED EXPECTATIONS AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power following the Egyptian uprising ushered in a new period of direct engagement with Iran. Iranian officials hoped that rapprochement with Egypt under the Brotherhood was a first step toward reestablishing diplomatic ties with Egypt and ending its own regional isolation.¹² (In place of a fully normalized diplomatic relationship, Iran and Egypt only have Interests Offices in each other's countries.) However, this ambition remained unfulfilled and did not account for the Brotherhood's need to balance numerous political considerations, particularly the views of influential domestic Egyptian actors, such as the military, and regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia. As a result, Brotherhood-led Egypt chose to pursue only limited cooperation with Iran.¹³

Brotherhood Rule Leads to a Warming of Ties

Iran's characterization of the Arab uprisings as an "Islamic awakening" framed the transformative events in Egypt in religious terms.¹⁴ This established common ground with Islamist organizations that were formally entering politics during this period. In April 2011, Egypt's then foreign minister Nabil Alaraby stated that Egypt was open to reestablishing diplomatic relations with Iran.¹⁵ The prospect of friendlier Iranian-Egyptian relations appeared only to improve following the successes of the Brotherhood-linked Freedom and Justice Party in Egyptian parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012.

Upon Morsi's election as president in June 2012, the new administration improved Egypt's ties with Iran to emphasize the Brotherhood's vision of a new and independent foreign policy. Morsi's decision to include Tehran in his first major diplomatic initiative—brokering a solution to the Syrian conflict—signaled that Egypt under the Brotherhood was willing to pursue a course at odds with the traditional isolation of Iran.¹⁶ The Morsi government proposed setting up a working group composed of Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran to discuss ways to halt the violence in Syria. While the diplomatic initiative never materialized, it demonstrated that the Brotherhood viewed Iran as an influential regional player that merited a seat at the table alongside Egypt's traditional pro-U.S. allies.¹⁷

In August 2012, Morsi handed over the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement to Iranian officials in Tehran, becoming the first Egyptian president to visit Iran in over thirty years.¹⁸ Then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad later reciprocated by attending an Islamic summit in Cairo in February 2013.¹⁹ Iran also attempted to strengthen ties through proposed deals to boost Egypt's lagging economy. These

offers included a package to promote Egyptian tourism to Iranians, provide oil shipments, and implement various trade agreements.²⁰

Rather than immediately seizing the opportunity for increased economic cooperation with Tehran, Morsi allegedly sought to leverage Iranian offers to improve his administration's relations with Saudi Arabia. After Morsi's election, Riyadh worried that the Brotherhood would undermine the existing Egyptian-Saudi alliance in favor of Iran, its main rival in the region.²¹ While negotiating with Tehran, the Morsi administration informed Saudi Arabia about the details of Iranian overtures, hoping the Saudis would offer commensurate economic packages in return.²² In that way Morsi sought to placate Riyadh and underline that Egypt still prioritized a relationship with Saudi Arabia over Iran. However, in what appeared to be an effort to undermine the budding Iranian-Egyptian rapprochement, the Saudis informed Iran that Egypt had passed along to them the Iranian trade proposals.²³ Although this put the Morsi administration in an embarrassing position, the revelation did not halt contacts. Business normalization continued, and in March 2013 the first commercial flight between Iran and Egypt in thirty-four years landed in Tehran.²⁴

In pursuing relations with Iran, the Brotherhood also had to take the preferences of Egypt's entrenched military and intelligence services into consideration. These powerful institutions were stalwarts of Egypt's traditional foreign policy alignment with the United States and Gulf allies. According to a member of the Brotherhood who worked in the presidential palace, Egypt's military leadership and intelligence services were against full normalization with Tehran, with the caveat that they did not view Iran as an "enemy."²⁵ However, the head of the Iran desk at the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate did advise the Morsi administration to pursue more economic cooperation.²⁶ It is unclear whether this reflected a genuine interest within the security establishment to deepen Egypt's economic ties with Tehran, or was a trap to make it appear that the Muslim Brotherhood held a political bias toward Iran.²⁷

The attitudes of Brotherhood supporters and domestic allies further constrained outreach efforts. Among some of the movement's constituents, there was little appetite for developing deeper relations with Iran while it was simultaneously involved in repressing the Syrian uprising. Meanwhile, Egypt's Salafi movement and its political arm, the Nour Party, an electoral ally of the Brotherhood, were also against improving Cairo's ties with Tehran.²⁸ ²⁹ The Nour Party's ideological and suspected financial ties with Saudi Arabia hinted at a degree of policy coordination on this front with the group's Saudi backers.

Looking back, Iranian analysts and government officials blame the failed rapprochement with Egypt on Morsi's unwillingness to diverge from the views of Saudi Arabia and the Egyptian military and intelligence services.³⁰ Using an anecdote to illustrate the point, one Iranian official described a visit to the presidential palace in Cairo: "I saw the same security guards when I came during Mubarak's period in power. What changed?"³¹ Morsi was unable to fundamentally alter Egyptian foreign policy and chart a new course. Indeed, the July 2013 coup against Morsi and the Brotherhood marked a return of military rule to Egypt. Saudi Arabia praised the Egyptian Armed Forces for the takeover, indicating that the Morsi administration had failed to win the trust and backing of Riyadh.³² Meanwhile, Iran's official response was to condemn the coup, ending its hopes of establishing full diplomatic ties with Brotherhood-led Egypt.³³

Iranian Outreach to the Brotherhood in Exile

Despite the failure to establish diplomatic ties and the Brotherhood's removal from power, Iran continues to cultivate contacts with the organization in exile. Following the playbook from before 2011, Tehran is using Islam-centric gatherings such as the Islamic Unity Forum to sustain communications between Iranian government representatives and Brotherhood figures. Still, the Muslim Brotherhood remains hesitant to move beyond casual contacts as a result of its present weakness and the lingering resentment in the Sunni Arab world over Iranian actions in Syria. However, the organization does recognize that political developments could push the two sides into closer cooperation, particularly in light of the growing trend against Islamists in the region.

The imprisonment of thousands of Brotherhood members in the wake of the Egyptian coup temporarily paralyzed the organization. Following Morsi's removal, officials from the Iranian Interests Office reportedly reached out to Mohammed Ali Bishr, a member of the Brotherhood's Guidance Office. Bishr had managed to evade arrest after the military takeover, but whether a meeting ever took place is unclear.^{34 35} At the time, the movement likely recognized that Iran lacked the influence required to solve its immediate crisis in Egypt, which instead necessitated outreach to Washington, Brussels, and Gulf countries.

Members of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership who avoided arrest managed to reorganize themselves in February 2014 through the formation of the Supreme Administrative Committee (SAC). The committee includes Internal and External Administrative Bureaus to manage the group's members and activities in Egypt and in exile, respectively. However, a power struggle emerged within the SAC.³⁶ It pitted the movement's traditional leadership, as well as IOMB chief Ibrahim Munir, against a faction of younger members, including some who advocated violent resistance against the new Egyptian regime and saw Tehran as a potential backer.^{37 38} The traditional leadership faction eventually reestablished its authority after co-opting or expelling rival members from the organization.³⁹

This period of internal division offered Iran an opportunity to reestablish contacts with members from various Brotherhood factions without the presence of a centralized authority to veto communications. In Istanbul, a hub for Islamist exiles, Iran has courted Brotherhood members and other Islamists by sponsoring visits to Tehran and offering university scholarships. Since at least 2016, two organizations close to the Iranian government—a Qom-based conservative research institute that studies Islamist movements and a Tehran-based civil society group—have invited current and former Brotherhood members to attend conferences.⁴⁰ The research institute has also been seeking to establish a branch in Istanbul that would tap the knowledge of Islamist-leaning exiles, but this plan is encountering funding problems as a result of renewed U.S. sanctions.⁴¹ Recently warming ties between Iran and the Turkish government, one of the Brotherhood's main international backers, have also helped facilitate contacts with Turkey-based Islamists. While this is a positive development from an Iranian perspective, Tehran is proceeding cautiously to avoid angering the Turkish government, which does not want to see its influence over the Brotherhood undermined.

In July 2017, Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood engaged in the most high-profile public meeting between the parties since Morsi's removal in Egypt. Ayatollah Mohsen Araki, an adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, met with Ibrahim Munir on the sidelines of a meeting of the Islamic Unity Forum.⁴² This encounter provoked a heavy backlash from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which criticized Munir for

his participation in the event and characterized the move as “a betrayal of the blood of the martyrs caused by Iranian militias.”⁴³ So while the talks between senior officials could be a positive signal for the future direction of the relationship, Iran’s intervention in Syria remains an obstacle to better mutual ties.

Despite opposition to Iran in Sunni Islamist circles, the Muslim Brotherhood’s contacts with Iran serve as an important safety net for the group in a time of growing regional and global uncertainty. If the 2016 military coup in Turkey and the 2017 Saudi-led embargo against Qatar had both succeeded in inducing regime change, the Muslim Brotherhood would have been stripped of its primary backers in the Middle East. As a result, relations with Tehran increasingly represent a useful insurance policy for the Brotherhood, particularly in a situation that would require the movement to seek refuge in Iran. As during the Morsi administration, the Brotherhood remains buffeted by competing influences and contingencies when considering its engagement with its fellow Islamists in Tehran.

CONCLUSION

Though the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran share ideological commonalities and points of political convergence, several impediments stand in the way of deeper ties between them. The Brotherhood’s lack of a clear road map for reemerging as a political force hinders any efforts to plan long-term alliances, including with Tehran. In its current state, the Brotherhood is also wary of being manipulated by more powerful actors such as Iran. On the Iranian side, financial constraints due to U.S. sanctions, along with persisting animosity over Tehran’s role in the Syrian conflict, may also negate its efforts to court Brotherhood members in exile.

The prospect of prolonged regional isolation could potentially change the Muslim Brotherhood’s calculations and spur a more profound rapprochement with Tehran. As in the past, this will depend on how both parties view their strategic priorities amid evolving geopolitical circumstances. For now, their relationship is defined by mismatched expectations.

Despite the letdown that was Morsi’s Iran policy, Tehran will cautiously pursue more extensive ties with the Brotherhood, in the hope that the organization will one day be in a position to serve Iranian interests. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood is keeping its options open and engaging with all parties, including Iran, while awaiting the right political context to reemerge as a force in Egypt.

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THEME 2: THE RISE OF SALAFIST AUTHORITY

THE EMIR'S GIFT: GIVEN A GREATER ROLE, KUWAIT'S SALAFIS FACE THE COSTS

ZOLTAN PALL

The years since the Arab Spring uprisings began in late 2010 have been good to Kuwait's Salafi Community (Al-Jamaa al-Salafiyya), the country's oldest and most prominent Salafi group. Following a wave of antigovernment protests beginning in 2011, Kuwait's ruling Al Sabah family co-opted the Salafi Community as a counterweight to its opposition. Consequently, the Salafi Community has established a strong presence in state institutions while also expanding its transnational linkages. But the relationship between Kuwait's ruling elite and the Salafi Community is indicative of the frequently complex ties between Arab regimes and Islamist groups, characterized by pragmatic, shifting alliances; the pursuit of a comparative advantage by both sides, particularly in terms of political power or expanded patronage networks; and the concomitant desire of regimes to keep a tight rein on Islamist groups. In Kuwait's contentious political landscape, the ascendance of the Salafis could quickly turn.

The Salafi Community, more commonly known as the Revival of Heritage (Ihya al-Turath), is named after its transnational charity organization, the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (Jama'iyat Ihya al-Turath al-Islami), or RIHS.¹ The Salafi Community has participated in Kuwaiti parliamentary politics since 1981, represented in the legislature by its political wing, the Salafi Islamic Gathering (Al-Tajammu al-Salafi al-Islami). While the RIHS and the Salafi Islamic Gathering are officially separate entities, it is an open secret that they are closely interlinked institutional arms of the Salafi Community—in some regions of the country, the Salafi Islamic Gathering's electoral campaigns are even organized by employees of the RIHS.²

Kuwait's political order is unique in the Gulf. The country has a multiparty parliamentary system with a powerful legislature and relatively free elections, which provides a wide margin for political opposition. Yet Al Sabah family members still fill the country's principal political positions. In order to maintain its dominance, the ruling family has long pursued a balancing game to offset or neutralize its adversaries while fragmenting the political landscape to its advantage. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the government naturalized around 200,000 tribesmen who had not previously possessed citizenship.³

The tribesmen were expected to vote for the government's candidates in elections, counterbalancing the mostly urban leftist and Arab nationalist opposition.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Al Sabah family began providing political and financial assistance to the Muslim Brotherhood, in order to socially and politically strengthen themselves while again seeking to thwart prominent Arab nationalists. At the same time, the governing elite turned to the nascent Salafi movement to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from dominating Kuwait's Sunni Islamic scene.⁴ With institutional and financial backing, the Salafi movement was able to compete with the Muslim Brotherhood and its Social Reform Society, a charity that also served as a political party before 1991. In 1981, Fahad al-Ahmad Al Sabah, a prominent member of the ruling family, donated funds to enable the Salafis to establish their own charity—the RIHS—providing them with political cover for their activities.⁵

The Salafi Community was a major beneficiary of the turbulent chain of political events that followed the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. While the protests in Kuwait did not lead to an immediate regime change, they inspired a multifaceted opposition movement that demanded political reform and an end to corruption. This opposition, which brought down the government in November 2011, included tribal groups, Islamists, and liberals. The Muslim Brotherhood severed its previous alliance with the governing elite to join the protests, drawing accusations of being the protests' main organizer from parliamentarians and opinion makers close to the government.^{6,7}

In contrast, the Salafi Community's reading of Islam's foundational texts argued that revolt against a legitimate Muslim ruler is forbidden. It expressed this view in Friday prayers, religious lectures, newspapers, and on social media. While this won the Salafi Community the favor of the ruling family, the Salafis did not emerge unscathed. The network behind the Salafi Community split into pro-government and pro-opposition camps, and a majority of those opposed to the government—led by the veteran Kuwaiti Salafi politician Khalid Sultan bin Issa—left both the Salafi Islamic Gathering and the RIHS.⁸

Many Kuwaitis also viewed the Salafi Community as unquestioningly supportive of the ruling family, which contributed to its dwindling popularity. In the November 2016 elections, the Salafi Community's candidates failed to win a single seat in parliament. Despite this setback, the Salafi Community preserved its alliance with the Al Sabah family.

In response to the protests, Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah dissolved the opposition-dominated parliament in late 2012, precipitating new elections in early 2013. However, the opposition boycotted these elections, allowing for the formation of a mainly pro-government legislature.⁹ The loyalist Salafis were rewarded with prominent positions in state institutions. For example, one of their leading figures, Ali al-Umayr, became the oil minister and then the minister of public works.

However, the Al Sabah family's main instrument of co-optation was providing the Salafi Community with a dominant role in what is referred to as Kuwait's Islamic sector (*Al-qita al-Islami*), which includes state Islamic institutions such as the Zakat House (*Beit al-Zakat*), the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, and the Kuwait Awqaf Public Foundation (*Al-Amana al-Ama li-l Awqaf*). Since the 1980s, the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood have competed for influence in these institutions, which have typically been dominated by skilled individuals belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Brotherhood fell out

of favor with the governing elite, however, the ruling family's Salafi supporters were able to increase their authority over this valuable institutional web of religious patronage.

The Zakat House was established in 1982 as an independent governmental body to collect *zakat*, the Islamic religious tax, and invest it in charitable projects inside and outside Kuwait. The idea for the institution originated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which dominated the Zakat House until its director, Abd al-Qadir al-Ajil, retired in 2014. In his place, the government appointed Ibrahim Salih, a member of the Salafi Community. A number of Zakat House employees who had belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood were retired or their contracts were not renewed, and they were replaced by Salafis or unaffiliated government loyalists.

The Salafis' increased presence in the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs was even more noticeable. Similar to what happened in the Zakat House, Muslim Brotherhood members were pushed out and, in many cases, Salafis close to the Salafi Community took their place. Currently, most department heads and the deputy minister, Farid al-Imadi, are Salafis. As a result, the number of imams affiliated with the Salafi Community has significantly increased. Some Kuwaitis even say a majority of mosques are now controlled by Salafis.

Many Salafis have also received posts in the Kuwait Awqaf Public Foundation, an institution that supervises Islamic endowments (*waqf*), which are established for specific charity purposes. The Awqaf Public Foundation has a say in who to support and where to carry out activities specified in the founding document of an endowment, so an influential position in the foundation can be especially beneficial in extending one's network of patronage. However, unlike in the Zakat House and the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, Muslim Brotherhood influence remains strong within the Awqaf Public Foundation, despite attempts to curb it.¹⁰

THE SALAFIS' TRANSNATIONAL CHARITIES

In co-opting the Salafi Community, the Al Sabah family gave Salafis the opportunity to expand their networks into other countries. The Salafi Community's enlarged role in Kuwait's Islamic institutions increased its access to financial resources for charity projects overseas, and it was able to use such resources to bolster the influence of the RIHS and augment its own power.

This new opening for the RIHS built on three decades during which it had established a presence in more than fifty countries. Beginning in 1987, the charity was active in Pakistan during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, helping refugees who were crossing the Afghan border.¹¹ Kuwaitis showed a great willingness to donate money to support humanitarian activities, enabling the society to expand worldwide. In addition to helping Muslims affected by conflict, the RIHS proselytized by investing heavily in poverty alleviation, building religious schools and mosques, and sponsoring thousands of preachers.

The Zakat House provides a good example of how, under the new Salafi leadership that took charge of the institution after 2011, the Salafi Community has benefited from state resources for charity purposes. The Zakat House cooperates with Kuwaiti Islamic charities, entrusting them with implementation of

relief projects abroad. According to a senior employee of the Zakat House, the share of these projects assigned to the RIHS has increased under the Salafis.¹² The employee also noted that foreign Salafis who are ideologically close to the Salafi Community have traveled to Kuwait to meet with officials of the Zakat House, feeling that the new leadership affords them a greater chance of receiving funding than was previously the case.

The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs provides similar powers of religious patronage. Its Foreign Relations Department sponsors the building of Islamic centers overseas and pays for Kuwaiti religious scholars to lecture abroad. More often than before, the beneficiaries of the ministry's financial support are foreign Salafis with connections to the Salafi Community. As a former ministry employee explained, for someone to stand a good chance of receiving such support, he or she needs to have the backing of the Salafi Community.¹³

In a further sign of the Salafi Community's growing influence, its charity now receives more donations from members of Kuwait's merchant class who are close to the emir, as well as from wealthy members of the ruling family. Affluent Kuwaitis usually make donations to charities by financing specific projects, such as the building of a mosque or a clinic. As a result of today's close relationship between the Salafi Community and the ruling elite, the RIHS now receives more funds for such projects.

In recent years, Salafis from around the world have been invited to participate in the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs' annual Islamic conference, the Conference for Reform and Change (Mutamar al-Islah wal-Taghyir). As an employee of the RIHS explained, the conference provides excellent opportunities to meet like-minded Salafis and expand Salafi *dawa*, or proselytization, into new locations.¹⁴ This is how the RIHS successfully established its presence in New Zealand a few years ago.¹⁵

Data measuring the international expansion of the Salafi Community's networks are scarce. Yet the impact can be observed in as unlikely a place as Buddhist-majority Cambodia, where Muslims constitute only 4 to 5 percent of the population.¹⁶ Since the fall of the Vietnamese-backed communist regime in 1991, thousands of transnational charities have established themselves in Cambodia. The most active organizations are those from Malaysia and the Gulf. Although only a few of them are Kuwaiti—including the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Social Reform Society and the International Islamic Charity Organization, another charity close to the Brotherhood—the RIHS has become very influential among Cambodian Muslims. The charity established its presence in the mid-1990s and, since then, has built an educational network with a local Muslim nongovernmental organization that includes more than thirty boarding schools in all provinces. One of its major achievements was building a hospital in Kendal Province with several other Kuwaiti charities.¹⁷ It has also launched poverty alleviation projects and sponsored hundreds of preachers across Cambodia.

Since 2013, the RIHS's Cambodian activities have grown significantly. Due to the society's increased financial capabilities, it has expanded its system of all-female boarding schools. Until 2016, only one such school existed, in Tboung Khmum Province, with room for 740 female students. Currently, new buildings are being built for 1,100 students at both the elementary and secondary levels. In 2017, the charity opened two more all-female boarding schools in southern Kampot Province, which it began building in 2016.¹⁸

While the Kuwaiti government's co-optation of the Salafi Community might have increased the group's influence abroad, it has been accused in Kuwait of focusing less on the purity of Islam than on the pursuit of political interests. Only a handful of people today attend the religious lessons of sheikhs close to the group, whereas dozens, sometimes even hundreds, of people attended a few years ago.¹⁹ The Salafi Community's electoral defeat in 2016 was the first time since it began participating in Kuwait's parliamentary elections that none of its candidates won a seat.

At the same time, the freewheeling context of Kuwaiti politics means the political alliance between the ruling family and the Salafis is likely to end at some point. The Salafi Community could easily fall out of favor if the ruling elite's interests dictate supporting another group, as happened to the Muslim Brotherhood after the 2011 protests.

The Muslim Brotherhood's falling out with the Al Sabah family is also not irreversible. Many people in Kuwait, including individuals from within the state bureaucracy itself, regularly point out that the Salafis do not have enough accomplished cadres to run the Zakat House and the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs with the same efficiency as the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁰ This may push the ruling family to restore ties with the Brotherhood and renew its influence in the Islamic sector. This could lead to the marginalization of the Salafis, due to their already diminished popularity.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

The Salafi Community's co-optation by the ruling family is an illustrative example of how Kuwait's political system works and how Islamist movements engage with it. Due to their support for the ruling family, the Salafis have taken on a prominent role in the state's Islamic institutions, which has enhanced their sway both inside Kuwait and abroad. However, this relationship, defined by the Islamists' dependency on state favoritism, has also allowed Kuwait's rulers to create divisions among Islamist groups, in the same way they divided their nonreligious rivals.

There is also an inherent disadvantage in the Islamists' relationship with the ruling elite, which has effectively allowed the Al Sabah family to squeeze Islamist groups between two unpalatable outcomes: If they align with the ruling family too closely so as to bolster their religious patronage capacities, their popularity may decline. But if they adopt a position opposing the ruling family, they may be cut off from its favors. The widespread perception that the Salafis are blind followers of the ruling family has already damaged the Salafi Community's credibility. The Al Sabah family can only gain from this dilemma. By keeping a major center of power in the state off-balance, they maintain their supremacy in Kuwait's complex political game.

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THEME 2: THE RISE OF SALAFIST AUTHORITY

BROTHERS IN ALMS: SALAFI FINANCIERS AND THE SYRIAN INSURGENCY

THOMAS PIERRET

Today, any discussion of the role of transnational Islamist actors in the Syrian conflict invariably focuses on Salafi-jihadi organizations, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State and al-Qaeda. In 2012–2013, however, the conflict was primarily shaped by other transnational networks that were run by more mainstream activist and quietist Salafi fundraisers based in the Gulf, particularly Kuwait.^{1 2}

Besides providing significant humanitarian support for opposition-held areas and refugees abroad, these fundraisers helped establish the largest rebel coalitions during the Syrian war. Yet their success was short-lived; by 2014, Salafi-backed coalitions were rapidly running out of steam. This resulted from military setbacks and intra-rebel factionalism, and also a decrease in private donations from Gulf countries as Salafi fundraisers faced state repression at home and declining public interest globally in the events in Syria. Concomitantly, inside Syria, the need for more pragmatic, less ideological rebel coalitions and the growing assertiveness of foreign states supporting the uprising combined and gave rise to new patterns of alliance. Gulf-based Salafi fundraisers often played no role in these newer coalitions, but their influence lingers in the country's religious sphere.

WHY GULF-BASED SALAFISTS SUPPORTED SYRIA'S OPPOSITION

The decision of Gulf-based Salafists in 2011 to take the lead in financially supporting rebel groups in Syria stemmed from a drive to bolster themselves at home and abroad. This in turn only heightened competition among Salafi networks, particularly between activists and quietists (known as such because they preach obedience to the incumbent). In Kuwait, fundraising for the Syrian rebels was spearheaded by activist Salafists, who had previously been minor players on the Salafi scene when compared to their rivals from the quietist, Saudi-aligned Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (Jamiyyat Ihya al-Turath al-Islami), or RIHS.

