



MALCOLM H. KERR  
CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER

VOLUME 2

# A Restless Revival: Political Islam After the 2011 Uprisings

Maha Yahya and Mohanad Hage Ali, editors

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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

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*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-Arouri, 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.



# POWER POINTS DEFINING THE SYRIA-HEZBOLLAH RELATIONSHIP

MOHANAD HAGE ALI

## SUMMARY

Hezbollah's relationship with Syria has long been characterized by periods of mutual distrust and conflicting goals. Both sides pursue their own political priorities with little regard for the other's interests. Hezbollah and its patron, Iran, intervened in Syria to save President Bashar al-Assad's regime, but they built a power base in Syria independent from state institutions. Russia's military intervention gave the Assad regime an opportunity to reverse its marginalization. Now, as the war comes to a close, Syria hopes to rebalance its relationship with Hezbollah and Iran by exploiting Russia's presence.

## Key Periods in the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship

- In the 1980s, Syria-Hezbollah relations were characterized by both cooperation and tension. Syria's ties with Iran and role in Lebanon's civil war allowed Hezbollah's rise to power. But Hezbollah's expanding influence came at the expense of Syria's local Shia ally.
- After the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990, Hezbollah acquiesced to Syrian control. Syria's participation in negotiations with Israel caused simmering tensions between the allies. Yet Syria also used Hezbollah as leverage in those talks.
- Following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Hezbollah defended its relationship with Damascus as a crucial part of the resistance against Israel, the *raison d'être* for its arsenal.
- Hezbollah's 2012–2013 intervention in the Syrian war gave them the upper hand in their relationship with Damascus, which they sought to exploit by pursuing political aims in Syria, such as opening a front against Israel in the Golan Heights.

- Since 2015, the Assad regime has used Russia's military support to rebalance its relationship with Hezbollah and reverse the party's encroachment on Syrian society.

### Key Themes

- Syria's relationship with Hezbollah has long been characterized by a pragmatic recognition of shifting power dynamics and the parallel pursuit of divergent political interests. Both sides understand that a weakened partner could lead to their own loss of power, which has consistently justified intervention to support the other.
- Syria and Russia appear opposed to attempts to open a new front against Israel in the Golan Heights, which could undermine Syrian sovereignty and threaten the Assad regime's fragile victory.
- The Syrian government enjoys the regional influence afforded by its close relationship with Hezbollah. In the aftermath of the Syrian war, the Assad regime will seek to rebalance relations with Hezbollah and regain its previous advantage.

## INTRODUCTION

As the conflict in Syria winds down, attention is on the political actors who ensured that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would remain in power. Iran and the pro-Iranian Lebanese Hezbollah have played a decisive role to this end, leading to speculation that the Syrian regime is unlikely to ever challenge Tehran's political agenda. However, if the past is any indicator, that conclusion is far from certain. For while Syria may be unlikely to break with Iran and its allies, their relationship is more complex than it appears. Characterized at various points by mutual distrust and conflicting aims, both sides have been guided by an acute sense of power dynamics. Their actions have been defined by their political interests—even when these interests did not overlap.

The heart of Syrian-Iranian relations is the relationship between Syria and Hezbollah. In just under four decades, the Syria-Hezbollah rapport has best embodied the dynamic between Damascus and Tehran. Tensions have arisen when either Syria or Hezbollah has perceived the other as infringing on its power. In the 1980s, during Lebanon's civil war, they entered into conflict when Hezbollah challenged Syria's allies and goals. Once the war ended in 1990, Hezbollah accepted Syrian supremacy. It pragmatically balanced Syrian and Iranian interests, despite turbulence in its relationship with Damascus when either side perceived the other as crossing redlines. Hezbollah and Iran worried that successful Syrian negotiations with Israel would threaten their interests in Lebanon, while Damascus was unwilling to recognize these concerns, even as it used Hezbollah's military capabilities as leverage against Israel.

The regime of President Bashar al-Assad welcomed Hezbollah's intervention in Syria in 2012, but not with alacrity. Iran and Hezbollah built a power base in Syria independent from state institutions, particularly among the country's Shia minority and limited segments of the Sunni and Alawite communities, which the Assad regime perceived as an infringement on its power and sovereignty. It understood that Iran and Hezbollah sought to preserve their own interests in Syria and Lebanon by protecting the regime.