The most dynamic of the Kuwaiti fundraisers was the preacher Hajjaj al-Ajami. He partnered with Hakim al-Mutayri, leader of the Umma Party, a transnational political organization promoting political liberalism at home and strident anti-imperialism abroad.³ Early on, the party played an outsized role in Syria by supporting Ahrar al-Sham, once the largest rebel faction and a cornerstone of the Syrian Islamic Front (al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya al-Suriyya) founded in December 2012. Muhammad al-Mufrih, the leader of the Umma Party's banned Saudi chapter, helped establish Ahrar al-Sham in 2011, and Muhammad al-Abduli, an Emirati counterpart, died while fighting with the group in Raqqa in 2013.⁴

The Syrian conflict represented a similar opportunity for another regional network of Salafists, often dubbed "Sururis," after Mohammed Surur Zein al-Abidin (1938–2016). A Syrian in long-term exile—living in Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and finally Qatar—Zein al-Abidin blended Salafi religious doctrines with a Muslim Brotherhood–like focus on political issues, a combination that proved a major inspiration for the Sahwa movement that challenged the Saudi regime during the early 1990s.⁵ His influence in Syria was minimal prior to 2011, not only because of his absence but also because his criticisms were focused on the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, where most of his followers lived.

With the 2011 uprising, Zein al-Abidin reoriented his efforts toward Syria. In September 2012, he threw his weight behind the Syria Islamic Liberation Front (Jabhat Tahrir Suriyya al-Islamiyya),⁶ which brought together several thousand fighters from four of the most powerful Syrian rebel factions: the Islam Brigade (later the Islam Army) in Damascus Governorate; the Farouq Battalions in Homs Governorate; and, owing to the Syria Islamic Liberation Front's financial capabilities, two groups previously co-opted by the Muslim Brotherhood, namely Souqour al-Sham in Idlib Governorate and the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo Governorate.^{7 8}

The activist Salafists' spearheading of fundraising activities for Syrian rebels triggered a similar move on the part of their quietist, pro-Saudi rivals. Following Riyadh's preferences, these networks initially supported attempts at establishing a command structure for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) under the aegis of officers who had defected from the Syrian army. The Saudi-based, Syrian television preacher Adnan al-Arouf, who blamed Kuwaiti activist Salafi fundraisers⁹ for bypassing such initiatives in favor of radical factions, was invited as a keynote speaker to the September 2012 inauguration meeting of the Joint Command of the Revolutionary Military Councils, a contender for the FSA leadership.¹⁰

Famous early defectors who had joined the FSA, such as Lieutenant Abd al-Razzaq Tlass and Captains Ammar al-Wawi and Ibrahim Majbur, also became commanders in the Front for Authenticity and Development (Jabhat al-Asala wal-Tanmiya), which the quietest RIHS established in November 2012.¹¹ Its decision to step up its involvement in the Syrian conflict must be understood in light of its delicate domestic position at the time.¹² The RIHS's activist rivals had significantly increased their visibility due to their proactive support of the rebels, and other causes throughout the region, after the Arab uprisings in 2011. Furthermore, the society's internal cohesion was threatened by a reformist wing that joined the domestic Kuwaiti opposition, against the wishes of the RIHS leadership. At a time when victory appeared possible for the Syrian rebels, the activist Salafists' sponsorship of the most powerful insurgent coalitions could have dramatically bolstered their standing across the region, a very real risk to their quietist counterparts.

In their Syrian endeavor, the Gulf-based Salafists owed their initial success to a unique combination of factors. One was the high GDP per capita of their countries, which made donations from Gulf citizens to Salafi groups more likely. Given Saudi Arabia's ban on private fundraising for the Syrian rebels from May 2012 onward, such donations began centralizing in the more permissive states of Qatar and Kuwait. A Salafi fundraiser for Syrian rebels, Nayef al-Ajami, even served as Kuwait's justice minister in early 2014. In such an environment, Salafi supporters of the Syrian cause were able to operate openly, tapping into a larger pool of donors than the low-profile networks that usually funded radical Islamist militancy.

A second advantage was the high profile that some of the fundraisers had acquired as television preachers. For example, Hajjaj al-Ajami, who was only twenty-four in 2011, had hosted an Islamic reality show,¹³ and Arour had broken through in media with anti-Shia polemics.¹⁴ Shafi al-Ajami, another major Kuwaiti fundraiser for Ahrar al-Sham, relied on the popularity of his partner Nabil al-Awadi, an immensely popular television cleric who, by September 2011, had become the single-most influential tweeter on Syria.¹⁵ Moreover, whereas regional states were either hostile to jihadi networks or dealt with them indirectly, activist Salafists were mainstream enough to partner openly with Qatar and Turkey, while quietist Salafists did so with Saudi Arabia.

Mainstream Salafists also initially benefited from their relative ideological flexibility in efforts to assemble large coalitions of Syrian rebels, among which, owing to years of state repression, genuine Salafists were in short supply.¹⁶ Gulf-based fundraisers could not connect with full-fledged Salafi communities, with the exception of Zahran Alloush's group in Douma that gave rise to the Islam Brigade. Rather, they established ties with local factions through individual brokers, such as veteran jihadists, preachers, and political activists. Therefore, Salafi fundraisers were not choosy when recruiting beneficiaries, although they encouraged the adoption of Islamic symbols and slogans by rebel factions and tried to shape the factions' politics according to their own agendas. They did not impose the same far-reaching ideological compliance that jihadi organizations, by way of comparison, expected from their affiliates.

So, for example, although he was a major backer of Ahrar al-Sham and more hardline factions, Hajjaj al-Ajami also sponsored FSA founder Colonel Riad al-Asad.¹⁷ The Surur-backed Syria Islamic Liberation Front was a heterogeneous alliance, including the genuinely Salafi Islam Brigade alongside Muslim Brotherhood-type Islamists. However, the group did not include jihadists due to decades of polemics from Zein al-Abidin on what he called the "party of extremists" (*hizb al-ghulat*).¹⁸ As for the Front for Authenticity and Development, it gravitated toward tribal factions in eastern Syria. This was not because quietist Salafism was strong there but because of personal ties, such as those linking Khalid al-Hammad, the front's secretary general and a Kuwait-based Syrian expatriate, to his native governorate of Deir Ezzor.

The influence of Gulf-based Salafi fundraisers seemed to peak in November 2013 with the merger of the Syria Islamic Liberation Front and the Syrian Islamic Front, creating the Islamic Front (Al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya). The move was unprecedented for two reasons: it led to the largest Syrian rebel coalition ever; and the new coalition was funded by both political and quietist Salafists,¹⁹ thanks to the dual networks of patronage of Zahran Alloush's Islam Army, a key faction in the Syria Islamic Liberation Front.²⁰

However, what looked like a show of strength and unity rapidly turned out to be nothing of the sort, as by summer 2014 the Islamic Front had turned into an empty shell. Part of the problem had to do with

realities on the ground. Military setbacks at the hands of the regime sparked factional divisions among groups that had been affiliated with the Syria Islamic Liberation Front, including the Tawhid Brigade, the Farouq Battalions, and Souqour al-Sham, which lost its powerful Daoud Brigade to the rising Islamic State.²¹ Moreover, the rivalry between Ahrar al-Sham and the Islam Army, the two pillars of the Islamic Front, resulted in the formation of subcoalitions within the alliance,²² thereby undermining the initial ambitions to build up a centralized leadership.

The comparatively modest Front for Authenticity and Development outlived other contenders, although it has also been diminished by the vagaries of war. The quietist Salafi coalition suffered a serious blow in summer 2014, when the Islamic State expelled rival armed groups from eastern Syria. Local members from the front formed the Lions of the East Army (Jaysh Usud al-Sharqiyya),²³ and subsequently spearheaded anti-Islamic State operations in the Badiya (Syria's central desert) with the support of the CIA-supervised Military Operation Command, based in Jordan. In 2016, the Front for Authenticity and Development lost its eastern assets following the establishment of the New Syrian Army (later renamed the Revolution Commandos Army), which partnered with the Pentagon. First, the Lions of the East withdrew from the front in opposition to the project.²⁴ Then the front broke with the New Syrian Army after its commander, Khazal al-Sarhan, in documents leaked by the Islamic State, was seen wearing a U.S. flag on his shoulders and expressing a disregard for civilian casualties. The front still formally exists in western Syria, but seems largely inconsequential.

A REVERSAL OF FORTUNE IN SYRIA

From 2014 onward, Gulf-based Salafi financiers were generally irrelevant in new rebel coalitions built on the remnants of the Islamic Front and similar groups. Three main factors were at play: a decline in donations from these Gulf-based fundraisers as a result of restrictive measures and a changing public mood at home; new military realities and organizational needs inside Syria; and a growing effort by state sponsors to consolidate rebel forces.

While the fundraising strategy of mainstream Salafi supporters in the Gulf had been premised on their media exposure and ability to operate publicly, by 2014 this had become a liability. Such visibility made the fundraisers vulnerable to a crackdown encouraged by the U.S. government.²⁵ The United States sanctioned activist Salafists, such as Hajjaj al-Ajami and Shafi al-Ajami, who primarily supported mainstream Islamist Syrian factions but had become increasingly open about also sponsoring the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front.²⁶ U.S. pressure resulted in the resignation of Kuwaiti justice minister Nayef al-Ajami due to his involvement in Syria-related fundraising.²⁷ Activist Salafi networks in Kuwait were further weakened by the decision of local authorities to join the region-wide repression against Islamist dissent following Egypt's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. Most notably, the authorities deprived Nabil al-Awadi of his Kuwaiti citizenship and ordered the closure of the Surur-linked Fahd al-Ahmad Association.^{28 29}

Growing repression at home was not the only factor diverting Gulf-based Salafi fundraisers, and the public, from the Syrian cause. While fatigue inevitably developed in the face of a protracted, increasingly fragmented conflict—donations reportedly began decreasing as early as 2013—other regional issues emerged.³⁰ This included the overthrow of Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 and the

subsequent repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the Houthi expansion in Yemen and the ensuing military intervention by Gulf states.

However, Salafi funding for Syrian factions did not cease entirely. The quietists and Sururis, who had not funded jihadists, continued supporting their favorites: the Front for Authenticity and Development and the Islam Army. Yet, regardless of the difficulties faced by their benefactors, the original Salafi coalitions in Syria no longer suited the rebels. The nationwide character and distinct political identity of these coalitions had been part of a PR strategy designed to appeal to Gulf donors concerned with their beneficiaries' relevance and ideological correctness. From a purely military perspective, however, these coalitions were useless because they aligned groups often physically scattered across Syria, which limited the possibility of cooperation on the ground.

This was not an insurmountable problem as long as regime forces seemed to be crumbling. However, as the tide turned throughout 2013, tactical synergy at the governorate level between groups of different ideological persuasions became a matter of survival for the insurgency. The trend was most remarkably illustrated by the creation, in spring 2014, of the short-lived Consultative Council of the Mujahidin of the Eastern Region in Deir Ezzor. This group united all local factions, from FSA-labeled ones to the Nusra Front, against the regime and the Islamic State. Likewise, in Damascus's Eastern Ghouta, the Unified Military Command brought together the Salafi Islam Army and its bitter rival, Afnan al-Sham, a faction led by Sufi clerics and figures tied to the Muslim Brotherhood.³¹ Elsewhere, military imperatives, combined with the growing assertiveness of foreign states involved in Syria, gave rise to local alliances. These included the Southern Front, backed by the United States and Jordan, and the Army of Conquest in Idlib Governorate and the Aleppo Conquest operations room, sponsored by Turkey and Qatar. The nationwide pattern of rebel consolidation that had been promoted by Gulf-based Salafi financiers had become obsolete.

CONCLUSION: WHAT REMAINS OF THE SALAFI LEGACY

In retrospect, the Syrian conflict appears to have represented a brief window of opportunity for Gulf-based Salafi fundraisers, who faded into oblivion as rapidly as they had initially come to the fore. Yet their long-term impact should not be underestimated. Their financial backing was a key factor in the rise of the two leading non-jihadi factions in Syria, Ahrar al-Sham and the Islam Army, leading to Salafism's unprecedented visibility in mainstream Syrian opposition politics.

Support for the armed factions in Syria also went hand in hand with less visible efforts on the part of Salafi humanitarian and proselytizing nongovernmental organizations. This included the RIHS, which has continued providing aid inside and outside Syria through its Syria Relief Committee (Lajna Ighatha Suriya),³² and the Surur-linked Hayat al-Sham al-Islamiyya, which claims to have distributed more than 1 million religious booklets and employs 150 full-time preachers across Syria and in refugee camps.³³

Salafi clerics have also broadened their foothold at the top level of Syria's religious elite, which had been the preserve of traditionalist, Sufi-leaning scholars. This change has been illustrated by the prominent role that the Hayat al-Sham al-Islamiyya plays in the Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council, the foremost religious authority among mainstream opposition and armed rebel groups.³⁴ Combined with the religious

indoctrination provided by Salafi armed factions themselves, these developments suggest that the map of the Syrian religious field has been durably redrawn. The post-uprising increase in Salafi influence is likely to persist long after the Islamist rebel fronts of 2012–2013 become a footnote in the history of the Syrian conflict.

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THEME 3: PRAGMATISM AND FLEXIBILITY

HAMAS: CONSTRAINED OR NIMBLE?

IMAD ALSOOS AND NATHAN J. BROWN

In 2017, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas made news by taking three major steps that did not involve firing a single shot: it issued a new charter; it elected a new leadership; and it allowed the administration in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip to answer to the ministries of the Palestinian Authority (PA) based in the West Bank, a relationship that had been sundered a decade earlier.

These measures were interpreted by observers as having been brought about by external political constraints.¹ There were good reasons for reaching such a conclusion, since Hamas was, and to an extent still is, hemmed in from all sides. However, focusing solely on external considerations misses a great deal and is hardly sufficient for explaining why and how Hamas behaves as it does. The movement's ability to take observers by surprise was dramatically illustrated in April 2018 with a series of marches on the fence surrounding the Gaza Strip.²

Rather, three additional factors must be taken into account. First, Hamas's leadership does not passively respond to outside conditions, but actively evaluates them in order to optimally manage its responses. Second, international pressure does not so much directly affect Hamas's calculations as it has an impact on domestic public opinion, which in turn shapes the group's understanding of opportunities and constraints. And third, Hamas is distinctive on the Palestinian scene in that it has developed an institutionalized rather than a personalized organization, one with mechanisms linking its leadership with the rank and file.

Understanding Hamas's internal dynamics helps to show how its actions reflect strategic choices, allowing for a better comprehension of the way the organization interacts with political realities, makes concessions, and capitalizes on these to maximize its gains. This, in turn, allows observers to grasp how Hamas achieves its goals, manages challenges, maintains its integrity, and survives, despite the formidable obstacles it has encountered in recent years. Such resilience has particular resonance at a time when Hamas's

main rival, Fatah, is showing signs of incoherence and decay, when many Palestinian political structures are in crisis, and when the Palestinian national movement is facing an uncertain predicament.

THE HEADACHE OF GOVERNING

Hamas was founded on the eve of the First Palestinian Intifada (1987–1993) as an “Islamic resistance movement.” While it has long sought to join the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), this has never happened. Fatah has dominated the PLO since 1969 and is unwilling to cede to Hamas any part of its power. Hamas rejected the Oslo Accords of 1993 and the negotiations with Israel that followed. When this process led to the election of a Palestinian president and parliament in 1996, as part of a supposedly temporary Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, Hamas refused to go along with it.

In 2000 the Second Intifada broke out, following the failure of the Oslo process to establish a Palestinian state. Hamas was active in the protests, solidifying its standing in Palestinian society. When new parliamentary elections were scheduled for January 2006, Hamas decided to participate, even though it continued to reject the Oslo process. The organization quickly showed a remarkable capacity for mobilizing in opposition to the PA, and this helped propel it to a stunning electoral triumph.

That triumph, which led to Hamas’s entering government for the first time, was met with a harsh international response. The Middle East Quartet—an ad hoc body created to mediate in Middle East peace talks, made up of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations—sought to impose conditions on Hamas for negotiations to continue.³ These involved recognizing Israel, accepting past agreements with Israel, and renouncing violence. When Hamas demurred, Israel and the United States took steps aimed at generating popular discontent with the Hamas government in Gaza and the West Bank. Israel ceased transferring tax revenues to the new Hamas-led Palestinian government while Western backers stopped providing it with budgetary support. Even private banks, fearing sanctions, put an end to their dealings with the new government. Under such pressure, Hamas did agree in principle with Fatah to form a national-unity government in 2007, but the efforts to unseat it continued. These efforts, spearheaded by the Palestinian security forces loyal to Fatah, failed, showing Hamas’s significant ability to maneuver domestically.

Power struggles between Fatah and Hamas over control of PA institutions escalated during that period, until there was a major outbreak of violence in June 2007, when the two groups engaged in a military showdown in Gaza. The ensuing Hamas victory allowed the organization to take over PA institutions in the territory. This provoked a rift in Palestinian areas, with Hamas ruling over Gaza and Fatah over the West Bank, from where it retained control of the PLO. While Hamas’s refusal to comply with the Middle East Quartet’s conditions had led to a momentary increase in its popular support,⁴ this did not help Hamas to overcome growing public dissatisfaction with the tightened blockade on Gaza imposed as a result of its victory, which began eating away at its popularity.⁵

Hamas’s leaders justified their military takeover in 2007 as a reaction to what they said was a planned coup by Fatah, but their actions placed them in a difficult position.⁶ The organization had crossed its own

self-imposed redlines of never killing Palestinians or attacking other Palestinian groups. Hamas imposed a tight grip on power in Gaza, but it also lost its reputation as a more principled movement in the eyes of much of the population.⁷

Even if the situation was corrosive to Hamas's status, it was manageable. The PA deposed the Hamas-led cabinet after its takeover of Gaza, but this came with a decision to continue funding the salaries of PA employees in the territory, allowing it to retain a base of loyalists there. In response, Hamas set up a parallel administration, hiring thousands of people, whose salaries the PA refused to pay. To counter the stranglehold on Gaza by Israel and Egypt, Hamas encouraged the growth of a "tunnel economy," whereby economic activity took place through hundreds of tunnels dug under Gaza's border with Egypt. This provided Gaza's inhabitants with work and cheap goods, generating renewed satisfaction.

As a result of the tunnels, Hamas's revenues rose, so that by 2009 they totaled \$150–\$200 million annually,⁸ a figure that would rise to about \$375 million in 2011, when the regime of Egypt's then president Hosni Mubarak fell. During the same period, unemployment in Gaza dropped from 45 percent to 32 percent.⁹ This led to the increased stability of Hamas rule and a bigger regional role for the organization after the election of Mohamed Morsi as Egypt's president in 2012. All this seemed to promise an end to Hamas's isolation.

Periodically, the rival Palestinian leaderships would pledge to reconcile, and at times specific steps were taken to further this, such as extensive negotiations in 2011. Generally, it was the weakness of one side or the other at a particular time, and sometimes both, that led to efforts to appear to favor unity. However, neither side was willing to risk surrendering authority in its respective realm and international actors remained guarded, with some even hostile to such attempts.

Things changed for the worse for Hamas after July 2013, when Egypt's military overthrew Morsi and the political system led by the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas's sister organization. The military-dominated regime in Cairo put an end to the tunnel economy, exacerbating the impact of the blockade on Gaza. The ensuing economic strains forced Hamas to accept the Shati Agreement of April 23, 2014, an unprecedented development in the Fatah-Hamas relationship that was aimed at allowing the Fatah-led PA to govern Gaza again.¹⁰ The accord collapsed following the war between Hamas and Israel in summer 2014, as both Palestinian groups focused on retrenchment rather than reconciliation. However, the brief opening revealed that Hamas was looking for a way out of the Gaza straitjacket in a manner that would strengthen its domestic popularity.

HAMAS CHOOSES RENEWAL

In early 2017, amid the continuing stalemate in Hamas-Fatah relations, Hamas once again faced a crisis. In an attempt to raise the heat on Hamas, the PA cut the salaries of some of its own employees in Gaza as well as other forms of support for the territory, because such revenues facilitated Hamas's continued rule by reducing discontent. The organization concluded that, despite widespread dissatisfaction with the PA, "popular agitation would turn against [Hamas] rule," as one activist put it.^{11 12} The collapse of the tunnel economy and the PA's punitive measures had pushed Gazans to their limit, given the misery in which they

lived.¹³ Hamas's stark choice was either "reconciliation at any cost" and handing Gaza's administration over to Fatah, or accepting an "inevitable catastrophe."

This new reality forced Hamas and its electorate to be pragmatic with regard to the internal and external challenges the organization was facing. Hamas elections in February and October 2017 brought in Saleh al-Aroui, as deputy head of the Hamas Political Bureau, and Yahya al-Sinwar, as the movement's head in Gaza. While both were seen as hardliners, they moved forward on a reconciliation agreement with the PA. The difficulties all around seemed insurmountable, but the two new leaders' status as former Israeli prisoners and the fact that they represented new faces gave them the latitude to take Hamas in a new direction. As Sinwar stated in a meeting with Gaza trade unions in October 2017, reconciliation was a collective decision by the movement at home and abroad¹⁴.

Under the reconciliation agreement that ensued, ministers from the PA in Ramallah are supposed to take formal control of political structures in Gaza, with Hamas ending any governing role there. However, full implementation seems unlikely at present. A unified cabinet in Ramallah nominally governs Gaza, but its effective control of the bureaucracy there is shaky and untested. Several outstanding issues, such as Hamas's insistence on retaining an armed wing, will likely remain unresolved. But even if parts of the agreement remain frozen, it has allowed Hamas to cede governing responsibility without losing influence over much of what goes on in Gaza. Even a bomb attack in Gaza in March 2018 targeting visiting PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, though it raised tensions, failed to bring about a collapse of the accommodation between Fatah and Hamas.

Why was Hamas willing to discontinue governing Gaza? And how did the election of seemingly uncompromising figures lead to its more relaxed grip on power and a more flexible ideology? External constraints, acting on public discontent in Gaza, had generated enormous pressure on Hamas, making its leaders realize that they could no longer govern, let alone wait out the blockade. However, Hamas also had choices, and in 2017 it showed that it could react not by accepting defeat passively but by turning crisis into opportunity.

Hamas was able to do this because its internal deliberations are conducted in such a way as to allow for the emergence of a broad consensus. The organization has always striven to have in place mechanisms allowing it to sustain itself, maintain links between the leadership and the base, and ensure that its members are united around party structures and a common strategy. That is why when Hamas faced external challenges, geographical isolation, a lack of allies, and rising popular discontent in 2017, it reacted by electing a new leadership. During this period it also altered its charter in a protracted, movement-wide process that suggested a willingness to compromise without formally repudiating past positions. These moves, aimed at giving new momentum to the organization, came as part of Hamas's preparation to disengage from its governing role in Gaza.

While Hamas has decisionmaking institutions, it gains by being able to anchor its choices in interactions between these institutions and local activists on the one hand, and between the organization and the broader public on the other. Hamas activists emphasize that all members were involved in deciding on a number of strategic choices in recent years, through forums providing for intense discussions—including

whether to participate in local or legislative elections, to approve of a truce with Israel, or to endorse reconciliation talks with Fatah.¹⁵

A mechanism that Hamas uses for internal dialogue is monthly gatherings that it calls *lailat katiba* (or “battalion night”), in which its leaders share the movement’s ideas with all members in each region.¹⁶ Hamas also depends upon local bodies to create informal networks based on kinship, friendship, and neighborhood ties. In addition, these local bodies build a profile of the population by conducting surveys and registering people in the organization’s database of inhabitants.¹⁷ This allows Hamas to get a sense of the public mood about issues, in particular its standing and general attitudes toward its behavior and political choices.

WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR HAMAS?

Were the measures Hamas adopted in 2017 anything more than a quick fix? Hamas’s ability to reestablish its position will depend on regaining the popular support it once enjoyed in Gaza, as well as on its success in rebuilding regional alliances to mitigate its political and geographical isolation. Achieving breakthroughs on these fronts depends on Hamas’s organizational potential and its strategic choices.

Hamas’s support dropped sharply as a result of its military takeover of Gaza and preservation of order through the heavy hand of its security forces. The organization realized it had to pursue conciliation as the violence had led to the death of dozens of people, leaving influential local families embittered.¹⁸ ¹⁹ Hamas’s social and political interaction with the public had shifted its initial approach, from direct and largely unrestricted access toward more limited contact suiting an autocratic governing authority. Hamas sought to reverse course and once again position itself as the protector of the population, rather than as a force policing society and suppressing the political opposition.

Hamas does have a history of reviving itself. During the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2005, after years of repression by the PA at a time when Palestinian-Israeli negotiations were ongoing, Hamas was able to persuade many of its compatriots that the arrest of its cadres and the torture of some of its top leaders had been necessary to defend popular interests.²⁰

However, while the post-2007 period allowed the movement to organize freely at the local level throughout Gaza, its current quest to regain public support could prove more difficult. Hamas’s decision to abandon governance in the territory and work in favor of Palestinian reconciliation, particularly societal reconciliation in Gaza, might facilitate this task. However, the organization’s enemies will not make it easy for Hamas to regain its previous stature.

Regionally, Hamas is attempting to revive its past relationships in a highly contested environment. The Middle East is polarized between a Saudi-led coalition that includes Egypt, Jordan, and the PA, and an Iran-led alliance that includes Syria and Hezbollah. Hamas is caught between the two poles. To bridge the gap with the Saudi-led camp, Hamas accepted some ambiguity about a two-state solution in its amended charter. It also dropped any mention of its links with the Muslim Brotherhood, which Egypt and Saudi

Arabia consider a terrorist organization, a contrast with how Hamas had presented itself in the past. However, such efforts will be complicated by the fact that Sinwar and Arouri come from Hamas's military wing, whose primary supporter has long been Iran.

It is unlikely that Hamas will be able to navigate the regional split for long. The divisions are too strong and bitter for the organization to succeed in retaining a foot in both camps. Today, Egypt and Iran are the main rivals for Hamas's allegiance, each important with regard to the organization's specific political priorities, which are themselves a reflection of its multifaceted identity.

Hamas's relations with Egypt deteriorated after Mohamed Morsi's removal from power. However, the organization cannot afford to be on bad terms with the largest Arab country and the neighbor that controls Gaza's major lifeline, its twelve-kilometer southwestern border. Egypt is also the one actor that can persuade the PA to implement a reconciliation agreement with Hamas, and push Israel to go along with it. For its part, Egypt needs Hamas's cooperation to combat the Islamic State, a common enemy that has been effectively contained in Gaza, but not on the Sinai Peninsula, where an insurgency continues.

At the same time, there are strong forces attracting Hamas to the Iranian camp, even if the relationship worsened in 2012. Khaled Mishal, then the head of the Hamas Political Bureau, publically supported the uprising against the Syrian regime, Iran's major regional ally. Yet Hamas needs Iran's financial support, which was suspended following that fissure, to pursue its social and political activities. Rebuilding the alliance would allow Hamas to resume providing services to the population and would help it regain regional standing as a major opponent of Israel. Iran, in turn, believes that renewed ties with Hamas would permit the Islamic Republic to recover its reputation as leader of the regional "resistance axis," rather than just as the sponsor of a sectarian Shia coalition.

The regional context suggests that the Iranian pull may be stronger since it is based on a longer-term, strategic concurrence of views. Arouri has described the relationship as being built on "solid ground."²¹ By contrast, the connection with the Saudi-led coalition seems to reflect *détente* more than any strong alignment. However, the lesson that Hamas learned from the failure of its alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab uprisings in 2011 is that it is better not to be tied to an ideological framework, but, instead, to pursue Hamas's interests according to circumstances. A Hamas leader, Mahmoud al-Zahar, has emphasized this, arguing, "We are not at a stage where we are comfortable with ideological alliances [as they involve us in] regional [political] games."²²

But the cold pursuit of Hamas's interests may prove tricky today. Regional polarization between the Saudi- and Iranian-led camps leaves little room for the organization to maneuver as it pleases. Hamas is also at its weakest internally and regionally since its establishment in 1987, which means that it is not in a position to play each side off against the other. Any attempt by Hamas to generate advantage from one camp will provoke problems with the rival camp.

FOLLOWING IN FATAH'S FOOTSTEPS?

Hamas has stood out among Palestinian groups for its ability to maintain its power and effectiveness over time, while remaining united and cohesive. But if the organization is strong, its strategy has been more problematic. Hamas's control over Gaza highlighted the contradiction between the organization's resistance role, intended to defend Palestinians, and its governance tasks, which frequently meant imposing strict, unpopular control over the population.

Against this backdrop, Hamas and its electorate reacted in 2017 by bringing in a new leadership, introducing hints of compromise into its charter, and showing a greater readiness to adjust to internal Palestinian and regional political realities. In a comparison that Hamas leaders would find distasteful, the organization had to manage the same tensions faced earlier by Fatah in the period after each Palestinian intifada, when it sought to prioritize a political strategy over armed resistance. Fatah's unpersuasive performance led directly to its electoral defeats in local elections in 2004 and legislative elections in 2006.

As an organization, Hamas may fare better than Fatah, because it has a greater ability to deliberate, decide collectively, and even vote internally. But while the organization is likely to survive and renew itself, it faces a real problem down the road. The new leadership of Hamas has no clear solution to the strategic vacuum lying at the heart of the Palestinian national movement that it seeks to lead.

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THEME 3: PRAGMATISM AND FLEXIBILITY

HEZBOLLAH'S JOURNEY FROM SYRIA'S BATTLEFIELD TO LEBANON'S POLITICAL MINEFIELD

ALI HASHEM

Hezbollah's place in Lebanese politics has not always fit neatly with the group's ties to its Syrian and Iranian backers. Yet a paradox of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict is that it has pushed the party to focus more on Lebanon's political scene. This shift echoes a past debate over whether Hezbollah could become a primarily Lebanese actor that plays by national political rules or whether the group's regional agenda would continue to hold sway.

As Syria's conflict winds down, the question is whether Lebanese voters will impose such a domestic role on Hezbollah. Between its entry into Syria and the Lebanese parliamentary elections of 2018, Hezbollah faced rising dissatisfaction from the Shia community and from the Lebanese electorate as a whole because of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions. Lebanese voters are asking Hezbollah to address their domestic socioeconomic concerns and participate more in governance. Effectively, the sectarian backlash prompted by Hezbollah's deployment in Syria has forced the organization to give itself domestic political cover in the hopes of being allowed to pursue its regional agenda uninterrupted. In the process, Hezbollah has struck deals with both allies and rivals so as to uphold Lebanon's internal stability.

All the signs indicate that Hezbollah will find this transition risky and difficult, as the party may not have the means to reposition itself to execute a domestic agenda. Given Lebanon's declining provision of services and faltering economy, domestic political actors risk being blamed for the governing system's many shortcomings. Moreover, playing a more active role in domestic politics may transform Hezbollah's interests and even its makeup—changes that may clash with the party's priorities outside of Lebanon. Addressing these competing objectives will require a delicate balancing act. The main challenge arises from the possibility of clashing with allies, who are providing cover for Hezbollah's regional role in return for full control over domestic policies.

HEZBOLLAH'S EARLY INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Syria was not the first Hezbollah deployment abroad, but it was the largest. In the early 1990s, more than one hundred Hezbollah fighters took part in an Iranian-led effort to train Muslims¹ in Bosnia. A prominent veteran of the Bosnian campaign was Ali Fayyad, also known as Alaa of Bosnia, who was killed² while fighting in Syria in February 2016. Just over a decade later, Hezbollah was also deeply involved in Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003. The party trained Iraqi Shia militias³ that launched attacks⁴ against U.S. occupation forces. Most of these Iraqi groups later went to Syria to fight alongside Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Yet Hezbollah did not immediately choose a military option in Syria. In fact, the party first tried to find a political solution⁵ with the help of the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas. In 2012, Hamas mediated by reaching out to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to try to secure a power-sharing agreement, but the effort failed when the Syrian government stipulated that the opposition lay down its arms first. As a senior Hamas official observed, "Our relations with the government in Damascus and the Muslim Brotherhood, along with our keenness to reach a peaceful solution to this conflict, prompted us to offer our services. Iran and Hezbollah had faith in our efforts, yet the Syrian government and the Muslim Brotherhood were reluctant as they both did not feel that they needed to offer concessions at that very early stage."⁶

Hezbollah's initial attempts to find a political solution were coordinated with Iran's position in mind. Tehran regarded the Syrian crisis as a challenge to its regional standing and, hence, saw a need to intervene⁷ directly or through its allies. Hezbollah's role in the Iranian decisionmaking process was revealed in the memoirs⁸ of Major General Hussein Hamedani, a deputy commander of the IRGC who was killed near Aleppo in October 2015. Hamedani recalled that, in the spring of 2012, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had asked him to consult with Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who was said to be responsible for relevant axis of resistance policy in Syria. Nasrallah had met with Khamenei⁹ in Tehran in late 2011 to decide on the intervention, just nine months into the Syrian uprising. He had then returned to Beirut to begin preparations, given the need to frame the intervention properly in Lebanon's already polarized political context.

Nasrallah hinted at a coming escalation on April 30, 2013, when he vowed¹⁰ that friends of Syria would not let the country "fall into the hands" of the United States, Israel, or jihadi groups. Hezbollah was already fighting alongside the Syrian Army¹¹ in rural areas around Qusayr, a city in the governorate of Homs near the Lebanese border. In May 2013, the party reportedly sent around 1,700 fighters¹² to support Syrian government forces in Qusayr. Nasrallah escalated matters further on May 25, the thirteenth anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon. He declared¹³ that Syria "is our battle, and we are up to it," before underscoring that the Syrian government¹⁴ was "the back of the resistance, and the resistance cannot stand, arms folded, while its back is broken." Lebanon's involvement had entered a new phase¹⁵. Nasrallah himself anticipated this in his speech, when he called on all parties to respect the country's stability. He urged¹⁶ the Lebanese to settle their differences in Syria and to spare Lebanon further sectarian violence, saying, "As long as we have conflicting stances regarding Syria, then let's fight each other there, not here."

When Hezbollah intervened in Syria in 2013, its primary aim was to maintain stability in Lebanon as the party fought what it perceived to be an existential war next door. Hezbollah perceived the war in Syria as a vital threat because Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been a major regional ally of the party and

of Iran. Syria is the main conduit for Iranian military assistance to Hezbollah, and it continues to play this role despite regional and international pressure. The feared overthrow of the Assad government, by potentially cutting off this assistance, could have weakened Hezbollah in Lebanon and the wider region, perhaps decisively. Such an outcome may have forced the party to adapt to a future without its weapons.

AN UPSWELL OF VIOLENCE

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria provoked controversy in Lebanon. Most Lebanese Sunnis supported Syria's opposition, while Hezbollah backed the Assad government. The long-standing rift of Sunni-Shia polarization grew. Many Lebanese saw Hezbollah's foray into Syria as a breach of the Baabda Declaration of June 2012, which was drafted after national dialogue committee sessions at Lebanon's presidential palace. The declaration was intended to dissociate Lebanon from regional conflicts, yet it had a minimal effect on the Lebanese parties involved in Syria. According to former Lebanese president Michel Suleiman, who presided over the sessions, "Hezbollah didn't inform the government prior to its intervention in Syria, despite the fact [that it] had accepted the Baabda Declaration."¹⁷

The spillover of violence from Syria revived feelings of enmity in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli. Several rounds of fighting took place between pro-Assad Alawite militants in Jabal Mohsen and pro-rebel Sunni militants in the neighboring quarter of Bab al-Tabbaneh. In southern Lebanon, Ahmad al-Assir, a firebrand Sunni cleric sympathetic to the Syrian uprising, announced his opposition to Hezbollah and the Syrian government in Damascus. He confronted Hezbollah by organizing sit-ins¹⁸ on the main road connecting Beirut to the party's stronghold of southern Lebanon. Assir's movement gained support among Sunnis throughout Lebanon. In April 2013, as Hezbollah's involvement in Qusayr unfolded, Assir and a cleric from northern Lebanon named Sheikh Salem al-Rafehi announced¹⁹ that they were going to send arms and men to fight in the Syrian city. Days later, in a further escalation with Hezbollah, footage circulated of Assir posing with weapons. In June 2013, a military confrontation occurred between Assir's followers and the Lebanese Army in the suburb of Abra in Sidon. Hezbollah was accused²⁰ of participating in the operation against Assir. The battle ended with Assir fleeing. He was later arrested²¹ while attempting to leave Beirut in August 2015.

Around the same time, a series of deadly bombings took place in Lebanon. Although the motives behind each attack were very different, taken together these attacks indicated that security conditions were unraveling rapidly. In October 2012, Wissam al-Hassan was killed by a car bomb²² in eastern Beirut. Hassan was the head of the intelligence branch of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces and a supporter of Saad al-Hariri, who would later become Lebanon's prime minister. In July 2013, another explosion shook a busy street in Bir al-Abed, a Hezbollah bastion in Beirut's southern suburbs. Other bombings targeted Tripoli. In another instance, a former minister named Mohamad Chatah was assassinated²³ by a car bomb in downtown Beirut in December 2013.

Events took another turn for the worse in August 2014, when militants of the self-proclaimed Islamic State and the Nusra Front attacked Lebanese army positions²⁴ in the Beqaa Valley, in the town of Aarsal near the Syrian border. Several Lebanese soldiers were abducted or killed. Some of the soldiers were later freed in a prisoner exchange²⁵ with the Nusra Front. The corpses of other soldiers taken by the Islamic

State were recovered after an August 2017 military operation²⁶ in which the Lebanese Army and Hezbollah tacitly fought together.

POLITICAL TURMOIL AND PUBLIC DISCONTENT

Lebanon's volatile security situation came amid a period of political turmoil. On March 22, 2013, then prime minister Najib Mikati resigned²⁷ following a disagreement over a political appointment. For months, Lebanon was ruled by a caretaker government. Tammam Salam was designated as the consensus candidate to replace Mikati in April 2013, but he was not able to form a government²⁸ until February 2014. The outward reason for this delay was a divergence of opinions among various factions over the distribution of policy portfolios, but in reality, the delay was mainly due to the Syrian war. Hezbollah sought a government²⁹ that would not adopt a position contrary to its own with regard to Syria, while Hariri's Future Movement was wagering that foreign intervention would bring about Assad's downfall.

Between 2013 and 2016, Lebanon was plagued by a key political vacancy and various factions' efforts to determine who would fill it. In May 2014, only three months after the Salam government was unveiled, Suleiman's term as president ended with no agreement among Lebanon's major political forces on who would succeed him. The ensuing power vacuum pushed the country's parliament to extend its own term for the first time since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990. Hezbollah's sole presidential candidate was an ally named Michel Aoun, a former army commander who headed the Free Patriotic Movement and the parliamentary Change and Reform Bloc. To bring him into office, the party and its allies boycotted parliamentary sessions held to elect a president, perpetuating a vacuum that increased pressure on its adversaries to endorse Aoun. Former president Suleiman blamed the impasse on Hezbollah's entry into Syria, saying, "Hezbollah's intervention caused differences among the Lebanese, leading to the chaotic [Syrian] refugee presence and prolonging the term of the caretaker government and the presidential vacuum by two and a half years."³⁰

Despite the row over Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, the party was able to push through its bid to be a presidential kingmaker. In October 2016 (after a twenty-nine-month deadlock), Aoun was elected. This outcome transpired after Hariri, once an opponent of Aoun, supported his candidacy in exchange for being given the role of prime minister. Hezbollah's actions compelled the party to consider its own internal positioning in Lebanon, even as its adversaries shifted course and demanded that Hezbollah withdraw from Syria, rather than demanding that the party disarm.

These political machinations coincided with an upsurge of public discontent with the Lebanese government's performance. When citizens took to the streets³¹ in August 2015 to protest the government's failure to solve a national garbage crisis, Hezbollah and its parliamentarians were among those that demonstrators denounced. The protests ended without much change, and public resentment toward the country's major political forces lingered. Consequently, in the municipal elections of May 2016, Hezbollah was surprised by the electorate's reaction. For instance, in the town of Baalbek (a party stronghold), the Hezbollah-backed candidate list won by only a small margin, while its rivals garnered³² 46 percent of the vote. This electoral outcome was a sign of voters' discontent with the party's local governing performance.

The dissatisfaction³³ could still be felt in the run-up to the 2018 parliamentary elections. But Nasrallah took the lead in addressing this issue, promising a different approach after the election. Specifically, he told voters that the party would make fighting corruption³⁴ a priority and that he would personally follow up on the matter. According to this public campaign, Hezbollah would demand a more active role in the cabinet. Nasrallah also vowed³⁵ that the party's future lawmakers would "work to secure political and administrative reform."

The 2018 election results allowed Hezbollah to strengthen its bloc, as the party and its allies secured more than half of the seats in parliament. However, the mandate that the electorate gave the party was based on its regional agenda, not its domestic achievements³⁶. While Hezbollah only gained one additional seat, given Lebanon's political system of proportionate representation, just keeping all its seats and adding another was seen as a relative success. The party's popular base was told on several occasions that losing additional seats would imply that the resistance of Hezbollah was losing to the group's enemies. In a speech in Baalbek on May 1, Nasrallah drew rhetorical links between his political rivals and Saudi Arabia, which situated the electoral battle in a regional context. Fearing that voter turnout would be low and reflect badly on Hezbollah, Nasrallah repeatedly highlighted before the election a sense of impending threat to the party's so-called resistance environment so as to prompt unenthusiastic voters to cast their ballots.

THE CHALLENGES OF FORMING A DOMESTIC AGENDA

What might the future hold for Hezbollah? The party's greater engagement in domestic governance could have a transformational effect on the party's aims. After decades of focusing on security issues—countering Israeli threats, saving the Syrian government from collapse, and aiding Iraqi factions against, first, the United States and then the Islamic State—Hezbollah would have to seek to improve state services, stabilize government finances, spark regional development, and spearhead administrative reform. The party's cadres and rhetoric would need to adapt to these new functions and priorities to live up to voters' expectations.

Another major question is whether Hezbollah is capable of formulating social and economic policies that respond to the needs of its popular base, beyond party members and their families. This might represent a far more difficult task than fighting in regional conflicts because Hezbollah was not created to formulate such policies. Rather, it was established on the basis of an ideological vision that never offered a domestic approach to social and economic matters, let alone a vision for a divided sectarian country like Lebanon, where no community represents a real majority.

Delivering on its electoral promises poses serious dilemmas for Hezbollah. For one thing, the party will find it hard to formulate a governance model to fit Lebanon's complexities. Not only that, but the party's greater integration into the Lebanese governing system would mean fully embracing the country's political game, with all its opportunistic compromises—a kind of wheeling and dealing that may make it more difficult to deliver on the vow to end corruption. The party is already facing questions about its greater commitment to domestic issues that it cannot readily answer. To address such issues, Hezbollah may

decide to invest more in policy formulation, whether by establishing policy research centers or recruiting specialists.

Another thorny question is what the party's expanding domestic portfolio would mean for its regional role. Hezbollah will continue to face tensions between its foreign and domestic priorities as long as its participation in conflicts and other activities around the Middle East affects the well-being of its Shia electorate. Whether the party has the latitude to cut back on its foreign involvement to concentrate on its own community is far from certain. Hezbollah's genes may not allow it to successfully adapt to domestic governance or even sectarian issues. And it is difficult to imagine the party abandoning its regional role, which would affect its relations with key Iranian benefactors. These tensions notwithstanding, the party's future will be largely defined by its ability to find a balance between the demands of its domestic and foreign agendas. Such a balance would need to allow Hezbollah to retain the support of domestic Shia voters while also maintaining strategic ties with Tehran.

HEZBOLLAH'S BALANCING ACT

In reality, Hezbollah's balancing act is not altogether new. Compare how Hezbollah operated in the 1980s, when it was fully outside Lebanon's political system, with how the group operated in the 1990s, when it introduced members into parliament. This evolution gradually allowed Hezbollah to better make decisions based on domestic criteria. This shift was reflected in the party's pursuit of greater legitimacy within the Lebanese state, despite its doubts about the country's political system. Since the 1990s, this reorientation toward domestic affairs has accelerated. Given that Hezbollah's parliamentarians and their allies now hold the majority, the organization will probably give greater weight to domestic Lebanese concerns, while not taking or allowing actions that undermine local stability.

Hezbollah understands well that, without a strong domestic front, it cannot advance its regional agenda. So, to some degree, the party must tackle delicate internal challenges with other Lebanese political actors. This necessity could pose problems for Hezbollah because its religious and ideological slogans will have little impact if the party fails to curtail corruption or if its members are involved in governmental wrongdoing. The same risk would apply if Nasrallah were to decide to combat corruption in ways that strains Hezbollah's local alliances with partners like Amal. This could have dire implications for those allies' commitment to Hezbollah's aims, while the party's retreat from confrontation could provoke serious credibility problems.

For years, Hezbollah has vowed to its supporters that it would win all the battles in which it is engaged, most recently in Syria³⁷. Yet, in the case of Lebanon, Hezbollah's test increasingly involves not guns and rockets but the ability to navigate political minefields.

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THEME 3: PRAGMATISM AND FLEXIBILITY

LOST CAPITAL: THE EGYPTIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD'S NEOLIBERAL TRANSFORMATION

Wael Gamal

In an October 2011 interview¹, Hassan Malek², a leading Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood businessman, emphasized that the Islamist group was friendly to business. Its main problem with the economic policies of former president Hosni Mubarak, he said, was not the policies themselves but the corruption of businessmen close to the regime. The Brotherhood's year in power, between 2012 and 2013 under then president Mohamed Morsi, confirmed that neoliberal³ market orthodoxy was at the heart of the group's economic program. Indeed, the Brotherhood had embraced neoliberalism during the decades prior to 2011, in line with the shift toward neoliberalism of Egypt's governing elites. The policies of Morsi and his government revealed their inability to break out of that mold, perpetuating a crisis of leadership that started under Mubarak and reflecting a failure to address public dissatisfaction with social and economic conditions. This helped undermine Morsi, ultimately facilitating his removal from office in July 2013, which led to the imprisonment of thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and devastated its organizational structure.

Neoliberalism⁴ can be broadly defined⁵ as the extension of the competitive market into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society. Neoliberal economic policies include trade liberalization, the privatization of social services, and the prioritization of fiscal consolidation. Beyond economics, neoliberalism also holds⁶ that an individual's well-being is intimately tied to making market principles the guiding values in their lives and regarding themselves as beings who can create, sell, and optimize.

Neoliberalism in the Arab world isn't only embraced by those in power. As a distinct form of capitalism and a political project, neoliberalism has been adopted by political opposition parties and even social movements throughout the region. This has been particularly true in Egypt, where neoliberal ideas were shared by parties and movements other than the Muslim Brotherhood, including the April 6 Youth Movement⁷, the Salvation Front—the secular coalition opposed to Morsi⁸—and some currents of the feminist and human rights movements.

Discussions of the Brotherhood's economics usually cover the group's finances, concentrating only on its transnational funding or business activities. Yet this doesn't allow for an accurate understanding of how the Brotherhood's neoliberal orientation developed before 2011 or, more importantly, how it was transformed afterward. The prevailing interpretation of the Brotherhood as a cultural and religious political actor, with a focus on identity, internal discipline, and religious discourse, overlooks how the group's approach to economics evolved at a time when neoliberalism affected nearly all aspects of Egyptian life.

THE UNDERPINNINGS OF A NEOLIBERAL MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

Islamic political movements have rarely been anticapitalist or hostile to market economics⁹, even in their most radical manifestations. Because they claim to represent the whole of society, they refrain from approaches that would highlight social class differences or social conflict. This playing down of social antagonisms historically allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to appeal to groups with contradictory interests. This, in turn, made it possible for the organization to attract a diverse membership—with middle-class professionals tending to dominate its senior ranks—while sustaining an elusive economic vision by altering its economic approach and rhetoric according to need.