However, the situation in Syria shifted. Russia's intervention in 2015 injected a new variable into the Syrian regime's dealings with Hezbollah and Iran—one that gave the regime an opportunity to reassert itself. The likely outcome will be a return to the ties that existed before the war, rather than a fundamental transformation of the Syria-Hezbollah relationship.

## HEZBOLLAH AND SYRIA FROM 1982 TO 2011

During the three decades prior to Hezbollah's deployment in Syria, the party's relationship with Syria mirrored the ups and downs of the alliance between Tehran and Damascus. During the 1980s, the Hezbollah-Syria relationship developed as Iran attempted to export its Islamic revolution.<sup>1</sup> At different times, Hezbollah's and Syria's agendas contradicted one another, leading to short periods of violence. By the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, however, things had changed. Hezbollah accepted Syria's dominant role in Lebanon and focused its attention, in line with Damascus's preferences, on fighting Israel's military occupation of southern Lebanon. By 2005, when Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon, Hezbollah was protecting Syria's stake in the country, while greatly enhancing its own power in the process.

### The Turbulent 1980s

The 1980s were symptomatic of the transactionalism that had long characterized relations between Syria and Iran. The two countries established diplomatic relations in 1947, though Iran's monarch at the time, shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a U.S. ally, was often at odds with the successive pro-Soviet Arab nationalist governments in Damascus.<sup>2</sup> However, Syrian-Iranian relations improved following the rise to power of Syrian president Hafez al-Assad in 1970. Syria's rivalry with Iraq and its need to adapt to then Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's rapprochement with first the United States then Israel, after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, pushed the regime to improve its ties with Iran.<sup>3</sup> The exchanges culminated in Assad's visit to Tehran in December 1975. However, because the two governments differed over Egypt's negotiations with Israel, their increased contact had little impact on regional alliances. It did, however, allow Assad to counterbalance Syria's main Arab rival: Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Led by competing Baathist regimes, Syria and Iraq were vying for primacy as the champion of broader Arab causes.<sup>5</sup> For example, Assad wanted the shah of Iran to persuade Washington to adopt a more balanced approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, in his typically hard-nosed fashion, Assad supported the shah's Islamic opposition.<sup>7</sup> He granted Syrian passports to its leading members while asking allies in Lebanon to provide them with military training. By the late 1970s, Syria had forged strong relations with opposition figures through the rising Lebanese-Iranian Shia leader Imam Musa al-Sadr.<sup>8</sup> In Beirut, Sadr sought regional allies for his newly established Amal Movement—his close ties with the Assad regime provided him with just that.

The Islamic Revolution transformed Tehran's connection with Damascus. Syria, building on its preexisting ties with Iran's opposition, was the first Arab state to congratulate the postrevolution leadership. While many other Arab states feared that Iran might export its revolution to Arab Shia populations, the Assad regime did not share their concerns. Assad, from Syria's minority Alawite community, was more fearful of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. When the Brotherhood launched a campaign of attacks against the Assad regime in 1981 and 1982, Iran, in turn, abandoned it.<sup>9</sup>

These Syrian-Iranian ties paved the way for Hezbollah's rise in Lebanon, where thousands of Syrian troops had deployed in 1976 to help quell the civil war. In 1982, shortly after Israel invaded the country in June to expel Palestinian factions, the Assad regime allowed hundreds of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members to enter Lebanon's Beqaa Valley from Syria and establish a training camp for groups of young men that would later unify to form Hezbollah.<sup>10</sup> The party's current deputy secretary general, Naim Qassem, later described Iranian efforts as "an advanced system of training, religious practice and personal as well as moral cultivation."<sup>11</sup>

Israel's invasion momentarily curbed Syrian influence in Lebanon, reinforcing cooperation between the Assad regime and Iran. Multinational Western forces stationed in Lebanon following the invasion tried to secure a Syrian withdrawal, while the Israeli army operated mainly south of Beirut and in southern Lebanon. Early cells of Hezbollah militants began attacking Western and Israeli forces, which allowed the fledgling party to expand its power and reach. Only later, however, would Hezbollah transform into a more cohesive organization, when the party released an open letter in 1985 that outlined its political program and signaled a new era in revolutionary Shia politics.<sup>12</sup>

In the second half of the 1980s, Hezbollah's actions both advanced Syrian objectives in Lebanon and challenged them, leading to the first signs of tension between the two sides. The party began abducting Western nationals in Beirut,<sup>13</sup> which mirrored Iran's revolutionary politics at the time. Syria benefited from being perceived as a potential stabilizing force for Lebanon, in contrast to Hezbollah, but there were downsides to the party's aggressive approach. As the Syrian regime tried to reassert its domination over the country, it had to carefully prevent Iran from driving the agenda. And as Hezbollah sought to drive the resistance against Israel, Damascus was concerned that it might lose its sway over Lebanon's Shia population. The Syrians were, therefore, wary of supporting a Tehran-backed group as the de facto representative of the Shia community when its own primary Shia ally was the Amal Movement.

This growing rivalry led to escalating tensions and armed clashes between the Amal Movement and Hezbollah. The Syrian army occasionally intervened against Hezbollah on behalf of its ally. Aqel Hamiyeh, an Amal official who played a leading role in the conflict with Hezbollah, later described the mood at the time:

We tried talking to the Iranians, saying that we didn't want tensions. Hezbollah became more stubborn in Baalbek and the villages around Baalbek. The Iranians told us that we could resist together, but on the ground, things were going differently. The Iranians had their own agenda. The Iranians were working for something new.<sup>14</sup>

In May 1986, fighting between the two sides left three Hezbollah members and two Syrian soldiers dead.<sup>15</sup> When Hezbollah kidnapped two Syrian officers, the Syrian army reacted by detaining several party members.<sup>16</sup> In February 1987, Syrian troops massacred Hezbollah members at the party's headquarters, the Fathallah Barracks in West Beirut.<sup>17</sup> The victims had not been previously involved in interparty fighting, leading many to speculate that they were executed as a warning to Hezbollah. Sheikh Subhi Tufeili, then Hezbollah's secretary general, accused Syria of "conspiring with Israel,"<sup>18</sup> but the party refrained from retaliating. Many years later, Qassem, Hezbollah's current deputy secretary general, would write, pointedly, "Sorrow over the event persists."<sup>19</sup>

Following the Fathallah massacre, conflict between the Amal Movement and Hezbollah spread. Fighting stretched on into 1988, until the Syrians deployed their forces in Beirut's Shia-majority southern suburbs to separate the warring parties. Qassem later wrote that Hezbollah leaders had requested a meeting with Hafez al-Assad to discuss the deployment. The meeting involved an "ideological and political discussion" that had a strong impact on the Syrian president's stance toward Hezbollah.<sup>20</sup> The Amal-Hezbollah conflict would continue, however, until Syria and Iran came to an agreement in November 1990 that ended the fighting.<sup>21</sup>

Major global change also impacted the situation in Lebanon. By the late 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed imminent. To compensate for the loss of its major international backer, Damascus was compelled to engage in a rapprochement with the United States. This culminated in Syria's taking part in the international coalition to liberate Kuwait, creating an opening for the Assad regime to end the conflict in Lebanon by imposing its military control over the whole country in October 1990. In light of its rapprochement with the United States, Syria also worked to free Western hostages still being held by Hezbollah.

This rapprochement hardly aligned with Iranian interests, given the hostility between Tehran and many Western countries, particularly the United States. Yet the balance of power in Lebanon had tilted strongly in Syria's favor, forcing Hezbollah to adapt. The party chose to focus on combating Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon in coordination with Damascus, which allowed Hezbollah to remain part of the armed resistance. The party's anti-Israeli operations provided Syria with leverage over Israel as the two countries began direct negotiations in the months after the October 1990 Madrid conference on Arab-Israeli peace.

### Cooperation Amid Competing Agendas in the 1990s

While the immediate postwar period in Lebanon saw Hezbollah's relationship with Syria strengthen, it again shed light on the ambiguous nature of their relations. Syria's peace talks with Israel initially exacerbated their divergent objectives. Hafez al-Assad claimed to be pursuing a "peace of the brave," while Hezbollah and Iran understood that such an outcome might threaten their interests in Lebanon and, indeed, Hezbollah's very existence. Yet Syria's dominant role ensured that Hezbollah kept its concerns in check to avoid another confrontation with Damascus.

This restraint was on display in September 1993, when hundreds of pro-Hezbollah demonstrators protested in Beirut against the Oslo Accords signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel.<sup>22</sup> The Lebanese army, then effectively under Syrian control, shot at the unarmed demonstrators, killing nine people. While this provoked new protests, the situation was contained. The incident, which could not have taken place without implicit Syrian approval, heightened tensions between Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran. At the time, it was interpreted as a signal that criticism of Syria's participation in talks with Israel would not be tolerated, even as Assad, a master of dual messaging, sought to make it clear that he could restrain Hezbollah after any peace deal.