However, avoiding social conflict is not the only reason why certain Islamic political groups have adopted neoliberalism. Strains of political Islam, as with all religious-based ideologies, are open to interpretation and interact dynamically with social class, political, and historical contexts. In Egypt and elsewhere, movements in and approaches to political Islam have defended free trade and markets, alongside others that call for social justice and equality. While all of these ideologies have used religion to justify their views, they have also been defined by distinct interests within different social and political contexts. Reflecting this diversity, the literature of the Muslim Brotherhood contains references to social justice and critiques of wealth gaps, together with affirmations of the sacredness of private property, business, and markets.

Under Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood had its own businessmen and businesses, but it was also able to claim that it sought to advance social justice by pointing to the activities of its social charity network. However, it shied away from critiquing market liberalization and neoliberal transformations, other than highlighting cases of corruption or echoing general populist complaints about the deteriorating living standards of the poor. The Mubarak regime adopted flexible tactics when dealing with Muslim Brotherhood businesses. It allowed these businesses to operate at a level where they would not become too large or powerful—if they grew too much, the businesses were closed and taken to court, often on the grounds that they were financing the Brotherhood, then an illegal entity. This happened to the Brotherhood-owned Salsabil computer company in 1992. Hassan Malek, one of Salsabil's partners, served one year in prison as a result.

By the early 2000s, the Mubarak regime—driven by a deep crisis due to declining revenues from oil, gas, the Suez Canal, and Egyptians living abroad—could no longer sustain food and energy subsidies or provide long-term employment in the state bureaucracy. In 2003, it adopted unprecedented neoliberal measures as a way out of its dilemma, accelerating the neoliberal transformation of Egypt that had begun in the 1990s. When the government of Ahmad Nazif, which was composed primarily of businessmen, took office in 2003, it had major implications on the evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood's economic agenda.

The business elite tied to the Brotherhood welcomed Egypt's new orientation, seeing an opportunity for growth. The Brotherhood was not an exception—neoliberal policies throughout the region provoked varying degrees of change¹⁰ in a wide range of Islamic movements. However, the Nazif government accelerated the privatization of public enterprises and slashed subsidies while the real wages of most Egyptians declined, fomenting a rising tide of social protests. Between 2004 and 2010, some 3,000 protests took place¹¹ as a consequence, mobilizing thousands of workers across the country's governorates in a slow rehearsal for the uprising of 2011.

The Muslim Brotherhood was never an organic part of those protests. In fact, it kept a distance from them and was content with doing nothing more than issuing occasional statements criticizing privatization transactions as corrupt or warning against deteriorating economic circumstances. One reason is that, in addition to the Muslim Brotherhood's business elite benefiting from neoliberal policies, the group's membership structure¹² had changed, leaning toward upper-middle-class and wealthier members. The Brotherhood's language displayed less sensitivity to the poor—a growing class of Egyptians due to neoliberal measures that put pressure on lawyers, schoolteachers, university professors, medical professionals, and others—as the group became increasingly defined by its more economically conservative members.

This evolution is why the Muslim Brotherhood was reluctant to join the first three days of protests against the Mubarak regime in January 2011. This created a backlash, as some of its younger middle-ranking cadres defied organizational discipline and went into the streets, sometimes even playing a leading role. Though the Brotherhood soon changed course and joined them, it later expelled the dissident members, who formed new political parties that adopted more critical views to neoliberalism. Among them were the Egyptian Current¹³ and Strong Egypt¹⁴ parties, which merged later under the leadership of Abdel-Moneim Abou al-Foutouh¹⁵, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership who had resigned in early 2011. The departure of these relatively more radical members removed any resistance within the Brotherhood, paving the way for those at the top who favored neoliberal policies and were eager to take their place in Egypt's political-business elite.

The Muslim Brotherhood's burgeoning businessmen and its changing membership structure were not the only factors behind the group's acceptance of neoliberalism. The emergence of pious neoliberalism in the 1990s and early 2000s also contributed to this transformation. Pious neoliberalism describes a phenomenon¹⁶ where religion, charity, and business interact. Religious practices that have been reconfigured in line with neoliberal principles are portrayed as part of what it means to be religious. This allowed the Brotherhood to integrate into the pre-uprising business elite after Mubarak's downfall, but also, once in power, pushed it to implement policies that alienated many Egyptians.

Turkey, whose ruling Justice and Development Party is close to the Muslim Brotherhood, was a regional pioneer of pious neoliberalism and a role model for the introduction of business practices into charitable work. However, the trend was also visible in Egypt with the rise of preachers such as Amr Khaled¹⁷ in 2003, who oversaw flourishing charity operations and targeted the Egyptian middle class with business-friendly religious messages. Preachers like him even reframed religious practices to depict economic rationality, productivity, and privatization as part of what it meant to be religious¹⁸. Khaled also used management science and self-help rhetoric to fold entrepreneurial activities into religion. The Muslim Brotherhood was not immune to such developments, as the group's behavior would prove once it took power.

FRIENDS WITH HOSNI MUBARAK'S FRIENDS

Hassan Malek and Khairat el-Shater, another influential figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, took advantage of Mubarak's removal to integrate the group's businessmen into the old business elite. They sent positive signals to the local and international business communities. Before the mid-2012 election of Mohamed Morsi, Malek and Shater began building relationships with Mubarak's close allies, whom they had previously accused of corruption, and Shater met with prominent members of the business community. In 2012, the Egyptian investment bank EFG-Hermes, in which Mubarak's son Gamal had been a partner¹⁹, helped Shater meet fourteen major²⁰ investment managers from Europe, the United States, and Africa. He used the opportunity to reassure investors that the new Muslim Brotherhood government shared their goals.

In March 2012, Morsi appointed Malek to head the Egyptian Business Development Association²¹, or EBDA. The launch ceremony was attended by several business leaders from Mubarak's disbanded National Democratic Party. After Morsi's election²² in June, the EBDA started organizing meetings²³ with the new president and leading reconciliation negotiations with businessmen who had fled the country after facing corruption charges. This included Nazif's trade and industry minister, Rashid Mohammed Rashid, and Hussein Salem, Mubarak's friend and a major player in a natural gas export deal with Israel.

In the first elected parliament²⁴ after Mubarak's overthrow, the Brotherhood failed to introduce any significant legislation to advance social reforms. But the life of the parliament was very short—the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces dissolved it hours after voting began in the second round of the presidential election on June 16, 2012. Therefore, it could be that the Brotherhood did not have enough time to fully formulate its economic agenda.

This inaction underlined the impression that, while the Muslim Brotherhood was in the opposition, a more informal approach to economic issues could work, combining pious neoliberalism with the absence of clear policy measures. But once in power, Brotherhood officials were obligated to introduce specific policies²⁵. Morsi was the most economically liberal of the candidates in the presidential election, which included figures from the old regime. His electoral platform, known as the Renaissance Project²⁶, called for resuming privatization—even of strategic economic sectors—after it had been stopped in 2007. The Brotherhood-dominated government of prime minister Hisham Qandil liberalized trade and vowed to attract billions of dollars in foreign direct investment to infrastructure projects. It also promised to increase spending on education and health, but suggested it would aim to ultimately privatize these services through public-private partnerships and signaled a dependence on private-sector financing. Social justice was a main objective of Morsi's platform, which sought to restructure Egypt's tax system. However, the platform failed to offer detailed plans for progressive taxation, which had been a demand of the social protest movement for years.

The Muslim Brotherhood's approach to privatization was very different from its position prior to the 2011 uprising. During the Nazif government, the Brotherhood attacked privatization, regarding it as a condition imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that went against Egyptian interests. It described privatization as “selling Egypt and its wealth.”²⁷ However, the Qandil government adopted pillars of the neoliberal approach. It prioritized economic growth and slashing the public debt. It resumed

negotiations with the IMF over a rescue loan and agreed to an austerity package that included raising the price of energy and public services. In March 2012, the Brotherhood's parliamentarians met with an IMF delegation and supported a loan deal²⁸.

After they took power, Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood also shifted their position on the Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ) agreement with Israel and the United States²⁹. The Brotherhood's parliamentary bloc had rejected the agreement when it was signed in December 2004, saying it threatened Egypt's security and wouldn't help the country's deteriorating textiles sector. Eight years later, however, after Morsi's election, an Egyptian delegation visited Washington to negotiate expanding the agreement and reducing Israeli inputs in Egyptian exports to the United States.

This was crucial for Egypt's textile lobby, which had been close to Mubarak. On September 9, 2012, in an interview, Qandil said "a lot of people are making good business out of [the agreement]: we want to make sure we do the right thing for them to flourish." Any radical challenge to the agreement could have antagonized the United States and Israel, something the Brotherhood likely wanted to avoid. Yet, revealingly, the Egyptian government chose to expand the agreement rather than just maintain the status quo, a move that was motivated mainly by internal alliances and the demands of important players in the textile industry who benefited from the QIZ.

SOCIAL PROTESTS RESUME UNDER MORSI

When Morsi was elected, the ongoing social protests were suspended while activists waited to see how the new president would act. Expectations were high when Morsi created a presidential Ombudsman³⁰ Office on July 16, 2012, to address wrongdoings. Within nine months, the office had received some 298,000 complaints³¹.

However, expectations soon gave way to disappointment. National protests resumed a few months later³², when the public concluded that their situation had not improved. A Gallup poll³³ just before Morsi's election showed that Egyptians' top priority was job creation, at a time when many were feeling the effects of rising food prices. As protests spread, the main demands were for more permanent jobs as well as higher or unpaid wages. Service delivery was another problem, and protesters demanded better access to electricity, drinking water, and water for irrigation.

A report published by the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights³⁴ in July 2014, one year after Morsi's removal, estimated that over 4,500 protests took place in the first half of 2013. The report affirmed that most of the protests were motivated by public anger against the Qandil government and the policies of the Muslim Brotherhood. This conclusion echoed the results of a Gallup poll conducted two weeks before the military removed Morsi³⁵ in July 2013, which found that only 29 percent of Egyptians expressed confidence in their government—the lowest level measured by Gallup since Egypt's uprising in 2011, and a steep drop from the 57 percent confidence level Morsi enjoyed in November 2012, five months after his election. Moreover, the disapproval was widespread. Protests took place all over Egypt, with more than 200 protests apiece in eight governorates other than Cairo during the final six months of Morsi's rule.

CONCLUSION

Egyptians revolted in 2011, anticipating change. Instead, they only got more of the same. The neoliberal agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood played a crucial role in damaging Morsi's credibility. Yet this was not merely the result of bad policy choices or mistaken execution. It was the natural outcome of the Brotherhood's trajectory toward greater neoliberalism before 2011, itself a manifestation of Egypt's broader neoliberal transformation at the time.

The Muslim Brotherhood found itself dealing with a crisis that had been exacerbated by the sharp neoliberal turn of the Mubarak regime in 2003. The Nazif government had appointed influential private businessmen as ministers, slashed subsidies and state jobs, lowered corporate taxation, and privatized banks and public services. The protests that erupted in 2004 reflected the failure of neoliberal policies and trickle-down approaches for dealing with the demands of the poor. The uprising in January 2011 was the culmination of that process.

Morsi and the Brotherhood-dominated government were unable to provide an alternative route to satisfy the social protest movement, let alone offer a new social contract for Egyptians. In pursuing the neoliberal economic policies that had provoked public anger in the first place, the Brotherhood exemplified the intensifying crisis of Egypt's ruling elite that continues today under a much heavier hand.

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THEME 3: PRAGMATISM AND FLEXIBILITY

MONEY AND MORALS: SALAFI ECONOMICS IN THE ARAB WORLD

FRANCESCO CAVATORTA AND VALERIA RESTA

In the wake of the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings, many Salafis across the Middle East and North Africa moved away from their traditional noninvolvement in political activism and embraced institutional politics through the creation of political parties¹. To achieve success, they had to appeal to electorates and, like other parties, present voters with their political and economic program.

Declining economic conditions are one of the chief concerns of citizens in the region². However, Salafis have never paid much attention to the economy—reflected in the paucity of Salafi writings on economic issues. This shortcoming remains a serious handicap at a time when most economies in the region have not improved since the uprisings. In trying to fashion a policy framework, Salafi parties have supported measures riddled with contradictions, creating unrealistic expectations and taking a moralistic attitude toward desirable economic behavior. Facing the negative political impacts of supporting unfeasible policy, the future of Salafi parties is ultimately tied, in part, to the success of their economic proposals.

THE SALAFI ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK

For Salafis, Islam is a comprehensive guide that provides instructions on how economies should be run so that they are both effective and religiously sound³. Salafi texts mention Islamic financial products and other ways of Islamizing the economy. At the core of Salafi economic thinking is the moral behavior of the actors engaged in transactions. The electoral manifesto of Egypt's Hizb al-Nour (or Party of Light)⁴, formulated in 2012, is the most comprehensive economic framework offered by any Salafi party, and it reveals how Salafi political parties provide discernible plans of action by borrowing economic ideas from disparate sources. Overall, four broad economic principles have shaped the Salafi economic vision: income redistribution, neoliberal economic principles, selective autarky, and support for regional integration.

The first principle is income redistribution, which is associated with Keynesian state intervention and borrows from social democratic tenets. The poorer socioeconomic classes look to the state to redress growing inequality, so Salafi political parties have tried to appeal to citizens who are struggling economically. Hizb al-Nour, for instance, has called for expanding job programs and introducing a minimum wage that is indexed to the cost of living. The party also proposes greater investment in education and social housing. Job creation is also a priority for Tunisia's Hizb Jabhat al-Islah al-Islamiyya al-Tunisiyya (the Tunisian Salafi Islamic Reform Front, or Jabhat al-Islah⁵)—the word “jobs” appears prominently in the party's slogans.

Hizb al-Nour's program further underlines that almsgiving (*zakat*) and religious endowment (*waqf*) institutions should contribute to reducing socioeconomic inequalities and provide funding for productive investments and job creation. Salafi parties across the region share a reliance on such institutions, as charitable work informs the way they think about welfare delivery.

The centrality of welfare and job creation seems in line with traditional leftist thinking about state intervention and wealth redistribution. But the reality is different for Salafi parties because they see a limited role for the state in any redistributive efforts. Fiscal policy is mentioned only in passing in Salafi economic programs. Instead, there is considerable emphasis on private or semiprivate religious entities taking over welfare programs or engaging in productive investments. In other words, there is much greater reliance on social solidarity than on the state. Religious morality would, in turn, compel private institutions to deliver social goods.

It is no surprise, then, that alongside the redistributive component of Salafi economic thinking there is a commitment to neoliberal economic principles. This appeals to a different constituency than those who would benefit from economic redistribution. Hizb al-Nour calls for fully liberalizing agriculture, enhancing the role of small and medium-sized enterprises, and introducing more Islamic financial products compatible with neoliberal practices. Salafi parties also support provisions to curb monopolistic tendencies and favor greater competition, a key principle of economic liberalism. For instance, Tunisia's Jabhat al-Islah never mentions the importance of the public sector in its literature and makes reference only to the role of entrepreneurship, illustrating its commitment to market economics⁶.

Another neoliberal tenet favors foreign direct investment (FDI) as vital to economic growth and development, due to its supposed trickle-down effects. In Egypt, Hizb al-Nour asserts the need for FDI, preferably from other Arab or Muslim states. For the party, former president Hosni Mubarak's neoliberal reforms exacerbated poverty because they were implemented by corrupt (read: un-Islamic) political networks, not because they were bad policies that undermined greater wealth redistribution⁷. If the right people were in power, Hizb al-Nour and other Salafi parties believe, the state would act more ethically and be more invested in religious morality, preventing corrupt and predatory economic behavior. In turn, businessmen and private enterprises would act according to religious precepts, making neoliberal reforms a success that would benefit the whole of society.

Other Egyptian Salafi parties, such as Hizb al-Bina wa al-Tanmiya (the Building and Development Party), Hizb al-Fadila (the Virtue Party), and Hizb al-Asala (the Authenticity Party), share this view about the relationship between neoliberal economics and morality. For instance, Hizb al-Bina wa al-Tanmiya's

program⁸ states that “the renaissance ought to pass through the strengthening of our religious and moral values under the banner of freedom and social and legal justice,” in a system that “preserves political and economic liberties.” Tunisia’s Jabhat al-Islah and Errahma, another Salafi party, also emphasize moving beyond social issues and individual rights to offer voters an economic vision based on entrepreneurship.

A third principle in Salafi economic programs is the need to pursue what might be termed selective autarky, suggesting that countries should be self-sufficient in specific economic sectors. This is clear in Hizb al-Nour’s manifesto and, to a lesser extent, in Hizb al-Bina wa al-Tanmiya’s program, which aims to “eradicate dependency and reliance.” Jabhat al-Islah also proposes to “end imports that do not contribute” to Tunisia’s economic renaissance—although it leaves unspecified which imports it’s talking about. Salafi parties also cite food production and weapons manufacturing as examples of strategic economic sectors. Egypt’s Hizb al-Nour argues that “a nation that does not produce its own food or military equipment is a nation that cannot be independent in its decisions to achieve the public interest.”⁹

According to this approach, a substantial portion of goods would no longer depend on trade with other countries. Jabhat al-Islah also refers to the state’s role in ensuring food security and controlling strategic heavy industries. The party prioritizes “establishing an effective agrarian policy . . . to achieve self-subsistence,” and seeks “economic security [through state] ownership of heavy, electronic, and chemical industries.”¹⁰

Finally, the fourth principle of Salafi economic programs is support for regional integration. Hizb al-Nour, for instance, recognizes that most countries participate in regional economic blocs because they provide considerable benefits. It proposes that Egypt integrate its economy with other Arab and Muslim markets, in order to better withstand pressures from competing blocs and generate economic growth through FDI. Their argument is that Egypt would benefit from increasing its exports, which would also raise domestic employment. Other Salafi parties agree. Hizb al-Bina wa al-Tanmiya, for example, envisages “economic integration and the construction of an economic community” to overcome the geographical and cultural boundaries they say were drawn by Western colonialism¹¹.

While Salafi parties may have experience providing welfare through their charitable activities, they need to offer voters a comprehensive economic vision and appear capable of delivering it. Salafi parties promise job creation, investment in public services, and greater integration into the global economy—voters share those same priorities¹² and see democratic party politics as a way of ensuring that promises are fulfilled. Given the socioeconomic roots of the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings—particularly in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen—voters find the Salafi economic framework appealing¹³. But this framework reveals short-term pragmatism. The way Salafi parties have framed their policies and priorities has underlined the fact that they have resorted to catchall solutions with broad appeal but few specifics.

Because of this pragmatic approach, observers have placed Salafi parties at different ends of the ideological spectrum, from representatives of the poor¹⁴ to genuine conservatives¹⁵. As these contradictions become clearer, the ambiguity shows how difficult it can be to gauge whether Salafi parties would ultimately be able to implement their broadly appealing economic programs.

NAVIGATING THE CONTRADICTIONS

With economic environments differing from country to country, the credibility and effectiveness of Salafi economic programs depend largely on their context. For instance, Salafi parties in Kuwait, an oil-rich state, do not operate within the same economic parameters as Egyptian or Tunisian Salafi parties. But across the board, Salafi parties share many potential difficulties and pitfalls.

One problem is that Salafis—and, indeed, Islamists in general—believe that philanthropy can replace state mechanisms for providing welfare. Salafis think the role of states is to protect the economic freedom of individuals who, in turn, should share their revenue with people in need through religious forms of charity, such as almsgiving or religious endowments. However, this belief is at odds with the very nature of modern states.

The Victorian conception of welfare—where wealthy private individuals and institutions decide who are the deserving poor—is problematic because it uses morality tests to determine potential beneficiaries. Relieving the state of welfare provision is an appealing proposal and, for conservatives, aligns with the Salafi belief that being a good Muslim merits assistance. But philanthropy can hardly replace state-provided welfare (even if it can supplement it), because its implementation becomes, effectively, political. What happens when an individual refuses to behave according to a religious institution? And which welfare causes—like education, health, single mothers, drug addiction, or unemployment benefits—are privileged? Philanthropy managed by religious institutions can be implicitly coercive and exclusionary, undermining the principle of equality.

A second problem for Salafi parties is that they omit a significant number of policy instruments from their economic frameworks. For example, they include virtually nothing about monetary and fiscal policy. Taxation, in particular, is overlooked, and none of the reforms and policies that Salafi parties advocate have gone through a detailed assessment of costs. The 2011 platform of Egypt's Hizb al-Bina wa al-Tanmiya is one of the few frameworks to mention taxation, but, even then, it only vaguely stated that fair taxes would help achieve social justice. Otherwise, no specific fiscal measures were mentioned, leaving it unclear how taxation would actually impact economic redistribution. This underscores how little Salafi parties have considered economic matters—they feel it necessary to remain as general as possible, in order to appeal to a wider potential electorate and win more votes.

A third shortcoming of Salafi economic programs is that they borrow from disparate sources, often offering irreconcilable policy prescriptions. This is exacerbated by the fact that the programs repeatedly fail to account for international economic realities or constraints and include policies that the parties might not be able to implement on their own.

The Salafis' call to integrate regional markets, for example, cannot be reconciled with the autarkic notion that entire economic sectors should not be liberalized because they are deemed to be strategic. Similarly, how does a state embark on a significant program of job creation and social spending when its coffers are empty? Borrowing from international financial institutions may often come with strings attached that impose contrary measures, such as reducing the number of public sector employees or slashing the budget.

Therefore, for electoral benefit, Salafi parties emphasize job creation and better welfare provision, together with greater market liberalization and FDI. However, by basing their economic vision on contradictory approaches and downplaying the difficulty of reversing the effects of prior economic choices and international constraints, Salafi parties' proposals are unlikely to be successful.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the inadequacies of Salafi economic programs are underlined by their belief that religious morality can overcome the difficulties of managing a national economy. Salafi Arabs involved in the political process genuinely believe that personal morality and the greater presence of Islamic financial tools, such as sharia-compliant banks, will generate greater growth and result in higher living standards. Salafi parties emphasize the burden of corruption to explain underdevelopment. According to them, amoral and unethical behavior is at the roots of a poorly managed economy because individual selfish choices—choices not made through religious adherence—undermine developmental efforts. They regard, as Hizb al-Bina wa al-Tanmiya has expressed, the “diffusion of the political notions and values of Islam” within society and the economy as a path to social and economic enfranchisement¹⁶.

Salafi economic programs in Tunisia and Egypt provide ample evidence of this attitude. Salafi parties in both countries, for the first time, were given the opportunity to compete in a free and pluralistic electoral market and present an economic plan after the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in 2010 and 2011. The dictators' downfall created an opening for alternative economic proposals. In both countries, Salafi parties tied their programs to Islamic morality. They proposed reforming existing economic laws according to Islamic principles and envisaged institutionalizing Islamic precepts such as almsgiving and the enhancement of Islamic finance¹⁷.

What they put forward, however, was, at best, economically naïve. The Salafi policies borrowed confusingly from social democratic and neoliberal tenets, but their success is predicated on the intervention of Islamic institutions and individual piety. Thus, on one hand, Islamic institutions and religious practices are intended to purify the private accumulation and redistribution of wealth, with individual piety fueling economic success in the same way that Adam Smith's invisible hand regulates the free market. On the other hand, social solidarity, wealth redistribution, and greater income equality depend on individuals that respect their religious duties, not because the state coordinates and intervenes in the economy.

In this sense, the participation of practicing Muslims in the economy is key to the Islamic economy itself, while the expansion of the private sector is a consequence. This is, at best, an unsophisticated approach. A social market economy, which is what Salafi parties have proposed, is still premised on the idea of profit—and where profit is the backbone of economic practice, morality tends to take a back seat. Just as systemic failures, not simply greed, led to the 2008 global financial crisis, morality alone is unlikely to dramatically improve economic performance and prevent further crises

CONCLUSION

The Arab uprisings forced Salafis to appear interested in economic policymaking. Yet this has been a particular challenge for at least two reasons. First, it has underlined that the economy has never been a clear priority for Salafis, whose political engagement is mainly anchored in identity and social issues. Second, formulating

an economic program has been difficult because Salafi parties rely on broad constituencies that cut across social classes. Salafis attract support from the middle class because of their focus on identity and social conservatism, but also from the disenfranchised because of the services provided by their charities. Thus, pinning down specific proposals is not just difficult, it may actually be detrimental to their political success.

The apparent absence of alternative economic models to neoliberalism has been a problem for Salafi parties hoping to offer an appealing economic framework to citizens. Policy prescriptions like privatization, budgetary restraint, open markets, and job insecurity are likely to worsen economic conditions in most Arab countries—in the short run, at least—and are the very policies that inspired the 2010–2011 uprisings. Instead, Salafi parties have had to emphasize job creation, greater welfare, and genuine market liberalization, offering an end to the corrupt liberalization that occurred under authoritarian rule.

At the same time, reform is necessary to revive moribund economies in which unemployment is high, productivity is low, and a fairer redistribution of wealth remains illusory. Emergency measures are needed to fight poverty and social injustice. While their policy contradictions, unrealistic expectations, and moralistic attitude might undermine their electoral credibility, Salafi parties may remain appealing as long as they are untested in the opposition.

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THEME 3: PRAGMATISM AND FLEXIBILITY

CHALLENGES TO SUNNI ISLAMISM IN BAHRAIN SINCE 2011

COURTNEY FREER

The position of Sunni Islamist groups in Bahrain is an underexamined aspect of the country's domestic politics, as most inquiries have focused on the rift between the Sunni ruling family and a largely Shia opposition movement. These sectarian dynamics have prompted Sunni Islamist movements in Bahrain, whether the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi groups, to align politically with the government; since 2011, state authorities have even made efforts to mobilize these groups against Shia protests. Nonetheless, both the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis have struggled to formulate agendas independent of regime interests, and have lost political capital among their supporters in the kingdom as a consequence, as shown in their poorer outcomes in the 2014 and 2018 elections.

As a result, Bahrain's Sunni Islamists increasingly have fallen back on the loyalism and political quiescence common to oil-rich states. This mindset makes such movements less likely to push for reforms in the context of a united Sunni bloc, which could further accelerate their decline in relevance to Bahraini political life. Following the chaos of the Arab Spring in Bahrain, both the Brotherhood and the leading Salafi organization have struggled to separate themselves from the regime, and their domestic setbacks are amplified by international backlash against Sunni Islamist groups (specifically, the isolation of the Muslim Brotherhood following the ouster of Egypt's Mohamed Morsi and, by extension, diplomatic crises in Qatar and Turkey).

While geopolitical concerns certainly have affected Sunni Islamist agendas in Bahrain, these agendas also often serve as domestic foils to Shia opposition movements that have been more successful in mobilizing support. Nevertheless, the grievances that drove the post-2011 protests are not strictly linked to sectarian divisions, and political agendas cannot be divided along these lines. Although many loyalists are Sunni, some Shia families also support the government, meaning that economic marginalization is not based on sectarian differences but instead reflects Bahrain's uneven development overall and "a political economy based on the exclusion of the majority and the rewarding of a minority of loyalists."¹ By portraying the

2011 uprisings as Shia-led, however, the Bahraini government helped discourage cross-sectarian political cooperation.

Bahrain's Sunni Islamist environment is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and one main Salafi organization, al-Asala. The country's Muslim Brotherhood appears to be highly localized, rather than part of a transnational movement, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Its agenda is therefore shaped by national context and a good relationship with the ruling Al Khalifa family, rather than ideology or any imagined connection to a transnational organization. Al-Asala, by contrast, appears to be linked (at least through ideology and personal ties) to Saudi quietist Salafi networks. Although all Salafi groups aim to purify society to align it with the earliest Islamic teachings, quietist Salafism is focused on ritual purity and education on the teachings of Salafism, rather than political issues. Despite this traditional understanding of quietist Salafism, al-Asala has become more localized and more politically active, similar to the activist strands of Salafism found elsewhere in the Middle East. By examining the Sunni political landscape in Bahrain and tracing government efforts to penetrate the Sunni Islamist sphere, it is possible to better understand how these dynamics have been affecting Bahrain's Sunni Islamists today.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BAHRAIN'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

The Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood was the first branch established in the Gulf Cooperation Council, founded in 1941 as the Students' Club and renamed Jamiyyat al-Islah, or the Reform Society, in 1948. Until the early 2000s, the Bahraini Brotherhood primarily was involved in charity and education but also took on some political stances, mainly against Arab nationalists and Shia Islamists, particularly during the period of protests in favor of domestic political reform between 1994 and 1999. At the time, the regime welcomed these stances since they provided support for the government's position, in the face of mounting political challengers agitating for political reform.² In 2002, the Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood established Jamiyyat al-Minbar al-Watani al-Islami (al-Minbar National Islamic Society, or simply al-Minbar) as its political wing, and for more than a decade it had at least one seat in parliament, until it failed to secure a seat in the 2018 elections. In parliament, al-Minbar has tended to support the monarchy's political and economic agenda while also pressing for the implementation of Islamist social policies like restrictions on the sale of alcohol. Its base of support is mainly the urban middle class and civil servants, and many members are in government decisionmaking bodies, especially for education.³ Its primary policy demands tend toward generic support for the security services and protection of the current situation.

Many Brotherhood members are from the Hawala tribe, and traditionally have been part of the merchant elite, so they have a vested interest in maintaining the political status quo.⁴ Members of al-Minbar most often hold positions in Bahrain's parliament, education system, security apparatus, and judiciary. The Bahrain government's ties to the Muslim Brotherhood are thought to be so strong that it is rumored that Bahrain's royal court and Islamic banking sector bankroll the group.⁵ The current king's uncle, former labor and social affairs minister Isa bin Muhammad Al Khalifa, was involved in the founding of the Reform Society and headed it from 1963 to 2013.⁶ Through these high-level links, the organization has become a reliable part of the rentier bargain, trading political access for its members' quiescence and loyalty. In spite of these loyalist leanings, in 2005 al-Minbar did cooperate with leading Shia opposition bloc al-Wafaq to encourage the reform of land ownership laws.⁷ However, this move was ultimately

pragmatic—it protected merchants’ economic interests and their part of the rentier bargain, or package of state-provided benefits—rather than a symptom of any change in agenda or desire to engage in cross-sectarian coalitions, as Bahrain’s primary Salafi political bloc has done.

THE SALAFI SPHERE

The al-Asala Islamic Society, Bahrain’s most prominent Salafi organization, was established in 2002. It is the political arm of the Salafi charity group Islamic Education Society, which was created in the 1990s and has attracted support from “poorer and more tribal Sunnis from Muharraq and al-Rifa’ as well as among naturalized Bahrainis.”⁸ Many of its members are involved in the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments.⁹ Al-Asala is considered ideologically proximate to Saudi quietist Salafis, who generally oppose taking stands against the government and thus are considered “a pawn of the royal family’s interests.”¹⁰ Compared to al-Minbar, al-Asala enjoys greater support from Sunni members of the tribal population, specifically those from the smaller cities of Muharraq and al-Rifa’, as well as members of security forces, who tend to voice social rather than political criticism. Like al-Minbar, and unlike truly quietist Salafis, al-Asala has at times criticized the government, even voting with the Shia al-Wefaq to demand certain reforms to limit the king and central government’s control. On the whole, though, it has never sustained an agenda independent of the ruling family, and instead has focused on preserving Sunni representation in parliament. Its participation in the legislature thus makes it not strictly speaking purist, yet its positive alignment toward the government has led it to be placed with that camp ideologically.

Overall, there has been limited cooperation between the Brotherhood and Salafis. The Brotherhood’s more conciliatory stance toward Shias has caused some tension, and outright antagonism emerged in 2002 when the Salafis refused to swear allegiance to the Bahraini Constitution based on their belief that the Quran is the only legitimate source of law.¹¹ In 2006, however, al-Minbar and al-Asala resolved not to run candidates in the same constituencies in order to enhance the Sunni Islamist vote, leading the Brotherhood to win seven seats and al-Asala eight.¹² Although this cooperation was not sustained in the 2010 polls, in 2006 the regime actively encouraged it, as it helped to isolate hardliners among the Salafi movement and combat a growing liberal-Shia alliance.¹³ Al-Minbar and al-Asala cooperation also ramped up for a limited period during the height of the Arab Spring uprisings. The regime encouraged this cooperation as well, seeking to isolate the Shia opposition movement by creating a new loyalist organization that would mitigate the Sunni groups’ poor showings in the 2010 parliamentary elections. Ultimately, even this cooperation failed when domestic and regional political calculations shifted with the Arab Spring.

INTRA-SUNNI COOPERATION DURING THE ARAB SPRING

Because the Bahraini regime presented the Arab Spring–inspired protests in the country as Shia-led, Sunni Islamists became an important base of support for the government. The regime actively promoted this dynamic, primarily by helping to create an umbrella organization for Sunni Islamists. Government encouragement led to the creation of the National Unity Gathering (NUG) in February 2011, which came to be seen as an alternative Islamist forum to the Arab Spring protests, one that advocated for gradual political reforms rather than major, sweeping changes. The NUG thus positioned itself as a third

option between Shia protesters and Sunni elites linked to the ruling family, insisting that this constituency was voicing its own demands.¹⁴ In March 2011, it held meetings with opposition groups, including the Shia al-Wefaq movement, to demand political reform and the end of sectarianism, but under government pressure it adopted increasingly loyalist positions. It also lost the critical support of al-Minbar and al-Asala after neither group had members elected to the NUG's steering committee, leading both groups to withdraw their support from the forum.¹⁵

What Justin Gengler has dubbed "Bahrain's Sunni awakening" demonstrated that "for their nearly unwavering support, and for their help in keeping the government's fiercest critics at bay, ordinary Sunnis expect something in return."¹⁶ Logically, the government was eager to support such mobilization, since it added credibility to the narrative that the protests were primarily Shia-driven. When the government became less concerned about its survival, however, it became less reliant on loyalist Sunni groups, and so there were few efforts to revive the NUG when it lost momentum at the end of 2011. The 2011 parliamentary by-elections reflected disillusionment among Bahraini Sunnis in general with their political societies, as well as efforts within al-Minbar in particular to rebuild after its 2010 defeats when it and al-Asala failed to coordinate in elections.¹⁷ Ultimately, neither the Brotherhood nor al-Asala participated in the elections; rather, they stated that they would tacitly support certain candidates, thus allowing more room for independent candidates to succeed.

ELECTORAL DEFEAT FOR BAHRAIN'S SUNNI ISLAMISTS

The November 2014 elections showed the extent to which the shifts in domestic and regional politics had left Bahrain's Sunni voters at a disadvantage and its Sunni political movements unable to find a secure footing. The government had redrawn electoral districts ahead of the polls, demonstrating, in Marc Valeri's words, "the reluctance of the regime to have a parliament controlled by Islamists (either Shia or Sunni) and of its strategy of favoring pragmatic businessmen and tribal leaders ready to support the regime's policies."¹⁸ It is therefore no coincidence that the redistricting seemed to affect Sunni Islamist groups more than it affected al-Wefaq; indeed, the redistricting, which was implemented after first Saudi Arabia and then the UAE designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, obviously aided tribal independents over Sunni Islamists.¹⁹ Districts in the Sunni-majority southern part of the country were increased in size, thus disadvantaging candidates with local support bases, and the districts of many incumbent Sunni Islamist members of parliament (MPs) were combined with others. Even though al-Minbar and al-Asala had been helpful domestic partners for the embattled regime during the Arab Spring, as the policies of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi increasingly turned against Sunni Islamists, it became more difficult for the Bahraini authorities to justify their closeness with such groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Sunni political scene also had a new player; in January 2012, young NUG supporters had sought to create another Sunni counterrevolutionary force, called the Fatih Awakening (Sahwat al-Fatih). The Fatih Awakening adamantly opposed any dialogue between the regime and al-Wefaq, describing the latter as "terrorists,"²⁰ a move that appeared to indicate its intended stance as a more genuine third way between the Shia opposition and the regime-backed Sunni parties. Based on its poor results in the November 2014 elections, however, the Fatih Awakening ultimately failed to mobilize sufficient support independent

of the government—which had been its goal in leaving what it considered the loyalist NUG—and the Brotherhood.²¹

In the elections, al-Minbar and the NUG had agreed not to present candidates in the same constituencies, but al-Asala did not follow their lead, and the electoral divisions had disastrous results for the Sunni Islamists. The smaller groups were decimated: none of the NUG's seven candidates was successful, and al-Fatih also failed to win any of the ten seats it contested.²² Meanwhile, al-Minbar won one seat and al-Asala won two seats, while thirty-six seats went to independents. The NUG's failure in elections demonstrated the degree to which it, like al-Fatih, had not managed to create an independent agenda within the Bahraini political scene.²³ In short, the 2014 elections demonstrated the extent to which Sunni Islamists had failed to reach the expectations of their constituents, exacerbated by their own internal struggles and the (potentially intended) effects of the government's redistricting.

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN POLITICAL RETREAT

The post-2011 period, though initially hopeful for Muslim Brotherhood affiliates throughout the Middle East, led to a widespread crackdown or at least vilification in the aftermath of the fall of the Mohamed Morsi government in Egypt in July 2013. Sunni groups of the Brotherhood and Salafi strands were notably important in rallying support for the Bahraini government during Arab Spring protests.²⁴ Yet in the space of a few months in 2014, Saudi Arabia and the UAE declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group, placing Bahrain in an awkward position, as the Brotherhood's local political branch held seats in parliament. Rather than specifically outlawing the organization, the Bahraini government claimed that it had a "special status," according to the country's foreign minister in 2017, while the Brotherhood itself was vocal in backing many government decisions that have proven detrimental to Sunni Islamists elsewhere.²⁵

In 2014, Bahraini Foreign Affairs Minister Khaled bin Ahmed Al Khalifa explained that his country did not consider the Brotherhood "a global movement," which has been a key criticism of the organization from states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE which have banned it.²⁶ In 2017, after the start of the Gulf crisis, he explained that his government does "consider the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group and anyone who shows sympathy with them will be tried on this basis."²⁷ To date, however, no one in Bahrain has been prosecuted on this basis, perhaps because the Bahraini Brotherhood responded tactfully to changes in the region. Al-Minbar, the Bahraini Brotherhood's political arm, issued a statement in June 2017 in favor of "the strenuous efforts led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to unify the stances of all Islamic states that attended the Riyadh summit, which isolated the Iranian regime and laid bare its terrorist and sectarian-tainted tactics in the international arena," while also affirming its adherence to moderate Islamic thought.²⁸

The November 2018 parliamentary elections confirmed the political retreat of Sunni Islamists. The elections were held in a tightly controlled political environment, with the opposition boycotting the polls after many of their members were banned from participating. Notably, al-Minbar, which held two seats in the previous assembly, failed to win a single seat for the first time since its creation. Al-Asala, meanwhile, managed to win three seats, and the NUG won its first ever seat as well, leaving these four seats

the sole representatives of organized Sunni blocs. This newly elected parliament, which houses only three incumbents, also features primarily independents—a testament to the perceived failure of existing political groups, though this outcome also threatens to make the assembly more susceptible to government control.²⁹ Just two weeks after the election, MPs from al-Asala led the charge in calling for crackdowns on “gay sheesha havens,” suggesting that what Sunni bloc does exist will focus on social, rather than political, issues in parliament.³⁰

WHERE NOW?

The introduction of a law in May 2016 banning any preacher from being a member of any political society or engaging in political activities explicitly shows the Bahraini government’s efforts to separate religion and politics, reflecting its concerns about the potency of Islamist thought, whether Shia or Sunni. Loyalist Sunni Islamists have been helpful to the regime during the uprisings, but these groups “have been unable to propose a sustainable post-2011 Sunni Islamist platform immune from the regime’s manipulation,” as Valeri put it.³¹ Sunni Islamism had thus effectively “served its purpose of arresting the momentum of opposition demonstrations in 2011,” and thus could be discarded.³² The longer these cross-ideological Sunni groups operated, the likelier they would adopt independent agendas objectionable to the government.

Marc Valeri further highlights that the regime’s emphasis on the sectarian divide during the Arab Spring helped drive Salafi jihadism within Bahrain, a strand of Islamism particularly hostile toward Shia Muslims.³³ Al-Asala has faced scrutiny for supporting militant groups in Syria; in particular, a delegation of al-Asala MPs traveled to Syria in August 2012 to give donations to the Islamist Suqour al-Sham brigade, later the Islamic Front. Although this trend of support for Syria may have slowed in recent years, anti-Shia rhetoric undoubtedly continues.³⁴

Bahrain’s leading Sunni Islamist blocs appear to have retreated to the safety of loyalism rather than promoting intra-Sunni unity to press for substantive political reforms. They have again become part of the rentier system, exchanging political independence for political access and economic privilege in a regional environment where Sunni Islamists are in an increasingly precarious position. As Justin Gengler points out, Bahrain’s Sunni community “receives a disproportionate share of state largesse and thus stands to lose the most from cuts to public-sector salaries and other benefits” because it is so critical to the survival of the regime.³⁵ In addition to rentier calculations, dissent has become increasingly associated with Shia mobilization, making it more difficult to mobilize Sunni groups against the regime. The rentier model remains alive and well in Bahrain, notwithstanding limited calls for changes in social policy in the current parliament.

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THEME 3: PRAGMATISM AND FLEXIBILITY

SURVIVING REPRESSION: HOW EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD HAS CARRIED ON

BARBARA ZOLLNER

Since the military overthrow in July 2013 of Egypt's then president Mohamed Morsi, the regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has engaged in the systematic repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Morsi is a member. It has done so by implementing policies commonly regarded as effective means of “decapitating” hierarchical organizations, particularly those with a significant capacity to mobilize grassroots support and generate public sympathy.¹

The Sisi regime took office in June 2014. Like the interim government that was under Sisi's control following Morsi's removal, it has adopted two leading approaches in suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood. First, it has targeted lines of command within the Brotherhood to destroy the leadership's control over the organization.² Second, to isolate the Brotherhood, it has constructed a narrative attempting to link it to violent Islamism.³ However, after nearly five years of such tactics, and despite numerous statements that the Muslim Brotherhood was at its end,⁴ the regime has failed to prevail. On the contrary, the Brotherhood has proven to be highly resilient, and there have even been signs of internal renewal,⁵ underlining that the regime's policies may be futile and counterproductive. If this continues, it could eat away at Sisi's legitimacy and even the stability of his regime.

THE EGYPTIAN REGIME'S LOGIC OF REPRESSION

Within months of the coup against Morsi, the Egyptian military took several measures to undermine the Muslim Brotherhood—banning it in September 2013 and declaring it a terrorist organization in December. These efforts corresponded to a view of the Brotherhood's power as being concentrated in an elite cadre that made strategic decisions and passed them on to the wider organization through top-down communication.⁶ The military-backed regime assumed that if this pyramidal setup was debilitated, the strains on the Brotherhood would lead to its disintegration.

After proscribing the Brotherhood and identifying it as a terrorist organization, the authorities rounded up members of the Guidance Office and the Shura Council, the organization's top two collective bodies. Only a few individuals escaped into exile. Some of those arrested were put in solitary confinement or suffered other abuses,⁷ in violation of internationally accepted prison standards.⁸ The regime then widened its persecution and purged other domains—public services, the military, the judiciary, syndicates, non-governmental organizations, media outlets, universities, and neighborhoods—to further curb Muslim Brotherhood influence among the middle class and parts of the elite.⁹ It also confiscated the organization's assets and closed affiliated social welfare associations.^{10 11}

Through these tactics the regime affirmed its resolve to defeat the Muslim Brotherhood politically and curtail its ability to build new constituencies. In subsequent court trials, tens of thousands of people faced charges of participating in a banned terrorist organization, and many continue to be detained without a warrant or have been disappeared.¹² Egypt's twelve major security prisons are filled beyond capacity, with prisoners languishing in substandard conditions.¹³

Initially, the Sisi regime's forceful imposition of a divide and conquer strategy on the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to pay off when part of the organization's younger members challenged the leadership.¹⁴ This looked like a generational conflict between more youthful members influenced by the revolutionary experience of the Arab uprisings in 2011 and a religiously and socially orthodox old guard that had controlled the Brotherhood's administrative apparatus for decades. In reality it was a clash over different visions of how to adequately react to the military coup and regime repression.¹⁵ The conflict brought to the fore disagreements over whether to undertake a range of actions from civil disobedience to vandalizing public installations and ransacking police stations and public buildings.¹⁶ Central to the internal tensions was the younger members' accusation that the older generation of leaders was seeking to maintain its grip on power.

The Brotherhood appeared to overcome these internal challenges. The Supreme Guide and the Guidance Office, whether in prison or exile, remain in charge of the organization's administration, although the Brotherhood's vertical command structure has been replaced by nonhierarchical networks and lines of communication.¹⁷ This has created spaces for relatively younger members to play a decisive role in the Brotherhood's survival.¹⁸ The organization has thus revealed an astonishing capacity to continue functioning despite regime efforts to prevent this.

THE MECHANISMS OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD'S SURVIVAL

The Muslim Brotherhood's ability to survive through long periods of persecution lies in the specifics of its organizational structure. It also derives from its assertion of a consistent social and political vision. In times of adversity this vision plays on a notion of perpetual religious struggle that underscores the personal and communal fortitude of true believers in their conflict with the regime. This reinforces the Brotherhood's unity and its members' willingness to carry on.

The Muslim Brotherhood persevered during the period of repression by then President Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime during the 1950s and 1960s,¹⁹ characterized by mass incarceration and torture strikingly

similar to the present. It also endured over three decades of antagonism from the regimes of presidents Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak.²⁰ During all those phases, the Brotherhood gained valuable experience that it has used in continuing to oppose the Sisi presidency through satellite television channels, websites,²¹ and support for imprisoned members and their families.²² These activities have been made possible because administrative and communication lines within the Brotherhood have remained intact, underlining that the organization cannot be stopped by prison walls and exile.

There are four main structural reasons why the Muslim Brotherhood has survived. The first is its pyramidal organizational structure.²³ This may seem counterintuitive, as it implies that what the regime regarded as the Brotherhood's main vulnerability in fact ensured its continuity. In reality the Brotherhood has lasted because the Office of the Supreme Guide and the Guidance Office remain its symbolic centers of command, even as the organization has adapted to changing circumstances. While the ability of the imprisoned supreme guide and Guidance Office members to run the organization's daily affairs is limited, crisis management and executive decisionmaking have been transferred to trusted members in exile.

The Muslim Brotherhood's centralized, pyramidal structure has remained unbroken, but it has been supplemented by an External Egyptian Brotherhood Office,²⁴ made up of higher-ranking exiled members. Among them are central figures in the Guidance Office,²⁵ such as Mahmoud Ezzat and Ahmad Abdul Rahman, or higher-ranking members such as Amr Darraj, Yahya Hamid, and Abdullah al-Haddad. Because Turkey, Qatar, and London are centers of the Muslim Brotherhood's administration, the exiled leadership is out of reach of the Egyptian authorities. Therefore, despite its reduced activity, the Brotherhood remains, with the help of modern technology, a sizable opposition force to the Sisi regime.

A second reason for the durability of the Muslim Brotherhood's organizational structure is that the top-tier cadre is large and diverse. This makes it virtually impossible for the regime to bring the entire leadership under its control, even using its extensive means of subjugation. More importantly, the regime's antagonism toward the Brotherhood has backfired. The organization's leadership has affirmed that the regime has not been able to break the Brotherhood's unity.²⁶ Therefore, it is conceivable that the public spectacles of the imprisoned leaders' trials may have helped restore respect for these figures among the Brotherhood's more revolutionary grassroots members. Although Sisi intended to demolish the organization's hierarchical setup, it largely remains intact.

A third reason for the Brotherhood's survival is that the diversification of its administrative processes has been supported by broadening communication networks. While the Muslim Brotherhood retains a pyramidal command structure, with key powers culminating in the Office of the Supreme Guide and the Guidance Office, its intraorganizational lines of communication do not necessarily follow hierarchical patterns. During previous times of repression, the Brotherhood refined a system of communication that did not rely on a strict top-down model but instead used multiple channels that allowed the leadership to pass on information in a relatively free-flowing manner. This was first tried and tested during the Nasser years, but was also applied during waves of incarcerations during the Sadat and Mubarak periods. The Muslim Brotherhood therefore built up skills allowing it today to transmit information among members in prison, on the outside, or in exile, through an intricate horizontal network that relies on personal relations rather than vertical lines of authority.