This message apparently reached Washington. It was well summarized by then national security adviser Anthony Lake in a lecture he gave in May 1994. Lake commented on how Assad's approach to peace talks

with Israel had worried Hezbollah and Iran. He observed that when the Syrian president stated that he regarded peace as a strategic choice,

his nation's erstwhile extremist allies quickly grew very nervous. . . . Hezbollah leaders argued how best to pursue an extremist agenda in an era of Israeli-Lebanese peace. Iranian officials hurriedly visited Damascus but apparently left empty-handed, and when they got home, the Iranian clergy began criticizing the leadership for failing to prevent the emerging isolation of their nation.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, the failure of Syrian-Israeli negotiations and Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 ensured that Syria did not part ways with Hezbollah and Iran over the peace negotiations. When Hafez al-Assad died in early June 2000, Bashar al-Assad, his son and successor, grew closer to Hezbollah. Syria had to find other means of justifying military action against Israel after Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon, which they did by claiming that parts of Lebanese territory were still occupied. This served Hezbollah well, as it rationalized the party's continued armed resistance. From then on, Syria and Hezbollah regarded their strategic interests as much more closely aligned.

### **Syria Withdraws and Hezbollah Takes Over**

Shifting regional dynamics following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 changed Syria's relationship with Hezbollah once again. In February 2005, former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in Beirut. It was widely believed that the Syrian regime was involved. Following a United Nations investigation of the crime, Hezbollah party members were accused as well. Hariri and his allies intended to stand against pro-Syrian candidates in the next parliamentary elections and believed they were guaranteed to win a majority,<sup>24</sup> which would have undermined the Syrian-imposed order in Lebanon and weakened both Syria and Hezbollah. Anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut, coupled with outside pressure, compelled Assad to withdraw his forces from Lebanon in April, making Hezbollah the primary decisionmaker on the ground for the Syria-Hezbollah-Iran alliance.

With the change in power dynamics, the alliance's priorities, now set by Hezbollah, shifted as well. Hezbollah's main concern was not to return the Syrian military to Lebanon but to safeguard its own weapons, guarantee a leading role for itself in national politics, and protect Iranian and Syrian interests against the United States and its allies.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the party refined its approach toward Syria. Instead of emphasizing the common history of Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah defended its relationship with Damascus by portraying it as an "ally of the resistance." The shared pursuit of resistance, in turn, allowed Hezbollah to remain armed.

In the aftermath of the Syrian withdrawal, Hezbollah also played a leading role in politically neutralizing Syria's Lebanese opponents while rallying Syria's Lebanese allies. The party thus ushered in a new era in its relationship with the Syrian regime, in which it was no longer the junior partner. The withdrawal spelled the end of Syria's absolute control over Lebanon. In its place, Hezbollah sought to fill the vacuum, thanks to the political leverage it enjoyed due to its military capabilities and ability to mobilize the Shia community.

In 2005, Hezbollah joined the Lebanese government for the first time.<sup>26</sup> In collaboration with the Amal Movement—which had become its principal ally against the new March 14 Alliance coalition—Hezbollah

named two cabinet ministers, one of them a party member. Naim Qassem has explained why Hezbollah concluded that its participation in governance was necessary, arguing that the new cabinet would have real authority, unlike previous ones under Syrian control. It “would exercise an active role in determining the direction of the country, rather than merely acting in an executive capacity as it has done in the past,” he wrote.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Hezbollah was dead set on helping to define Lebanon’s course for the future.

While preserving its alliance with the Syrian regime, Hezbollah was now autonomous in its decision-making. Indeed, there were times when it was Syria that followed the party’s lead. This was evident in summer 2006, when Hezbollah and Israel engaged in a thirty-four-day war. During that conflict, the Syrian regime tapped into its own arsenal to supply Hezbollah with weapons for the first time, including 220-millimeter and 302-millimeter rockets.<sup>28</sup> This came as a surprise to Israel.<sup>29</sup> Syria hoped to guarantee that Hezbollah was not impaired by the conflict, reaffirming a constant in the Syria-Hezbollah relationship: the preservation of one side’s power often means ensuring that their partner is not weakened.

Between 2006 and 2011, Hezbollah’s sway expanded. At the same time, Syria normalized relations with European countries, notably France under then president Nicolas Sarkozy, ending the isolation it faced after the Hariri assassination. In 2009, a Saudi-sponsored reconciliation took place between the Assad regime and Lebanese politicians who had opposed Damascus,<sup>30</sup> followed months later by Assad’s visit to Beirut in July 2010. However, that momentary harmony collapsed in early 2011 when Hezbollah and Syria brought down a national unity government in Beirut led by Rafik Hariri’s son, Saad Hariri. The outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 again altered the relationship between the Syrian regime and Hezbollah.

## HEZBOLLAH’S INTERVENTION IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

After the Syrian uprising began, the Assad regime came to depend on Hezbollah and Iran for its survival, shifting the balance of relations even more to their advantage. The regime’s violent response to protests in March 2011 isolated it regionally and internationally. As it began losing large swaths of territory in 2012, its allies decided to intervene militarily, with Hezbollah reportedly playing a large part in Iran’s decision to support Assad.<sup>31</sup> However, Hezbollah’s role was focused less on rebuilding and reinforcing the capacities of regime forces than on helping to establish parallel institutions, such as pro-regime militias. This replicated what Hezbollah had done in Lebanon—building up an independent armed force in the midst of a weak state. The alliance between Hezbollah and Syria had reached a new phase in which the party not only dictated the terms of the relationship but also had room to expand its ideological, military, and political influence inside Syria.

Initially, Hezbollah framed its Syrian intervention as motivated by the protection of Lebanese-Syrian dual nationals living on the Syrian side of the border.<sup>32</sup> Only later would it affirm the party’s obligation to defend a so-called ally of the resistance. On October 11, 2012, following the death of a Hezbollah member in Syria, the party’s secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, acknowledged Hezbollah’s participation in an “accidental” and limited engagement in which it had helped Syrian government forces defend twenty-three villages around the town of Qusayr, near the Lebanese border.<sup>33</sup> Though the villages were inside Syrian territory, Nasrallah said, they were inhabited by some 30,000 Lebanese citizens from all sects.

By 2013, Nasrallah was laying out a new rationale that underscored the stark contrast between Iran's and Hezbollah's ambitions in Syria and those of the Assad regime.<sup>34</sup> In a speech on May 9, Hezbollah's secretary general observed that, in the past, Syria had been criticized for not militarily opposing Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights, unlike their intervention in Lebanon. The conflict in Lebanon was possible due to the weak Lebanese state, he continued, unlike in Syria, where a strong government was in place. But the Syrian conflict had changed the situation, creating "an opportunity" to begin popular resistance in the Golan. In other words, Nasrallah highlighted the potential advantages of a weak Syrian state, underlining how it would allow Iran and Hezbollah to pursue their goal of resistance against Israel. Their willingness to take advantage of Syria's impotence was a bitter pill for the Assad regime.

Hezbollah's rising casualties in the Syrian conflict, estimated by the number of funerals held for party members, became increasingly difficult to explain away as the consequence of limited engagements. On May 19, 2013, Hezbollah and Syrian forces launched a major offensive to retake Qusayr. Hezbollah suffered heavy casualties during the operation, which last nearly twenty days.<sup>35</sup> Changing tack, on May 25, 2013, Nasrallah laid out a detailed argument for the party's strategic involvement in the Syrian war, signaling a long-term presence. The situation in Syria was no longer about "a people participating in a revolution against a regime, or a question of reforms," Nasrallah said.<sup>36</sup> Rather, the proliferation of armed groups in Syria posed a danger to Lebanon, and Hezbollah had intervened to protect its interests.<sup>37</sup> He spoke of an existential threat not only to Hezbollah and Lebanon's Shia population but to the whole country, including Sunnis. "I have evidence," he added.<sup>38</sup> If Hezbollah allowed Syria's regime to collapse, the resistance would be besieged.

Syria is the back of the resistance and its foundation, and the resistance cannot stand by watching, leaving its back exposed or its foundation broken, otherwise we would be idiots. The idiot is the one who watches the conspiracy crawling toward him, but doesn't move. If Syria falls into American and *takefiri* hands, the resistance will be surrounded and Israel will enter Lebanon to impose its conditions and again carry Lebanon into an Israeli era.<sup>39</sup>

As Hezbollah's military involvement widened dramatically—extending to the northern part of Syria, especially Aleppo and its vast countryside—it became inevitable that the party would help set up foreign militias and irregular Syrian forces to bolster its own forces.