Personal relationships matter in the Muslim Brotherhood. There are countless examples of family ties binding members together. These links create relatively closed networks and ensure that trusted means of exchange remain open, while also safeguarding against potential infiltration and detection. For an example of how tightly knit Brotherhood networks can be, the organization's representative in the United Kingdom, Abdullah al-Haddad, is the son of the imprisoned Guidance Office member Issam al-Haddad and the brother of Jihad al-Haddad, who acted as media spokesperson during the early post-coup days.

These personal links are complemented by new media that permit relatively secure networking activities.²⁷ For example, encrypted text messaging and voice applications such as WhatsApp or Viber allow users to pass on information. Social media sites such as Facebook, online portals such as Ikhwanweb, and pro-Muslim Brotherhood satellite television stations such as Rabea TV or Al-Watan are all outlets through which ideas can be transmitted. As most Brotherhood-linked television stations are in Turkey, and because it is difficult to comprehensively block internet sites, the Egyptian authorities find it almost impossible to prevent the dissemination of leadership announcements or news about the Brotherhood. Some of those media—at least ones not entirely under the Guidance Office's control—have been used to express internal discontent and voice radical views.²⁸ At the same time they are crucial for keeping communication lines open, therefore for connecting the leadership with grassroots Brotherhood members.

Perhaps the most important reason for the Muslim Brotherhood's long-term survival is the fact that higher-ranking members can act relatively independently because they have been instructed in the details of the organization's ideology, aims, and *dawa*—meaning its proselytizing activities or call. The pledge, or *baya*, is the outward oath of allegiance to the supreme guide as head of the organization. However, it is the devotion of highly trained members to the ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood's founder Hassan al-Banna that ensures a particularly loyal and dependable membership base, one not reliant on top-down micro-management in times of crisis. The Brotherhood's education and selection program, which had served to screen members for posts in the organizational apparatus, has therefore contributed to tying rank-and-file members to the rest of the organization.²⁹

Proselytizing and teaching activities are not a priority for the Muslim Brotherhood today, due to the strains and risks that regime harassment has imposed³⁰. However, the training and selection program continues to pay off as it has produced skilled and devoted members. The organization's main body can thus carry on for long periods, without daily instructions, administrative guidance, or strategic commands. Therefore, the principal guarantors of the Muslim Brotherhood's long-term existence are committed members who can carry on through troubled times.

IDEOLOGY AND THE COMMITMENT TO NONVIOLENCE

In addition to attempting to destroy the internal structures of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian regime has also taken its battle into the realm of ideas and ideology. President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi has often associated the Brotherhood with religious extremism.³¹ By doing so, he has attempted to undermine the organization's claims to epitomize moderate Islamism and portray the regime as the defender of the Muslim mainstream. Sisi has revived Mubarak's rhetoric about the danger the Muslim Brotherhood poses to Egyptian security, thereby justifying legal proceedings against the organization.³²

This depiction of the Brotherhood resonates positively with international actors.³³ It also appeals to sections of the Egyptian population that agree with their regime's view that the organization threatens Egypt's political development, regional security, and the global fight against Islamist terrorism. However, it is questionable whether the government's narrative has had a dampening effect on Egyptians, particularly among those with religiously conservative leanings who do not consider Salafism as a viable ideological alternative to the Brotherhood or progressive Islamist movements as sufficiently strong to oppose the regime.³⁴

In assessing the ideological trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood, there has been a tendency to focus on the discord between younger members and the older leadership following the coup. There is a belief that the Brotherhood has been crippled by a deep ideological rift over the use of violence and revolutionary action, therefore over how to interpret the writings of the influential Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, who was hanged by the Nasser regime in August 1966.

Such an assessment misjudges the causes, dynamics, and extent of these disagreements. In his book *Milestones*, Sayyid Qutb did indeed introduce radical ideas that could be interpreted as calls to violence and revolution.³⁵ But it would be a mistake to assume this is what divides Brotherhood members. The label "Qutbist" is deceptive when describing the worldview of a religiously and socially conservative Brotherhood leadership that, despite the regime's repression, has publicly called for nonviolent political change.³⁶ The hardline position of the elders does not stem from the fact that they began their careers during Sayyid Qutb's time in prison. Rather, it is a consequence of their inflexibility based on a conviction that the Brotherhood represents the only solution to the problems in Egypt's future.

Similarly, the revolutionary fervor of the younger generation is not so much inspired by Sayyid Qutb's radicalism, as stirred by disenchantment with the Arab uprisings of 2011,³⁷ the horror of the Rabaa al-Adawiya massacre of Muslim Brotherhood protesters in August 2013, and shock at the extent of the regime's clampdown.³⁸ Indeed, the internal friction between Cairo as the base of the youth movement and Istanbul as the main center of the Guidance Office in exile has caused noticeable tremors and shake-ups that have also reverberated in London, Doha, and the wider global network.³⁹ However, all this has not affected the Muslim Brotherhood's overall ideological and organizational coherence.

The Brotherhood has shown consistency in its calls for nonviolent resistance. Although it seems that youths on the organization's fringes have flirted with pursuing violent tactics, their anti-Sisi stance has not brought them ideologically closer to Salafi-jihadi militancy.⁴⁰ Official regime rhetoric affirming such a link and the existence of an alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood and militants affiliated with al-Qaeda or the self-proclaimed Islamic State group is not based on any conclusive evidence, but merely on an inference that there must be an ideological relationship due to Sayyid Qutb's legacy.

While Sayyid Qutb's writings significantly affected the evolution of Salafi-jihadism, it was not his radical revolutionary ideas on which the Brotherhood picked up as part of its ideological framework. Instead, it was influenced by Sayyid Qutb's uncompromising resistance to the regime, which ultimately led him to the gallows. Of greater inspiration to the Brotherhood were the ideas of Hassan al-Banna, its founder. He rejected revolutionary militancy, and his legacy was further interpreted by the second supreme guide, Hasan al-Hudaybi; his son Ma'mun al-Hudaybi; and the third supreme guide, Omar al-Tilmisani, who

all favored gradual social and political change. It was under their leadership that the Brotherhood rose out of the ashes after Nasser's death, fixing a conservative, yet nonviolent, ideological path to which the organization still adheres.⁴¹ While some members may argue that the emphasis on gradualism needs to be revised, there is no evidence of an imminent ideological shift that will turn the Brotherhood toward violence.⁴²

One issue crucial to Muslim Brotherhood thought and discussions is the renewed emphasis on the *mihna*—a divinely ordained trial that tests the conviction and persistence of true believers in the pursuit of justice and truth. On both the personal and organizational levels, regime repression has become a core element of current narratives within the Brotherhood and has contributed to shifting away from a resort to violence as a potential option. The reference to *mihna* as a call for patience, persistence, and fortitude plays on the tribulations of those imprisoned and tortured during the Nasser period. Subsequently, the concept evolved into an integral part of the Brotherhood's historical narrative and self-image. Rank-and-file members are familiar with the stories of the organization's "heroes" and their sacrifices under duress. The emphasis of the *mihna* is a deliberate attempt to draw parallels between the past and present. It contributes to the construction of an image that regards tenacity against authoritarianism as an ideal that should be emulated as well as reaffirming a need for internal unity.

THE DANGERS OF UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

The costs of the relentless suppression of a significant social movement such as the Muslim Brotherhood are incredibly high. That is not only true for its members and supporters, but also for the authorities who implement such a course of action. While the Sisi regime might regard the repressive measures as necessary, they also carry a risk. The material costs of running prisons with tens of thousands of inmates—the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) reported as many as 60,000 political prisoners including opposition activists, journalists, and alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood—are immense, not counting the implicit losses due to the fact that the detainees are not economically active.^{43 44}

But such consequences are unlikely to dissuade the Sisi regime. However, the nonmaterial costs of the Muslim Brotherhood's persecution weigh heavily on an Egyptian leadership that vowed to ensure democratic freedoms, bring economic prosperity, and guarantee security in the face of Salafi-jihadi terrorism. If the regime is unable to meet the expectations it created, its popularity will suffer. This could provide new political openings for opposition to the president, affecting Egypt's stability.⁴⁵ Unfulfilled expectations and regime violence, observed Amr Darraj, a high-ranking Brotherhood member in exile, could result in unrest or even civil war, with terrible consequences for Egypt and negative implications for Europe.⁴⁶ The Brotherhood cannot be defeated, not even by executing its leaders. Given the signs of organizational continuity, even renewal, Egypt's political destiny will continue to be defined by the clash between the regime and Islamists.

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THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

OUR COMMON ENEMY: AMBIGUOUS TIES BETWEEN AL-QAEDA AND YEMEN'S TRIBES

NADWA AL-DAWSARI

The spread of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen is sometimes mistakenly blamed on tribes. The mainstream narrative claims that the extremist group is embedded in the country's tribal and social fabric and that tribes offer AQAP safe haven and protection¹. Since the start of Yemen's war in September 2014, the relationship between the group and the tribes has been explained in sectarian terms², with AQAP fighting alongside Sunni tribes against the Shia Houthis.

Bayda Governorate is one of the areas where AQAP's activity in the region has increased since late 2014. The group has been engaged in the conflict against Ansar Allah, a Zaydi-Shia rebel group known more commonly as the Houthis, a development that has reinforced the perception that AQAP has built an alliance with local tribes. In reality, prior to the conflict in Yemen, the tribes had largely obstructed AQAP's ability to expand and gain influence. It was not the sympathy of local tribes but the offensive in Bayda by the Houthis and forces loyal to the late Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh that created chaos, fueled grievances, violated tribal honor, and exacerbated conditions that allowed AQAP to gain strength.

AQAP AND THE TRIBES: THE CASE OF TARIQ AL-DHAHAB

Misperceptions about tribal collaboration with AQAP can be traced back to January 2012, when Tariq al-Dhahab, the son of a prominent leader of the Qaifah tribe in Bayda, seized the historic castle and mosque of al-Amiriya in the center of Radaa city (around 140 kilometers or 90 miles south of the capital, Sanaa) with the help of dozens of AQAP militants. Tariq, who had lived in Sanaa all his life, sought the group's help to reclaim his status in his clan, Al al-Dhahab. The reason was that Tariq's elder brother Ali had denied him and six other brothers the land and wealth they had inherited from their father, the leader of the clan³.

This incident is often presented as evidence of tribal support for AQAP. This belief was reinforced by the fact that Tariq's sister married Anwar al-Awlaki, the U.S.-born cleric who acted as a spokesman for AQAP before he was killed by a U.S. drone strike in 2011. Some also say that AQAP was able to exploit the rivalries within the Al al-Dhahab clan in Bayda to penetrate the tribes⁴. What is certain is that the collaboration between Tariq al-Dhahab and AQAP was not a result of ideological affinity. Indeed, most of Tariq's followers did not even perform religious duties⁵. Rather, he was able to attract supporters among the tribes because of his ability to resolve conflicts and difficult cases of revenge killings, an endemic problem in Radaa. AQAP saw a benefit in helping Tariq address such complicated tribal conflicts, in the hope that by doing so it would gain local support. This also motivated the group to provide services that the government and the tribes had not delivered to the local population. Indeed, AQAP sometimes even paid blood money to settle tribal disputes.

However, Tariq al-Dhahab, in allying himself with AQAP, did not reflect the preferences of his wider tribe. Indeed, it was the tribes that had successfully kept AQAP under control in Bayda and many parts of Yemen before then, recognizing the threat posed by the extremist group. Yet they also understood that getting rid of AQAP carried many risks for the already fragile order established and maintained by the tribes. That's because AQAP members come mainly from local tribes and resorting to force could provoke tribal conflicts, a problem the tribes in Bayda and in other areas have been struggling to resolve. The tribes, therefore, have preferred to rely on negotiations and pressure when it comes to AQAP, as well as punishing their own members who give shelter to the group. Force is only used when all other means have been exhausted.

This is precisely what happened when Tariq al-Dhahab and the AQAP militants moved into Radaa. The tribes from the seven districts surrounding the city took action immediately to contain the situation. Armed tribesmen surrounded buildings controlled by AQAP. The tribes positioned their men at city entrances to block the arrival of AQAP reinforcements from Abyan Governorate. They also stationed armed men to guard government facilities and formed neighborhood watch committees⁶. A mediation committee of tribal dignitaries was then set up to negotiate with Tariq, and it eventually persuaded him to withdraw from the city and return with the AQAP militants to his home village of al-Manasseh⁷. Tariq's tribe disowned him for bringing the militants into Radaa, which meant that he lost his right to protection and other privileges as a member of his tribe⁸.

But even mediation does not always end well. Tariq's half-brother Hizam, who had grown tired of seeing AQAP militants in al-Manasseh, confronted Tariq about their presence and eventually shot him dead. That same day, the militants avenged Tariq by killing Hizam⁹. When the government sent a military force in February 2013 to force AQAP militants out of al-Manasseh, the tribes intervened to stop the campaign after shelling destroyed homes in the area. They were worried that their areas would face the same fate as Abyan in mid-2012, when efforts to push AQAP out had resulted in massive destruction and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians. Another mediation effort eventually forced AQAP leaders from Al al-Dhahab to leave al-Manasseh, and government officials announced that the village was free of al-Qaeda¹⁰. Most of the AQAP militants relocated to Yakla, a remote and mountainous area on the border with Marib Governorate.

THE HOUTHI ENTRY INTO BAYDA

In September 2014, the Houthis seized Sanaa with the support of military units loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh. A few weeks later, in October, the Houthis moved south to capture Bayda Governorate, which they managed to mostly control by March 2015. The Houthis branded their military campaign as a war against AQAP. The Peace and National Partnership Agreement the Yemeni government signed with the Houthis on September 21, 2014¹¹, affirmed that the government was committed to helping the citizens of Bayda fight against AQAP, giving the Houthis the political cover they needed to enter the governorate.

In reality, however, taking control of Bayda was militarily important to the Houthis because the governorate is located in the middle of Yemen and shares borders with eight other governorates. Control over Bayda would make it easier for the Houthis to cement the military gains they had made in the north of the country and move southward and eastward with more confidence.

The Houthis first entered Bayda through neighboring Dhamar Governorate, which they already controlled thanks to Saleh's units. Tribal leaders in Bayda loyal to Saleh helped the Houthis negotiate with local tribes to ensure a smooth entry. While tribes across Bayda had prepared to stop the Houthis, they realized that the combined forces of Saleh and the Houthis were much stronger, so they opted to remain neutral. The political situation in Sanaa at the time was unclear, as the capital had just fallen into Houthi hands. The impression was that the Houthis' expansion was merely a façade for Saleh's return to power.

To gain access to Radaa, the second-largest city in Bayda, where government, military, and security facilities were located, the Houthis needed to pass through the territory of the Arsh tribe. The tribe reluctantly allowed the Houthis passage into Radaa and to Qaifa, located to its north, by the main highway that cuts through Arsh territory. In return, the Houthis were not to establish checkpoints or use the tribe's territory to engage in any fighting. "We are not your enemies, but we want our home to remain dignified, to remain protected, to remain untouched," the leader of the Arsh told the Houthis during negotiations¹².

As the Houthis gained greater control over Bayda and became more powerful than Saleh, they went back on most of the agreements they had concluded with the tribes. They began committing unprecedented abuses to force the tribes into submission. The Houthis abducted, arbitrarily arrested, and killed their opponents, including tribal leaders, or destroyed their homes, all of which constituted serious offenses according to tribal tradition¹³. For example, in August 2016, the Houthis killed four tribal leaders in Bayda in cold blood¹⁴. They also destroyed farms, levied heavy taxes, and imposed the use of their own ideological slogans in local mosques, provoking resentment among local tribes.¹⁵

Many of the tribes saw the Houthis' actions as an attempt to undermine their power.¹⁶ In the village of Khubza, for example, tribal mediation between the Houthis and local tribes led to the expulsion of AQAP members from the village. Despite this, the Houthis attempted to capture Khubza by force, destroying many homes and displacing thousands of families¹⁷. Similarly, in al-Zoub, the most-populated and highest-educated area in Qaifa, a local nongovernmental organization documented over 800 atrocities against local residents by the Houthis¹⁸. The Houthis' behavior prompted the tribes to fight back.

Violence between the two sides flared up in several parts of Qaifa before spreading to other tribal areas in Bayda, where it is ongoing in at least six districts.

The Houthis' entry into Bayda allowed AQAP to gain influence on the ground and return to al-Manasseh, from where they had been pushed out in early 2013. Nabil al-Dhahab—Tariq's brother and a leader of Ansar al-Sharia, the Yemeni affiliate of AQAP, until he was killed by a U.S. drone strike in November 2014—attended a meeting in October 2014 in which tribes from several parts of Bayda and other governorates gathered in al-Manasseh to discuss the Houthi threat¹⁹. AQAP militants became very active in the fight against the Houthis, and their ranks swelled. This showed that the tribes that had previously curtailed AQAP's influence were no longer willing to do so, as they both shared a common enemy.

A member of the mediation committee that had convinced AQAP combatants to withdraw from Radaa in 2012 put it this way: "Before this war, the tribes didn't want al-Qaeda and were able to keep it in check. Now angry tribesmen say al-Qaeda is welcome if it can help us fight the Houthis."²⁰ Indeed, according to local tribesmen in Bayda, AQAP has more experienced fighters and better combat skills than any other group, including the tribes. It also has more money and equipment, which has attracted some tribesmen frustrated with the lack of support from the Yemeni government in exile in Saudi Arabia, and from the Saudi government itself, in the battle against the Houthis.²¹ For example, in 2015, the government formed Brigade 117, made up of thousands of Bayda tribesmen, with the purpose of pushing the Houthis out of the governorate. However, the brigade has been stationed in nearby Marib Governorate to the tribes' dismay and has so far not intervened in support against the Houthis.

More significantly, AQAP was able to expand its operations in Bayda because it exploited the historic grievances that have shaped the tribes' attitude toward the Houthis. The Houthis are widely viewed in Bayda as an extension of the Zaydi imamate, a theocracy that ruled much of Yemen for hundreds of years, mostly by intimidating local tribes into submission, until it was overthrown in 1962.²² The imams claimed authority from being descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, commonly known as *sayyids*. The Bayda tribes believe the Houthis want to reinstate the imamate and eliminate the republican system.²³ These perceptions are reinforced by the Houthis' own public discourse that endorses the right of the Prophet Muhammad's family, or Ahl al-Bayt, to rule²⁴. When the Houthis pushed into Bayda, to the tribes it seemed to be a return to the seventeenth century, when the imams mobilized northern tribes to forcibly add Bayda to their territories, as well as to the late 1920s, when northern tribes engaged in fierce clashes with local tribes. The Bayda tribes remember how their leaders were beheaded and how the forces of the imamate looted their crops and imposed heavy taxes²⁵. Many in Bayda also believe the Houthis have behaved brutally against local tribes because of the significant role they played in the imamate's downfall in 1962.²⁶

THE ENEMY WE KNOW AGAINST ONE WHO MUST GO

The tribes in Bayda regard the Houthis as a greater threat than AQAP. Unlike the Houthis, AQAP does not exercise power over the tribes or compel them to follow a particular ideology.²⁷ The Houthis are outsiders who come principally from the northern tribes, while AQAP is made up mainly of local tribesmen who have not challenged the authority of the tribes in Bayda. The Houthis have insulted the tribes by labeling

those who reject their presence in Bayda as “Dawaish,” a term derived from “Daesh” that describes groups following the ideology of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. AQAP, meanwhile, has always been careful not to antagonize the tribes, addressing them with respect²⁸. The Houthis have violated tribal honor while AQAP has helped defend it. For the tribes, AQAP is tomorrow’s problem but the Houthis are the existential threat they need to face right now.

AQAP might have gained more recruits in tribal areas during the past several years, though the extremist group is far from being embedded in the tribes and remains much weaker than them. The majority of tribesmen who joined AQAP are motivated far less by ideology than by anger and frustration at the marginalization their areas have long suffered, and continue to suffer, as well as by current Houthi efforts to subjugate them.²⁹ While there is a level of coordination between local tribes fighting the Houthis and AQAP, they function in separate spaces. When the Houthis started clashing with tribes in Qaifa in October 2014, major tribal leaders from Bayda met and agreed to send hundreds of their men to help support the Qaifa tribes. However, most returned when they realized that AQAP was also fighting against the Houthis on the side of the Qaifa tribes.³⁰ Shortly thereafter, AQAP militants moved to separate locations after demands by the tribes, who feared that the militants’ presence would undermine the legitimacy of their cause and taint them as AQAP members.³¹

That reaction was understandable, as there remain fundamental differences between the tribes and AQAP on the battlefield. In early 2015, AQAP militants executed captured Houthi fighters, an action that angered the tribes and led to clashes. According to customary tribal law, executing unarmed persons is an exceptionally heinous offense.³² Even in Yakla, AQAP is mainly stationed in the mountains away from the tribal population.³³

Ultimately, the Bayda tribes and AQAP have conflicting objectives in Yemen’s war. The tribes’ final goal is to secure their land and expel the Houthis from their territory. They don’t have any interest in fighting the Houthis outside of Bayda. AQAP, however, wants to use guerrilla warfare to draw the Houthis into tribal areas so that they can ensnare them in a costly war of attrition, an objective that disturbs local tribes.³⁴ For as long as the Bayda tribes are forced to defend their areas against the Houthis, they will become weaker, which means that their ability to limit the threat of AQAP will diminish over time.

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THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

SYRIA'S REGIME HAS GIVEN THE FATAH ISLAMIC INSTITUTE INFLUENCE, BUT AT WHAT COST?

LAILA RIFAI

After the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, certain religious institutions gained influence in a manner unprecedented since the country's independence in 1945. This followed from efforts of President Bashar al-Assad's regime to bring them more tightly under the state's control. The price these institutions paid, however, was that the regime used them to advance its own interests, while they would surrender their administrative independence—which had been, until then, a defining feature of Syria's Sunni religious establishment.

The most prominent example was the private Fatah Islamic Institute, which teaches Islam, Islamic jurisprudence, and Arabic. Along with two other institutions—the Sayyida Ruqiyya Foundation and the Abou Nour Foundation, which was established by Syria's grand mufti between 1964 and 2004, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro—the Fatah Islamic Institute was transformed by Legislative Decree 48 of April 4, 2011¹. The decree helped initiate the integration of these institutions into the state, ultimately leading the Ministry of Higher Education to recognize the degrees they issue as legitimate, thereby allowing graduates to work in state institutions and study abroad.

This was done by unifying the university-level departments of the three institutions (but not their middle and secondary schools) and placing them in a single organization under the umbrella of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, named the Damascus Institute for the Study of Islamic Law, Arabic Language, and Islamic Studies and Research (Maahad al-Sham lil Ulum al-Shariyyeh wal Lugha al-Arabyia wal Dirasat wal Buhuth al-Islamiya). In January 2017, the state went a step further when it effectively transformed that institute into a public university² called the University of the Levant for Islamic Sciences (Jamiaat Bilad al-Sham lil Ulum al-Shariyyeh).

The trajectory of the Fatah Islamic Institute reflects two defining realities of the relationship between the state and the ulama, or religious scholars, in Syria. First, there are no longer private religious establishments

outside the state administration, ending centuries of independence. And second, although the institute became more prominent through its regime ties, the regime benefited more, using the institution to its advantage.

OFFICIALLY SANCTIONED ISLAM UNDER THE BAAATH PARTY

When the Baath Party took power in 1963, it broke with previous Syrian regimes by not trying to develop a religious bureaucracy. There had been earlier attempts prior to Baath rule to increase the state's authority over religious institutions, but these had largely been unsuccessful. The Baath Party gave up on such efforts, preferring a hardline security approach to religion.

Under the Baath Party, the ulama were not part of the state bureaucracy, nor did they have a representative association or union similar to other organizations set up by the state to oversee social groups. The principal point of contact between the Syrian state and the religious establishment at the time was the Ministry of Religious Endowments, a weak institution with limited prestige. The relationship between the ulama and the state contrasted with the ties existing among Al-Azhar, the Egyptian state, the Council of Senior Scholars, and the Saudi state. That is why Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, who became mufti after an election in the Ministry of Religious Endowments, was largely a symbolic figure, whose influence came from his personal network of relations rather than his institutional standing.

This impacted the development of Syria's ulama. Their distance from the state allowed them to become economically independent, so that they relied more on the private sector for funding, while focusing on social work instead of political action. The religious establishment was decentralized, and this led to the creation of categories and associations of religious scholars³ with varying degrees of connection to the state. They and the state benefited mutually from their relationships. The associations provided the regime with religious and political legitimacy. In turn, the regime met the main demands of the ulama, namely preserving religious and social conservatism; upholding the ulama's stature, status, and relevance; and addressing the demands of each association within the context of internal and intra-associational rivalries. This defined Syria's religious landscape from 1963 until the legislative decree in 2011.

The Development of the Fatah Islamic Institute

The Fatah Islamic Institute⁴ was founded in 1956 by Sheikh Saleh al-Farfour⁵, the scion of a Damascus-based family that had produced many religious scholars. He originally studied under the religious innovator Sheikh Badruddin al-Hasni, among Damascus's most significant ulama. During the 1940s, Farfour began his own activities, first by hosting study circles (*halaqat ilm*) in the Umayyad Mosque and other mosques in Damascus's old city, such as the Fathi Mosque in al-Qaimariyya.

To support his work financially, Farfour established the Fatah Islamic Association, which allowed him to provide Islamic teaching and charity to students of religion. The association bought Farfour a house and worked with him to set up the institute in the association's name. Its curriculum was based on key works in Islamic thought and Arabic lessons for middle and high school students, amounting to a five-year program at the end of which students would earn an institutional certificate. In 1965, a section was

opened for women. In 1971, the institute established the Specialization Department for university-level study, offering a three-year program of courses—one on Islamic jurisprudence, another on Arabic language and literature, and a third on the study of the Quran and the hadith, or the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

In 1984, two years before he died, Farfour handed administration of the middle and high school—known as the Sabahi Department—to Sheikh Abdel-Fattah al-Bazam, while one of his sons, Houssam al-Din, took over the Specialization Department. The department gained academic accreditation in 1994 through a deal Bazam and Din signed with Egypt's Al-Azhar University, on the condition that the institute implement Al-Azhar's curriculum and develop and expand the courses offered by the Specialization Department. This allowed their graduates to receive Al-Azhar certificates. However, the agreement was abandoned at the start of the millennium without any clear explanation. The Fatah Islamic Institute did expand, however, moving from its original location around the Bilal al-Habshi Mosque in the old city of Damascus to offices in the Abou Ayoub al-Ansari Mosque in Zahira al-Jadida.

The Fatah Islamic Institute continues to teach Arabic based on classic texts of Islamic law. This is part of the institute's integrated, traditional educational program, offered to a small number of students, that has high entry and graduation requirements. The institute also enforces significant discipline and conservatism—especially for women—making it attractive to Damascene society, which leans socially conservative, and allowing it to compete with other institutes, most notably the Abou Nour Foundation.

Competing for the Regime's Favor

For a long time, the Abou Nour Foundation was the Baathist regime's favored religious group. An example of the regime's approval occurred in 1967, when it used the foundation to replace imams who had resigned following an article in the Syrian army magazine describing religions as retrograde⁶, suggesting they be placed in a museum. The foundation repeatedly broke ranks with its peers to improve its status with the regime. However, after February 1982, when thousands of people in Hama were massacred following a failed insurgency led by the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime somewhat relegated the foundation when it sought Islamic legitimacy. This advantaged the prominent Islamic writer and thinker Mohammed Said Ramadan al-Bouti, who had long dominated the religious scene.

The Abou Nour Foundation's preferential status was a major reason the Fatah Islamic Institute differentiated itself at the time. In 1993, the situation changed when Sheikh Abdel-Fattah al-Bazam was appointed mufti of Damascus in a regime effort to co-opt the institute. However, because Kufaro remained mufti of Syria, the Abou Nour Foundation retained the upper hand; so the Fatah Islamic Institute continued to seek the regime's favor until Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000.

Assad's arrival was a shock to many former regime supporters, including Kufaro, institute officials, and even Bouti. The new president sidelined them all and initiated conversations with a former enemy, the Zayd Association, which the regime had mistrusted since the 1980s because of the group's unclear loyalties during the 1982 crisis with the Muslim Brotherhood. The association survived because several leading figures were allowed to remain in Syria. Its leader, Osama al-Rifai, would soon return from exile and was alone among religious figures in enjoying a personal audience with Assad.

Several factors drove Assad's actions. Once in office, he faced an increasingly devout society searching for religious representatives with greater legitimacy than the regime's longtime allies. Syria was also buffeted by regional unrest—including the second Palestinian intifada, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and growing instability in Lebanon. All this heightened Assad's fears of losing power, pushing him to open channels to new partners who could offer greater social legitimacy. Yet the regime also played religious actors off against each other, limiting their influence while maintaining ties with those it trusted and appointing their members to posts in the religious administration, such as officials from the Fatah Islamic Institute.

When Kuftaro died in 2004, his association lost some ground and the Fatah Islamic Institute moved to fill the gap. Two of its clerics, Bassam Dafdaa and Mahmoud Dahla, ran in the 2007 parliamentary elections, though neither won. However, the institute did play a larger role in the government. Ahmad Samer Qabbani, an institute teacher, was appointed head of the Endowments Department for Damascus, while Khodr Shahrouf, another teacher, took the same position for Rural Damascus Governorate.

The institute found itself in an enhanced position. Abdel-Fattah al-Bazam was mufti of Damascus, and institution officials controlled the religious endowments of the country's capital and its environs. The institute even started working on ecumenical matters. In 2006, it organized a meeting between Sunni clerics and Christian clergymen at Harvard Divinity School. This was controversial among Syria's ulama, who have reservations about interfaith dialogue. It prompted Bouti and two leading figures in the Faculty of Islamic Law at Damascus University, Imadeddine al-Rashid and Badiaa al-Sayyid al-Lahham, to resign their teaching positions in the Specialization Department after refusing to compromise on religious matters.

Syria's Islamic establishment experienced much upheaval in 2008. The regime felt more at ease in its foreign policy (epitomized by Assad's attendance at Bastille Day celebrations in Paris), and it saw an opening to strengthen its hold over the religious establishment without risking its own legitimacy. One of Assad's first moves was to appoint as religious endowments minister Mohammed al-Sayyid, the mufti of Tartous and a noted regime loyalist, who vowed to "end anarchy" in the religious establishment and "promote the entry of the ulama into the body of the state."⁷

In September 2008, Sayyid took advantage of an explosion near a state intelligence building, allegedly set off by the Fatah al-Islam jihadi group, to underline that the state had to "take control of [religious] institutions."⁸ For reasons left unclear, he made an exception for the university-level branches of the Abou Nour Foundation and the Fatah Islamic Institute. However, all of Syria's religious institutions, including the Fatah Islamic Institute's Sabahi Department, were later placed under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which also set their curriculum.

THE STRENGTHENING OF THE FATAH ISLAMIC INSTITUTE AFTER 2011

The uprising in 2011 represented a major rupture for Syria. Its impact was felt everywhere, including the religious sphere, with top-ranking clerics forced to take positions on events. They felt this acutely because their young supporters, along with lower-ranking clerics from most of the country's religious institutions, contributed to the antigovernment demonstrations. The uprising's speed and unpredictability provoked

ambiguity in the religious establishment. This pushed the regime to restructure the religious establishment by imposing separate arrangements on each actor, depending on its reaction to the uprising and according to the regime's needs.

Indeed, the regime's first step toward reining in trusted clerics was to issue Legislative Decree 48 less than a month after the uprising began, to reorganize and centralize religious institutions. The decree soon bore fruit. It brought the Fatah Islamic Institute into the loyalist camp, and the institute issued statements lending legitimacy to the government and warning against *fitna*, or civil strife. This repositioning came at the expense of the institute's clerics who had joined the uprising and went against students protesting the institute's tilt toward the regime. The institute gave the security forces access to CCTV footage to identify regime opponents, leading to mass dismissals of students and the departure of many staff members.⁹ At the same time, senior clerics in the institute were appointed to positions in mosques vacated by members of the Zayd Association, which had declared its opposition to the regime.

Within the Fatah Islamic Institute, the Specialization Department took advantage of the legislative decree that had brought recognition from the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Teachers from the department began appearing on official television stations, raising their profile. This partly stemmed from a departmental modernization program that had set up a media training section. Many of the department's students played key roles in the official Nour al-Sham religious television channel, which Assad had created for Bouti. There were other changes, too: the institute allowed the sexes to intermingle on its premises and in some of its newly established academic departments, after this had long been prohibited.

The Fatah Islamic Institute's demonstrations of regime loyalty earned it other benefits. It can annually broadcast, on state television, its graduation ceremony, with the minister of religious endowment's approval. However, the crowning moment came in January 2017, when a presidential decree transformed the Damascus Institute into the University of the Levant for Islamic Sciences. This placed the university, and through it the Fatah Islamic Institute's Specialization Department, on par with other important Syrian universities, granting it official recognition from the Ministry of Higher Education. It also completed the regime's efforts to bring Syria's religious institutions under the state's auspices.

The growing closeness between the Fatah Islamic Institute and the regime had ramifications on the ground. Well-known figures from the institute, building on its social and religious standing, helped break the morale of rebel forces in the territories they controlled, to the regime's benefit. For example, Bassam Dafdaa, along with dozens of his colleagues, endured the siege of Kfar Batna, east of Damascus. During the siege, he cooperated with the dominant faction in Kfar Batna, Failaq al-Rahman. Once the tide turned in the regime's favor in early 2018, however, Dafdaa led a popular movement calling for regime forces to enter Kfar Batna¹⁰. In the end, the regime forces were able to enter the town. Opposition sources accused Dafdaa and some 400 armed men loyal to him of having eased the entry of Syrian government troops¹¹ into the area. He would not have been able to play such a role had he not been a scholar and teacher from the Fatah Islamic Institute.

This approach was repeated in southern Damascus by two other institute graduates, Anas al-Tawil and Radwan al-Kahil. In a more overt way than Dafdaa, they led a reconciliation drive with the regime after abandoning armed struggle at the end of the siege of the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in 2014. This facilitated the territory's handover to regime forces in May 2018.

The mediation role played by individuals from the Fatah Institute was not only visible on the ground during the conflict; it also played out in the religious arena. The institute also lent greater legitimacy to Iran and Shia Muslims in official Syrian religious institutions, something the Iranians had sought since 2005.¹² Institute representatives made up a large share of the Syrian delegation to a meeting with Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in Tehran in March 2018. The meeting was followed by a conference attended by Houssam al-Din al-Farfour, Mohammed al-Sayyid (Syria's religious endowments minister), and Kamal al-Kharrazi, the head of Iran's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations. During the conference, they announced the founding of a College of Islamic Doctrines in Damascus¹³.

THE FUTURE IS A DILEMMA FOR RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

The Fatah Islamic Institute has ceased to be a religious actor that merely did favors for the regime in exchange for privileges, and has become a fundamental part of Syria's official Islamic religious establishment. In the process, it not only gave up its administrative independence but also helped revitalize relations between the Islamic field and the regime. It has stimulated the social role of these Islamic institutions under the regime umbrella, and they are more in tune with society than the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Syria's muftis have ever been.

However, these closer ties with the regime raise questions about the future of religious establishments and their legitimacy. Particularly after a brutal and divisive conflict, it is doubtful whether Islamic institutions can benefit in the long term when they are identified with a state that has alienated a significant portion of the Syrian population. In many regards, these institutions' value to the regime has always been the religious legitimacy they provide. It is questionable, however, whether they can still do this today, creating a dilemma for the religious institutions. Continuing to embrace the regime will further erode these institutions' credibility with many Syrians, while opposing the regime will undermine the gains they have made in recent years and render them irrelevant. For the regime, this is a winning deal. It helped the regime re-legitimize itself in society's eyes after a divisive conflict, and it also neutralized any potential independent actor that could distort Assad's legitimacy.

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NOTES

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THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

YEMEN'S HOUTHIS USED MULTIPLE IDENTITIES TO ADVANCE

AHMED NAGI

Over the past two decades, the Houthis have advanced from being a local religious movement in Yemen's northern governorate of Saada to being a de facto authority controlling the country's capital, Sanaa, and most of its northern governorates. Several factors enabled this gain in power, including the breakdown of state institutions and the opportunities created by domestic and regional rivalries. But it was chiefly the Houthis' ability to play on a range of religious, political, and social identities that helped them recruit fighters, defeat opponents, and build alliances. It was a pragmatic approach, whereby, depending on the circumstances, the Houthis favored certain identities over others. This flexibility made them a more potent adversary than anyone had expected.

Representing a once-powerful Zaidi Shia minority, the Houthis' ultimate aim is to resurrect Zaidi leadership as a counter to encroaching Sunni ideologies. This is one main reason Yemen's conflict turned into a proxy war between a Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition and Iran. Despite these actors' involvement, however, the Houthis maintain tight control over northern Yemen and Sanaa, and recent international pressure to end the conflict may force a political compromise that enables the Houthis to take on yet another identity—that of a legitimate local government in North Yemen.

FROM A RELIGIOUS TO POLITICAL MOVEMENT

The Houthi movement was largely born from a major transformation of the Believing Youth Forum (BYF), founded in 1992 by Zaidi religious leaders in the northern city of Saada. According to one of the BYF's co-founders, Mohammed Azzan, the forum was established to revive Zaidism by providing an educational and intellectual foundation for youth.¹ However, when Hussein al-Houthi, a prominent and politically active religious leader, joined the organization in 1999, he changed its central role dramatically.

Through exploiting communal solidarity and grievances, he turned the forum into a political platform that eventually became a military insurgency.

Prior to joining the BYF, Hussein co-founded the Party of Truth in 1990 to protect Zaidi interests. He was a follower of Twelver Shiism (a Shia denomination embraced by Iran) and identified with Iran's political vision. He regarded the country's late ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as a role model.² But not all Zaidi scholars supported his desire to revive Zaidi governance, and he gave up his parliamentary seat—held for only one year.

Similarly, not all BYF leaders supported Hussein's political views or his eventual use of the forum for political purposes.³ But his father, Badreddine, was the organization's spiritual guide, which helped Hussein extend his influence. Furthermore, in the name of Zaidi revivalism, Hussein was able to play on communal solidarity to gain more support among Zaidi tribes in Saada Governorate. He recruited disgruntled young Zaidis displeased with the status of their community after the republican revolution of 1962, which ended the thousand-year Zaidi rule in the North. He also exploited the Zaidis' strengthening resolve against actions by Sunni groups. For example, in 1980, Salafis attempted to change the religious identity of Saada's tribal communities through establishing the Saudi-financed Dammaj religious center in the governorate's Safra District.⁴ And in the 1990s, they tried to expand tribal support of the Islah Party, whose ideology is tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. This created an opportune moment for Hussein to gather the Zaidis in Saada around him and strive to resurrect Yemen's Zaidi leadership.

Over time, the BYF started to be known as the Houthi movement and transformed into a military force, opposing then president Ali Abdullah Saleh and seeking self-autonomy. With memories of the 1960s conflict still fresh, many Zaidis did not initially support the Houthi movement. But this changed when, in June 2004, war broke out due to a dispute between Saleh and the Houthis⁵ over the collection of a religious tax from neighborhoods in Saada, as well as other Houthi actions Saleh perceived as undermining his authority.⁶ The government sought to arrest Hussein, who was killed in fighting later that year. However, rather than intimidate his followers, Hussein's death rallied Zaidi support and the movement's influence grew. Hussein's brother stepped into the leadership role.

The Houthi insurgency continued to grow in the ensuing years. One factor was the Houthis' ability to bring together the Hashemites⁷—influential, mainly Zaidi families that had played an important administrative role during Zaidi rule and claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Through making this connection and adopting the Hashemites' identity, the movement gained the respect accorded to Hashemites and took advantage of their presence and networks outside areas of Houthi influence. This was a clear first step toward the Houthis moving beyond their religious identity to having an overtly political one.

A NEW NAME, A NEW STRATEGY

After six rounds of conflict with government forces between 2004 and 2009, the Houthis had control over most of Saada Governorate. With this gain in power, the movement saw an opening to expand its reach outside Saada (some Houthi leaders desired an authority-sharing arrangement, while others sought to control

all of Yemen). During the 2011 Arab uprising, protests erupted in several governorates against Saleh's rule. The Houthis participated, seeing an opportunity to advance community-level demands, such as more representation in local and government councils and compensation for their people killed during the conflict. For the first time, they could peacefully present their political aims and do so on a much larger stage.

However, the Houthis had to overcome a significant obstacle to gain nationwide attention. Because the religious or tribal identities they had embraced until then had little resonance among many Yemenis, especially in the South, the Houthis had to find one that would entice a wider cross-section of society. This began with renaming their movement Ansar Allah (Partisans of God) to put more emphasis on their political agenda. The name was derived from a Quranic verse⁸ that would appeal to a religious Yemeni society while echoing the name Hezbollah, with all the political imagery that accompanied the Lebanese party. The Houthis also invoked the political vision and writings of Hussein al-Houthi, which reflected themes that appealed to Sunni followers of the Shafi'i school of Islamic law, such as Muslim unity, prophetic lineages, and opposition to corruption. This allowed the Houthis to mobilize not only northern Zaidis, but also inhabitants of predominantly Shafi'i areas.

The adoption of a new name represented more than a change in rhetoric. The movement established networks of working groups to advance their political and religious agendas, which enabled them to recruit more fighters. Each group had three leaders focused on ideology, society, and security, and they all monitored the activities of public sector institutions.

The protests against Saleh ended in a political compromise⁹ brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in November 2011. This resulted in Saleh's removal from power and the election of then vice president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, as a transitional president. By that time, the Houthis had become a hybrid entity, undertaking political and missionary activities while dramatically increasing their military capabilities. From 2012 to 2014, they took advantage of weak government forces to capture additional governorates near Saada, including al-Jawf, Amran, and Hajja.

While the Houthis rejected the GCC compromise, they participated in its most important outcome, namely the establishment of a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013–2014.¹⁰ Thirty-five out of 565 conference members were from the movement,¹¹ which portrayed itself not as a religious group but as an actor with a national vision—an actor that could cooperate with other national actors. During this period, the Houthis initiated contact with Western diplomats to change their image as solely an armed group. It was a political calculation that complemented their domestic political and military strategies.

This external attention helped the Houthis depict themselves as adversaries of extremism. They used their Zaidi identity to affirm their opposition to Salafi-jihadi groups, at a time when the government was fighting al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. This enabled them to appeal to an even broader cross-section of Yemeni groups.

As the political arm of the Houthi movement was engaged in the national dialogue, its military forces were fighting different adversaries.¹² This included the Salafis gathered around the Dammaj religious center, who were defeated and obliged to leave Saada in January 2014. The Houthis again depicted such actions as combating extremism, an attractive slogan that resonated with those worried about terrorist

groups in Yemen. The war against al-Qaeda, the weakness of Yemeni state institutions, and a mounting political crisis brought tangible gains for the movement. The United States did not hesitate to deal with the Houthis,¹³ despite its slogan “Death to America,” presuming that they represent a valuable ally against the jihadis. And this contact has continued despite the United Nations Security Council’s claims in 2015 that Iran has been sending weapons to the Houthis by sea since at least 2009—at a time when the movement was seeking to build close ties with Shia communities throughout the Middle East.¹⁴

The Houthis did not stop with the elimination of the Salafis in Saada. They moved to attack the Hashid tribes loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated Islah Party between the Saada and Amran governorates, again employing an anti-extremism slogan.¹⁵ They accused the Islah-backed tribes of having fought alongside the Salafis. The Houthis could act as they did thanks to the silence of then prime minister Mohammed Salem Basindawa and the endorsement from certain parties, including Saleh’s General People’s Congress. Because many Yemenis opposed the Brotherhood, these actors welcomed the weakening of pro-Islah tribes and supported an alliance with the Houthis. Even Hadi, though an Islah ally, saw an opportunity to rebalance his ties with the party and gain more political power.

FROM A POLITICAL TO REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT

The Houthis ultimately rejected some of the NDC’s conclusions in 2014, particularly the one that would create a six-region federal system in Yemen, in which the Houthis’ influence would be limited to the Azal region.¹⁶ Azal would include the landlocked northern governorates of Amran, Dhamar, Mahwit, and Saada, isolating the Houthis from the country’s wealthier governorates where ports or oil reserves were located. This spurred the next phase of the movement’s advancement.

In this new situation, the Houthis sought to widen their margin of maneuver, which they did by exploiting widespread dissatisfaction with the Basindawa government. The Houthis became a revolutionary movement, fighting against a corrupt, ineffective government and calling for reform. They accused Basindawa of being aligned with the Islah Party and leveraged their own emerging alliance with Saleh to mobilize tribal communities that were isolated after the 2011 agreement. This came at a point when the national dialogue was marred by growing divisions among Yemeni parties—not only between Saleh and a coalition of parties that had opposed him named the Joint Meeting Parties, but also among these opposition parties themselves.¹⁷ The weakness of the Hadi administration did not help.

The Houthis thus saw an opening to fill the void and pragmatically allied themselves with Saleh, who sought to make a political comeback and viewed the Houthis as his ticket to doing so. The Houthis ramped up their offensive, and in July 2014, they entered Amran Governorate, located 50 kilometers away from Sanaa. Two months later, they took over the capital and replaced the legitimate governorate with the Supreme Revolutionary Committee.¹⁸

The Houthis’ ability to play on a plethora of identities was particularly effective in light of the multiple divisions and rivalries in Yemen at the time. They benefited from the rift between the Gulf states and the Muslim Brotherhood after 2013, which further undermined Islah. The Houthis also profited from Hadi’s desire to weaken Islah and other powerful tribes in the North during the battles in Amran and Sanaa.

The president opened secret communication channels with the movement and ensured that military units loyal to him would not confront the Houthis.

The Houthis' takeover of Sanaa was a major step in dominating the governorates around the capital, before expanding outward. At each stage, the movement would display its adaptability by changing its alliances and identities. Once they controlled the capital, the Houthis—fearing that Hadi might try to counterbalance their rising power by aligning with Islah—tried to place Hadi under house arrest. The president fled to Aden, and from there, he denounced the Houthis' actions as a coup. Hadi's presence in Aden was a threat to the movement, as he was still the legitimate president. Therefore, they advanced against his forces to the gates of Aden City, prompting the Saudi-led coalition to intervene in March 2015.

In July 2016, together with Saleh's General People's Congress, the Houthis formed the Supreme Political Council, which subsumed some power from the Supreme Revolutionary Committee and began to manage areas the parties controlled. Yet relations with Saleh slowly deteriorated due to the increasing fear that he might betray them and revive his alliance with the Saudis. In December 2017, two days after Saleh had announced his withdrawal from his alliance with the Houthis and expressed a willingness to talk to the Saudi-led coalition, the Houthis killed him while he was leaving Sanaa.¹⁹ Since then, the Houthis alone have controlled northern Yemen, becoming the paramount power in that part of the country.

The culmination of the Houthis' trajectory came in December 2018, when they participated in United Nations–brokered peace talks in Sweden among the warring Yemeni parties.²⁰ The Houthis named half the negotiators to those talks, and, as such, received a measure of international recognition as the de facto ruling authority in northern Yemen.

Within a decade and a half, the Houthi movement transformed from a local religious movement in Saada into a dominant revolutionary power in the North, with links to political actors throughout the country. Bolstered by newfound legitimacy, it played a significant role in defining the outcome of the peace talks, the Stockholm Agreement, while the Saudi-led coalition faced mounting criticism for the humanitarian costs of its military campaign. Looking back, the Houthis could say that it was their ability to embrace different identities in separate contexts that led to their successes. The movement lithely adapted to the twists and turns of Yemen's circuitous politics.

AN OFFICIAL AUTHORITY OF YEMEN?

Though the Saudi-led coalition and pro-Hadi forces have pushed the Houthis out of several areas, the movement still retains tight control over northern Yemen and Sanaa. Moreover, the Houthis are benefiting from growing rifts among factions fighting with the coalition²¹—including those divided over the future of South Yemen and rival pro-Saudi and pro-Emirati Salafi groups. At a time when pressure is building on the coalition to end its military operations, and the cost of pursuing the war is rapidly mounting for the countries involved, a major reversal of the Houthis' gains appears highly unlikely.