Iran's and Hezbollah's mobilization of militias took two forms. They recruited foreign combatants from places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, while at the same time mobilizing Syria's Shia community.<sup>40</sup> These efforts came with a high price tag for Iran. Staffan de Mistura, then the United Nations' special envoy to Syria, estimated in 2015 that Tehran had spent some \$6 billion annually in financial and military assistance to prop up the Assad regime.<sup>41</sup> Iran also had to pay the thousands of foreign fighters that it brought to Syria.<sup>42</sup>

For Iran and Hezbollah, the fighting in Syria presented an opportunity to not only establish a foothold in Syria through local Shia militias, but also to facilitate future Iranian intervention across the Middle East by training non-Syrian pro-Iran militias. Mohammed Ali Falaki, then an IRGC general, signaled Iran's ulterior motive when he told an Iranian news agency that Tehran had established "a liberation army with fronts in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq."<sup>43</sup> Hezbollah was at the heart of this effort: with its indoctrination, discipline, and experience, the party took the lead in major battles.

According to Syria's allies in Beirut, this challenge to the authority of the Syrian state disquieted the Assad regime, which was not used to allowing armed groups outside its control.<sup>44</sup> The regime's reaction took different forms, such as restricting the militias' freedom of movement within the Damascus area or limiting public Shia ceremonies.<sup>45</sup> This recalled earlier tensions in Damascus's relationship with Iran and Hezbollah, when Syria perceived things as infringing on the regime's power and established redlines. The regime's main concern was Iran's and Hezbollah's mobilization of Syria's Shia population, rather than the foreign militias.<sup>46</sup> Iran's and Hezbollah's attempts to create an institutional framework—including the establishment of a religious network, indoctrinated militias, and supportive communities, all outside the state's control and influence—were intended to supplant Syrian society itself, laying the foundation for future mobilization efforts.

These mobilization efforts extended to religion itself. In 2012, the Supreme Islamic Jaafari Council, the first independent Shia representative body in Syria, was established.<sup>47</sup> The council was reminiscent of Lebanon's Supreme Islamic Shia Council, which Musa al-Sadr established in 1967 to represent the country's Shia population and lay the groundwork for greater political participation. While the Syrian state established the council by decree, the institution effectively acted as an extension of Iran and Hezbollah, catering to Hezbollah's Syrian followers. The council's clerics organized the funerals of Shia fighters who had been killed in combat and participated in commemorations of the Islamic revolution in Iran.<sup>48</sup>

By the end of 2013, armed Syrian Shia groups had become more visible. Images of Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah flags were often present in these groups' videos and posters. Quwwat al-Rida, the most prominent militia in Homs Governorate, became a clear manifestation of tensions between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. The militia, which recruited from the city of Homs and villages surrounding it, helped break the siege of two Shia towns in Aleppo Governorate, Nubol and Zahraa.<sup>49</sup> The Syrian regime, meanwhile, attempted to limit Hezbollah's influence by imposing Syrian state authority over Quwwat al-Rida.

As the Assad regime regained its confidence and influence by 2017, two years after Russia's military intervention, it began reasserting control over Syrian militias, including Syrian Shia militias. According to a Hezbollah official, Syrian officers and officials expressed concern over the party's infiltration of Syria's social fabric.<sup>50</sup> The presence of sectarian Shia militias defied the official secular character of the Syrian state. Moreover, Syrian Shia militias often criticized the state security services on social media platforms, calling them incompetent—a striking transgression in what had been a tightly controlled system.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, the Syrian government decided to integrate Quwwat al-Rida into its armed forces. By starting to pay the salaries of militia members, the regime increased its leverage over them and undermined the influence of Hezbollah.

An internal investigation by a Quwwat al-Rida committee, leaked in April 2017 to a Lebanese website, revealed the obstacles Iran faced trying to transform Syria into a testing ground for its regional agenda.<sup>52</sup> The document highlighted disagreements between Quwwat al-Rida's Syrian members and their Lebanese leadership. It pointed to grievances on both sides, including the Syrians' anger over being paid less than the Lebanese combatants and Hezbollah's dissatisfaction with their belief that Shia mobilization had fallen short of expectations. Hezbollah was also displeased that their Syrian recruits were not as responsive to indoctrination as Lebanese fighters were.

The Syrian Shia community was not cohesive and unified, which prevented the formation of a broad Shia organization throughout Syria. Shia represent only a small minority of the Syrian population, 1–2 percent, and are dispersed across Syria, which limited the threat they posed to the regime. The Syrian regime eventually managed to impose its control over the Shia groups, which now routinely include photographs of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad in their propaganda.

However, something more profound was at play after 2015. Russia intervened in September 2015 in defense of the regime and the Syrian state. Moscow's focus on rebuilding state capacity clashed with Iran's efforts to create institutions that could circumvent the state. By bolstering the regime and enabling it to regain territory, the Russians allowed Syria's leadership to slowly revive its moribund authority.<sup>53</sup> After years of dependency, the Syrians could finally rebalance their power relations with Iran and its allies. Thanks to Russia, the Assad regime had room to ensure that Iran would not profit off Syria's vulnerabilities.

These volatile dynamics played out most noticeably in southwestern Syria, near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Taking advantage of Syria's weakness, Iran and Hezbollah started to build infrastructure in the region to support a sustained confrontation with Israel. This challenged the Syrian regime's long-standing implicit understanding with Israel to keep the Golan front quiet in accordance with the 1974 armistice agreement. Israel soon declared that it would not permit Iran and Hezbollah to build up a military capacity in Syria and began attacking their positions. Russia did not deploy its anti-aircraft defenses, which many interpreted as a sign that Moscow opposed Iran's and Hezbollah's expanding presence near the Golan, in part because the Kremlin feared that any ensuing conflict might undermine its efforts to stabilize Assad's rule.<sup>54</sup>

Signs on the ground have pointed to friction between Russia and Hezbollah. The deployment of Russian military police on the Lebanese-Syrian border and on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights armistice line has, at times, exacerbated tensions with Hezbollah. A rare standoff on the outskirts of Qusayr between Hezbollah and Russian forces in June 2018 was resolved when the Russians withdrew and were reportedly replaced by Syrian forces.<sup>55</sup> A month before the incident, Moscow had called for all foreign forces to leave Syria—which appeared to implicitly include Iran and Hezbollah.<sup>56</sup>

Nor was Damascus completely neutral in these exchanges between Russia and Iran. When Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iranian supreme leader's adviser on foreign affairs, stated that Iran's intervention in Syria had prevented the collapse of the Assad regime, he was taken to task in the semi-official *Al-Watan* newspaper, owned by Bashar al-Assad's cousin.<sup>57</sup> The reverberations of these disputes even reached Tehran. Behrouz Bonyadi, an Iranian member of parliament, warned that Assad's alliance with Russian President Vladimir Putin could "sacrifice" Iran to the United States and Israel. "Bashar Assad, with full impudence, has cozied up to Putin," Bonyadi said, adding, "Russia will not be a trustworthy friend for us."<sup>58</sup>

While Russia and Iran have conflicting priorities in Syria, they are not likely to fundamentally change Damascus's relations with Tehran or Hezbollah. The Assad regime will continue to use Russia's presence to revive its authority through state institutions, particularly military and security bodies, and rebalance its relationship with Iran. The Assad regime and Hezbollah, within the framework of the Syrian-Iranian relationship, have long demonstrated an ability to reconcile their priorities amid the changing power dynamics of the alliance. This tendency toward stability has helped both sides overcome tensions in their relations.

As Russia continues to assert its influence in Syria's state institutions, and the country as a whole, Hezbollah's role and presence in Syria may decline. But Assad—and, to an extent, even Russia—has no desire to break with Hezbollah. The regime's continued relationship with the party is not only a cornerstone of Damascus's relations with Iran, it is also likely to provide the Assad regime with valuable leverage in any future negotiations with the United States, Sunni-majority Arab states, or Israel. For as long as Syria maintains its connection with Hezbollah, there will be reason to treat the Assad regime as a potential counterweight to Hezbollah and its Iranian patrons.

For the Syrian regime, returning to its prewar relationship with Iran and Hezbollah will mean separating the Golan Heights from regional proxy conflicts and preventing a new front with Israel from opening on Syrian territory. While it's not clear how Iran and Hezbollah will respond to this, both must have understood that enabling Assad to regain power meant the regime would return to its past behavior. The regimes of both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad have consistently sought to preserve their independence to act flexibly and pursue political outcomes that are not always necessarily in line with allies' interests.

Assad, with Russian support, will also aim to continue extending the state's authority over Syrian militias, disbanding them or perhaps conscripting their members into the regular armed forces. The regime may seek a rapprochement with the Gulf states—Iran's main regional rivals—to try to anchor its own power by using Arab unity to control (though not eliminate) Iranian influence. This would potentially allow Damascus to again play Arab states and Iran against each other, to its own benefit. However, the extent of Syria's success will ultimately depend on its ability to strengthen what is currently a weak state—the regime today has little capacity to prevent regional powers from pursuing proxy conflicts within its borders.