In this context, Saudi Arabia may choose to again revive the negotiations it had started with the Houthis in the Saudi border city of Dhahran al-Janoub in 2016.^{22 23} At the time, and with a sense of realism,

Riyadh had sought to persuade Houthi leaders to sever ties with Iran in exchange for full Saudi support of postwar power sharing—reminding them that the kingdom had been the main supporter of Imamate rule and of the Zaidi Hashemite families during their conflict with Egypt and allied republican forces between 1962 and 1967. Such an accord is conceivable. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have shown a recent willingness to compromise with other regional allies of Iran, notably the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. And while the Houthis have irrefutable links to Iran, they deny being puppets. Moreover, some analysts believe their ties to Iran have only played a marginal role in their rise to power.²⁴

Meanwhile, the Stockholm Agreement is unlikely to have tangible results, given all the parties' different interpretations of its points, lack of will, and deep mistrust. However, if a political compromise is achieved, the movement would likely establish a system combining its religious vision and political project. The Houthis have replaced most state officials with their own people and could function as a deep state, pulling the strings from behind the scenes. In that sense, they might persuade the Saudis that they are best able to secure the Saudi-Yemeni border, taking on yet another identity—that of an official authority in Yemen.

While the clashes on the border would stop under this scenario, the Houthis could use this new identity to settle their scores with internal factions, leading to a new wave of conflict and insecurity elsewhere in the country. These factions would no longer have Saudi protection.

Much will be determined by the conflict's progression, but one thing is clear—the Houthis remain potent in the North, and, therefore, their acquiescence will be needed for any final resolution in the country.

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THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

THE RELIGIOUS DOMAIN CONTINUES TO EXPAND IN SYRIA

HAROUT AKDEDIAN

Recognizing the vital humanitarian and socioeconomic role religious institutions assumed before and after 2011, the Syrian state allows the religious domain to grow while simultaneously seeking to control it. Law 31, passed in October 2018, expands the prerogatives of the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments), while reinforcing the state's regulatory command over it.

Although a state apparatus, the ministry is part of the broader religious domain, which, over twenty years, increased its social and economic ties with communities while the state's responsibilities and capacities gradually devolved—first due to neoliberal policies and later due to state atrophy. The new law—among other objectives—reinforces the ministry's utility as an instrument of economic development and wealth redistribution. The law will enable the government at large to both increase its oversight of the ministry and tap into its economic and social networks.

This legislation is complemented by the state's efforts to replace local networks in former opposition-held areas with “loyal” ones. While religious institutions have been providing an alternative distributive system, they have been, and will remain, submissive to patrimonial and asymmetric power structures in place. Thus, what is likely to emerge is a more powerful religious domain that not only shapes religious expression but also increasingly intervenes in state-society relations and everyday life.

RELIGIOUS NETWORKS GROW UNDER NEOLIBERAL POLICIES

From 2000 to 2011, President Bashar al-Assad made a sharp turn toward neoliberal modes of economic management by transferring economic and social responsibilities to private entities. One outcome was a burgeoning role for religious associations in stimulating economic development at the local level and delivering sorely needed social services.

Prior to the year 2000, Syria had a public sector–driven economy, focused on primary investments in infrastructure and industry. The state largely dictated economic and social policy.¹ According to the International Labor Organization, for instance, until early 2000, more than half of the workforce was employed in agriculture and industry, two sectors heavily supported and subsidized by the state². Furthermore, the number of registered associations (charity, social, cultural) was on a downward trend, declining from 596 in 1962 to 512 in 2000; the state continuously limited the role of associations, as it considered itself the primary authority responsible for socioeconomic welfare.³

By 2000, it was clear that the state's services could no longer meet the needs of the population. Between 1990 and 2010, the population nearly doubled from approximately 12 to 21 million⁴, which exacerbated economic hardships such as the drought in agricultural areas of al-Jazira and Houran, internal migration from rural to urban areas, and youth unemployment.⁵ Balancing the country's economic and social needs was largely dependent on revenue from the energy sector, and this became untenable as Syria began transitioning from an oil-exporting to an oil-importing country.⁶ Between 1990 and 2000, the Syrian regime established intimate linkages with wealthy individuals and families in urban centers.⁷ These linkages and clientelist arrangements with private entities expanded between 2000 and 2011, forming the bedrock of the private sector in Syria.⁸

Assad's answer to the socioeconomic situation was to adopt neoliberal policies by fostering economic privatization and increasing openness to importing.⁹ Over the ensuing years, only a small group of kin, loyalists, and crony businessmen came to benefit from Assad's policies. Further, the state surrendered social responsibility, leaving the majority of the population lacking economic and social security. It is in this context that the number of registered associations grew from 513 in 2000 to 1,485 in 2009.¹⁰

During this period, the role of religious institutions expanded through economic exchanges and social networks. The transition came about through professionalization of the religious field—the development of a cadre of specialized offices; hiring of professionals (social workers, project coordinators, and field workers); and acquiring of new funding sources. Charity associations shifted from distributing short-term aid to delivering basic monthly income, skills development and literacy courses, employment opportunities, microcredits, and even international relief and humanitarian aid.¹¹ Religious networks expanded their reach through direct, face-to-face exchanges within communities and local economic development efforts. Religious actors and entities redistributed wealth—a responsibility the state ceded—by raising funds through local donations or receiving grants through international charity networks and donor agencies, and then redistributing them to those deemed in need.¹²

Throughout this transition, the state either turned a blind eye to the growth of religious actors or directly encouraged them. Out of 8,731 mosques in 2007, 7,162 were not registered with the Ministry of Awqaf.¹³ This data came from the ministry itself, indicating that it was fully aware of, and favored, the growing religious networks. In fact, multiple direct government contracts (*'uqud tasharuqiyya*) explicitly transferred state services to religious social institutions.¹⁴ Although state policies began shifting in 2009—toward greater government control and diminished autonomy within the religious domain—religious networks had already established a wide presence in the public sphere.¹⁵

CLIENTELISM AND FAVORITISM FOSTER INTERNAL COMPETITION

At the same time it was devolving services, the state was also reinforcing clientelist arrangements within the religious domain by promoting local competition for resources and demonstrating favoritism. For example, there were more Christian organizations, relative to the size of the Christian population in Syria, compared with Islamic organizations, relative to the size of the Muslim population.¹⁶ But Christian organizations were allowed to operate more freely and had access to funding sources that were unavailable to Muslim organizations¹⁷. This was evident during the influx of Iraqi refugees in Syria after the insurgency and sectarian strife in Iraq from 2003 onward. Christian entities such as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch (GOPA) were allowed to operate more freely than any other entity. The GOPA was able to cooperate with several United Nations humanitarian agencies that were not listed among the foreign donors allowed to operate in Syria. This might be regarded as the state's attempt to balance the access of Islamic associations to Gulf capital with the access of Christian organizations to foreign funding sources. However, Christian entities also had access to funding sources unique to their international donor networks, including the World Council of Churches, Catholic Relief Services, and the Jesuit Refugee Service.

Clientelism and state favoritism were also evident in the dynamics of urban versus rural competition and competition among networks of kin. For example, in Aleppo, over time, key positions from the religious networks of the Shami family were transferred to those of the Grand Mufti Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassun.¹⁸ In the 1980s, the Shami family, which directed the Kiltawiyya mosque and its institute, held key religious positions and appointments and had a large rural constituency.¹⁹ In 1984, Suhaib al-Shami, then head of the Ministry of Awqaf's Aleppo directorate, and his brother, Anas, then a member of parliament, oversaw the closing down of the al-Furqan Sharia institute founded by the Hassun family. However, over time, the state gradually passed key positions to the networks of Hassun, who became a member of parliament in 1990, a mufti in 1999, and, through a direct presidential decree, the grand mufti of Syria in 2005.²⁰ Urban and rural religious networks thus began to compete for limited rewards only accessible through state favoritism. As the conflict in Syria turned violent, Hassun, owing his ascendancy to the regime, remained one of the staunchest allies of Assad. Alternatively, the Shami brothers left Syria in 2012, and their Kiltawiyya mosque in Aleppo city was destroyed in 2015 by militant Islamist groups. The physical remains of Muhammad al-Nabhan, the founder of the institute, were also extracted and destroyed.²¹

RELIGIOUS NETWORKS EXPAND THEIR ROLE UNDER STATE ATROPHY

Many sheikhs and clerics left Syria after 2011, leaving the field open for many new religious actors. The religious diaspora, together with these new actors, created entities such as the Syrian Islamic Council to stay strongly connected to their Syrian communities. The council's members, for example, are religious figures from both inside and outside of Syria. Other diaspora organizations, such as the League of Syrian Ulema, comprise Islamic scholars that left Syria in the wake of the turmoil in the 1980s.²² Despite being disconnected from the Syrian context for decades, the league harnessed powerful linkages with Syrian localities after 2011. For instance, Muhammad Sabuni, the league's chairman in 2012, was granted full control over humanitarian relief efforts in territories occupied by the rebel group, Liwa al-Tawhid.²³ Competing transnational networks of sponsors also fueled local divides through their ability to liaise with private and public sources of funding, specifically from the Gulf.²⁴

Internally, competing for local control, armed factions saw independent actors as competitors that needed to be either co-opted or eliminated. Prominent factions limited independent initiatives and spearheaded their own religious, judiciary, and humanitarian networks. For example, independent clerics, similar to the independent lawyers and judges of the Free Independent Judiciary Council,²⁵ attempted to fill the void in local governance, but, eventually, were either absorbed or marginalized by armed factions.²⁶

The religious networks affiliated with armed factions thus became pseudo bodies of local government and took charge of relief distribution, social services, education, the management of bakeries, the administration of refugee camps, and other societal functions. Accompanying these social services were clear efforts of religious indoctrination—for example, the standardization of veiling, the distribution of the Quran, and the running of orphanages (with life arranged around religious teachings and memorization of the Quran). Of the seventy-seven social and humanitarian associations recently surveyed in opposition-held areas in the province of Aleppo, forty-nine (64 percent) were religious entities.²⁷

In government-held areas, too, religious actors deemed trustworthy by the state were granted unprecedented prerogatives within their communities. Religious entities took on municipal tasks—specifically for minority populations—to offset disintegrating state structures and services.²⁸ For instance, religious entities sponsored the distribution of electricity through privately owned and operated electricity generators.²⁹ In addition, artesian water wells were dug on church premises to distribute, or provide locals access to, water and offset water shortages.³⁰ Furthermore, international donors and faith-based organizations partnered with local religious networks to provide donations and assist with food parcels; medical services; hygienic services; and livelihood, education, and reconstruction efforts.³¹ Thus, in government- and opposition-held areas alike, the religious field took on an even more important role in the public domain, while state and municipal structures significantly atrophied.

Although the government has regained control of parts of the country, its actions in some localities already show that the religious domain's socioeconomic role will be maintained. After Assad retook Aleppo City in 2016, individuals that had any role in local government in opposition-held areas were deemed terrorists and pushed out. This removed any remaining societal structures and local networks that had managed to survive under opposition control. But by 2017, the government began allowing religious institutions operating in government-held areas to operate in areas previously held by opposition groups.³² These government-supported entities are now establishing their own charities and medical, educational, economic, and welfare services, which will lead to new societal structures and local networks.

LAW 31 REINFORCES THE ECONOMIC FUNCTION OF THE RELIGIOUS DOMAIN

Numerous observers believe that Law 31 represents the government's attempt to further control Syria's religious networks.³³ The new legislation expands the presence and powers of the Ministry of Awqaf and its personnel; defines the "correct" version of Islam; determines processes for appointing religious positions such as that of the Grand Mufti; defines the responsibilities, limits, and salaries of religious officials; and specifies penalties for violations committed by such officials. But a closer examination of

the document reveals that the government also aims to sustain and leverage the ministry's socioeconomic role.

Section 5 of Law 31 covers the ministry's economic and financial activities. It includes multiple provisions regarding the use and development of lands and properties belonging to the ministry, which is one of the biggest landowners in Syria. But, at the same time, it grants the ministry more budgetary independence and greater autonomy to collect and organize its own funds. It allows the ministry to establish business and financial corporations with the purpose of generating funding. The ministry can repurpose and develop its properties for residential or economic functions. In this way, Law 31 treats the ministry as a significant economic actor with redistributive functions, rather than a religious establishment per se.

Exchanges and transactions such as those mentioned in the new legislation have had precedents. For instance, in February 2017, with a presidential decree from Assad, the ministry presented 341 acres of real estate to the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, which, in turn, passed ownership to local residents.³⁴ The real estate is located in Dahiyat al-Rmeyle in the coastal city of Jableh in Tartous, which, for the past forty years, was sprawling with informal settlements.³⁵ The heads of each ministry signed the change-of-ownership document in the presence of local notables and residents. The transferring of property was framed at the event and in state media as a donation to families who have sacrificed and fought for the nation. The broader religious domain, in line with the Ministry of Awqaf's role, continues to act as the authority responsible for the redistribution of wealth and property.

THE IMPLICATIONS

Religious entities have played a crucial role in alleviating the suffering of Syrians throughout the conflict. However, by doing so, they have also played a significant political role. By competing for funds and resources within a patrimonial environment, religious institutions have become instruments to counteract the socioeconomic effects of war in government- and opposition-held areas alike.

Given that the state's economic capabilities remain weak, reliance on the religious domain for socioeconomic purposes will likely continue, and, in turn, religious networks will maintain their role in the public sphere. Under this scenario, the religious domain's burgeoning power and influence will further shape state-society relations and everyday life. It will also further blur the line between social action (services and charity) and religious activism. Through social institutions, religious actors are already playing a regulatory role, dictating religious observance and expressions while stimulating socioeconomic exchanges throughout the country.

While it is too early to speculate the trajectory of the religious domain in Syria, management of the country's reconstruction and resources will be a reliable indicator of the regime's future outlook toward the domain's role. Religious institutions will either continue to serve as local implementing partners or be sidelined. Regardless, the regime will continue to use resources to reinforce clientelist arrangements, especially in urban areas. During conflict or otherwise, it has always prioritized the development of key urban areas, such as Damascus and some coastal cities. Thus, religious actors in rural areas and secondary cities will likely be deprived of any opportunity to develop or grow.

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NOTES

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4. Ibid 2.
5. State services included, but were not limited to, public education, health care, subsidized food products (such as sugar and bread), and other subsidies targeting the agricultural sector. See Azmeh, "The Uprising of the Marginalized," 10–11.
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14. Ibid 10.
15. According to Jamal Barout, the number of registered associations in Syria dropped to 1,074 by 2010. See Barout, *The Past Decade of Syrian History*, 150. Pierret also points to this transition in state policy based on public statements made by government officials. See Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik, "Limits of 'Authoritarian Upgrading' in Syria: Private Welfare, Islamic Charities, and the Rise of the Zayd Movement," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 4 (2009): 609. Line Khatib reports on the testimonies of security officials, admitting the challenges of curbing the influence, and the expansion of religious networks due to their informal operational methods. See Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, 162.
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involvement in antigovernment mobilization in the early 1980s. Asad's policy toward religious actors in Aleppo was to support rival religious networks, favoring those with a rural constituency.

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26. Author interviews with previous local council members in Aleppo and Beirut in March 2018 and in Utrecht in August 2018.
27. Author survey conducted in May 2017. The entities operated at different intervals between 2011 and 2017 and will be detailed in the author's forthcoming publication.
28. Examples include, but are not limited to, the GOPA, the Latin Church, and the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East.
29. Author interview with the head of a Syrian Christian community, Beirut, in October 2017.
30. Author interviews (by phone) with Aleppo residents in May 2017.
31. Author interviews with representatives from international faith-based organizations and intermediary entities connecting international donors to local religious entities in Geneva in June 2017.
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THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

HOW SYRIA'S REGIME USED LOCAL CLERICS TO REASSERT ITS AUTHORITY IN RURAL DAMASCUS GOVERNORATE

HADEEL AL-SAIDAWI

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

SYRIA'S RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT AND THE REGIME BEFORE 2011

For a long time, the Syrian regime viewed religion as a vital security issue and controlled the religious sphere by regulating its access to state resources. The regime adopted a hybrid strategy of co-opting some actors and providing them a platform in state institutions and media in return for their support, while marginalizing others. By establishing partnerships with individuals or institutions historically sympathetic to the ruling Baath Party, or sufficiently weak enough to abide by its rules, the regime was provided social legitimacy and ensured its grip over the religious establishment and society overall.

After assuming the presidency in 2000, Bashar al-Assad initiated a limited liberalization of Syria's religious policy. As a result, a wider range of actors within the country's Islamic scene was permitted to establish religious institutions and charities.¹ The process continued throughout the decade as the regime sought to reinforce its religious legitimacy with an increasingly devout society amid regional upheaval—including growing sectarian violence in Iraq and instability in Lebanon. Benefiting from increased resources and methods of outreach, Syrian clerics were able to enhance their influence in society as a whole and within their local communities in particular.

The Sunni religious establishment in Syria has typically trained clergy through state-run religious schools, or through informal institutions (*jama'at*) where instruction is based on a master-disciple relationship. These bodies were nominally under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, but they possessed varying degrees of autonomy depending on their historical reputation and connections to the regime. Though most religious educational institutions are situated in urban centers, they attract many students from the countryside. For example, the Fatah Islamic Institute, a state-backed Sunni institution established in Damascus in 1965, gained influence in Rural Damascus Governorate by training local clerics, particularly after opening a specialization section for higher education studies in 1991.²

Regardless of where they obtained their education, religious figures in Rural Damascus affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Endowments enjoyed a special status within their communities. They often hailed from notable families traditionally involved in the religious field that were wealthy, enjoyed a respected lineage, and inherited religious authority. In addition, there were clerics trained in the 2000s who gained a significant following in Rural Damascus among the younger generation by preaching about everyday life topics.

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

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

retain influence within their local communities and gradually push for the return of state resources and control to opposition areas.

THE POLITICS OF INFLUENCE DURING SIEGES

In Rural Damascus Governorate, several respected religious figures became influential players in opposition-held localities during the conflict. Initially helping with opposition governance, these clerics gained prominence by negotiating relief from regime sieges and access to supplies and other resources. This was visible in the suburbs south of Damascus and in the town of al-Tall, northeast of the capital. Meanwhile, the town of Kfar Batna in East Ghouta, a Damascus suburb, showed how divisions within the opposition allowed the state to reestablish connections with the local community outside any formal reconciliation framework through contacts with a respected local cleric.

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

The Southern Damascus Suburbs

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

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

In July 2013, the southern Damascus suburbs were besieged by regime forces. The area suffered severe hardship due to aerial bombardments and a government-imposed siege, which cut off the delivery of food and medical supplies. The regime then initiated contacts with Babila, Yalda, and Beit Sahim through other clerics who had left the towns at the beginning of the uprising. These figures reached out to Taweel, Khatib, and Hindi, due to their local popularity, to discuss terms for lifting the siege. Although Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the major armed groups in the area, initially declared that anyone engaging with the regime would be considered a traitor, pressure for negotiations mounted after over 200 residents died of starvation.³ As a result, armed groups were eventually forced to accept the formation of reconciliation committees.

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

The clerics, despite their affiliation with the opposition, began to use their religious platforms to support the merits of negotiations. Their Friday sermons would cite the sunna, the customs and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, in favor of reconciliation. They also claimed that accommodating the regime was necessary to preserve the area's Sunni character against the specter of Shia expansion from the adjacent Sayyida Zeinab suburb, a prominent base for Shia militias.^{4 5} The clerics further emphasized that the final decision on reconciliation with the state should be made solely by residents, not by armed groups composed of non-local members. The clerics communicated regime guarantees to their followers, including promises to not engage in punitive measures or conscript residents to the army for a set period if the towns returned to state control.

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

However, the clerics' years of negotiations and lobbying within the community played an integral role in laying the groundwork for the surrender. As a result of regime guarantees certified by the clerics, only 300 residents chose to evacuate the area along with the armed groups.⁶ After the return of state control, Taweel, Khatib, and Hindi maintained their influential positions in their towns and reconnected their mosques to the Ministry of Religious Endowments. The clerics also continued to act as middlemen between the regime and their communities, assisting residents in gaining regime approval to remain or return to the area in a formal process known as "regularization of status" (*taswiyet awda*).

The Situation in al-Tall

In the mountain town of al-Tall, northeast of Damascus, young local clerics were popular before the uprising, and this continued throughout opposition control and regime reconciliation. In the 2000s, several new mosques were established there, led by youthful preachers. These mosques, sponsored by local wealthy families under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, attracted many worshippers who came to hear the clerics discuss everyday issues, such as marriage, housing, prices, and inheritance. This stood in contrast to the preaching of older clerics, who focused narrowly on the Prophet Muhammad's life. One such young cleric was Sheikh Rabia Shammo, who gained a devout following through his popular Friday sermons at the Ikhlas Mosque.

During the early days of the uprising, al-Tall's young clerics, including Shammo, took a pro-opposition stance and participated in demonstrations against the regime. Again, this distinguished the younger

generation of clerics from the older religious establishment, who argued for dialogue with the regime. As the country descended into conflict, al-Tall experienced a high influx of displaced persons, numbering half a million by some accounts, as a result of military campaigns in neighboring areas.⁷ Regime forces later encircled the town in early 2015. In response, representatives from notable families that had previously mediated with the regime in 2014 to negotiate the release of captured soldiers reached out to Damascus to discuss terms for ending the siege.

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

Sheikh Bassam Dafdaa and Kfar Batna

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

Dafdaa, a popular preacher at the Omari Mosque who had taught at the Fatah Islamic Institute, remained in Kfar Batna after armed groups took control in 2012. When regime forces besieged East Ghouta in April 2013, rebel factions accused Dafdaa of maintaining contact with the state through clerics in Damascus. As a result, he was banned from giving weekly sermons, joining the local council, or working on humanitarian affairs.⁸

In April 2016, clashes broke out between armed groups in East Ghouta, pitting Failaq al-Rahman against Jaysh al-Islam, the dominant faction in the area. The infighting was partly due to rebel factions' resentment of Jaysh al-Islam's political and military dominance over East Ghouta, which the group had imposed through harsh tactics.⁹ Religious institutions established by the opposition in the area also were divided as a result of rebel infighting, most notably the Sharia Board of Damascus and Its Countryside (SBDC).¹⁰

The SBDC was formed in November 2012 by thirty-six local clerics. At its peak, the body administered forty villages and towns—running mosques, issuing fatwas, teaching Islamic law at local schools, and certifying imams and preachers—much as the Ministry of Religious Endowments once had.¹¹ Initially an independent administrative authority, the SBDC grew closer to Failaq al-Rahman after Jaysh al-Islam attempted to exert direct influence over the institution. The SBDC mobilized clerics to speak out against the attempted takeover, including Dafdaa, who was permitted to join the sharia authority and resume preaching.

Despite the growing public outcry at the clashes, attempts to mediate between armed factions were unsuccessful. The Syrian Islamic Council (SIC), established in exile in Istanbul in 2014 to serve as the opposition's chief religious authority, attempted to persuade armed groups in East Ghouta to form a united front.¹² However, the council was weak, divided, and unable to play a meaningful leadership role after many armed groups withdrew from the body that same year. Nonetheless, the SIC attempted to mediate in East Ghouta, though a short-lived truce broke down in September 2017.¹³

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

Unlike the situation in the southern Damascus suburbs and al-Tall, the regime had not managed to rebuild influence in Kfar Batna by allowing the town access to resources in the lead up to its recapture. However, the state did advance its agenda in all three localities by exploiting the presence of popular clerics. The regime leveraged contacts with the clerics, who calculated that they could best preserve influence within their communities by engaging with the government and eventually advocating for the return of the state.

A NEW ERA OF REGIME-CONTROLLED RELIGION IN SYRIA

Partly in response to the fragmentation of Syria's religious establishment in opposition areas, the regime passed Law 31 last October. The legislation grants sweeping powers to the Ministry of Religious Endowments and represents a new chapter of state control over religious life.¹⁴ Proponents of Law 31 say such measures are necessary to empower the ministry to combat religious extremism.

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

CONCLUSION

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

Endowments has begun replacing some clerics in former rebel-held areas in Rural Damascus with regime loyalists.¹⁵ However, removing clerics who enjoy local support may undermine the regime's goal of enhancing its legitimacy.

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

Hadeel Al-Saidawi was a visiting scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, where her research focused on Syria.

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