## CONCLUSION

For decades, the relationship between the Syrian regime and Hezbollah has been defined by resilience amid shifting power dynamics, and this will not change in the foreseeable future. The inherent stability of their relationship derives from the fact that, although the two unambiguously understand the other's ambitions, both sides are able to recognize when the other gains the upper hand. Hezbollah adapted to Syrian dominance in Lebanon after 1990, just as the Assad regime had little choice but to consent when Iran and Hezbollah established Syrian Shia militias independent of the regime after 2012 or attempted to transform the Golan Heights into a new front against Israel.

Russia's military intervention in 2015 introduced a new variable into the equation. Moscow's emphasis on rebuilding state capacity and ability to help the regime retake large parts of Syrian territory began reversing the Assad regime's marginalization at home. The Syrian state began reasserting its control over pro-regime militias, including the Shia militias close to Hezbollah and Iran. Meanwhile, Tehran's ambitions in the Golan Heights ran into Israeli efforts to prevent Iran from establishing a military infrastructure in Syria. That Russia did nothing to thwart Israeli air attacks against Iranian and Hezbollah positions only underlined that Moscow, too, was not willing to see Syria transformed into a new arena of Iran's fight against Israel. The United States' decision to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights further serves Hezbollah's and Iran's agenda in southern Syria. However, the regime's record of avoiding direct confrontation with Israel suggests that Damascus will most likely push for quiet frontlines in the Golan Heights.

Looking ahead, it seems unlikely that Assad will be forced to choose between Iran and Russia. All three actors are united by flexible politics and common rivals, which gives each side room to make decisions in line with their own interests. Neither Russia nor Iran will try to eliminate the other's presence in Syria—both governments recognize that this would not be possible without inviting serious harm. And Syria, Russia, and Iran all understand that a weakened partner could ultimately lead to their own loss of power. In this context, Hezbollah's ties to Damascus will likely continue to be shaped by the same dynamics as before.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## THEME 3: PRAGMATISM AND FLEXIBILITY

# ENNAHDA'S UNEASY EXIT FROM POLITICAL ISLAM

HAMZA MEDDEB

### IN BRIEF

In 2016, Islamist political party Ennahda decided to abandon preaching and focus on politics, precipitating an identity crisis within the party. It faced new challenges, including rethinking the role of Islam, addressing its own neutralization as a driver of socioeconomic change, and managing its core supporters while appealing to a broader electorate. Ennahda's shift to politics has forced it to rethink its ideological framework and rebuild its legitimacy based on arguments other than religion.

### Key Points

- Ennahda's landmark decision to become a purely political party—rather than a movement also engaged in religious proselytizing—marked a radical change of strategy and redefined its identity.
- The end of Ennahda's Islamist project was a consequence of internal and external pressures, born out of pragmatism and transactional politics. Ennahda had to make concessions, notably during the 2013–2014 National Dialogue, to guarantee and consolidate its participation in Tunisia's transition to democracy.
- Since its decision in 2016, Ennahda has been struggling to find the appropriate place for Islam in its political project.
- Despite good electoral results since 2011, Ennahda's attempts to further develop a support base on grounds other than religion will likely be contingent on its ability to position itself as an effective governing force and propose viable policy solutions to Tunisia's social and economic challenges.

## Key Findings

- Moving away from an Islamist ideology means rethinking the party's relationship with Tunisia's religious sphere, its current constituency, and the wider conservative electorate. Managing the party's core constituency will be a particular challenge, given that the 2014 constitution did not end politically driven battles over identity.
- Prioritizing consensus seeking has weakened the party's image as a driver of socioeconomic change. By governing in a coalition with old regime members and acquiescing to neoliberal economic policies, Ennahda has lost its ability to activate socioeconomic reform and anticorruption arguments to rebuild its legitimacy and support base.
- Although Ennahda initiated a strategy in 2018 to diversify its representatives and membership, this revealed divisions between older members and new careerists. Ennahda's success moving forward is dependent on the leadership's capacity to manage this divide and rebuild a new identity that satisfies the old guard and appeals to new members and voters.

## INTRODUCTION

When Tunisia's Islamist party, Ennahda, made the landmark decision in 2016 to turn away from its religious roots and focus exclusively on politics, it marked a sea change in the movement's strategy.<sup>1</sup> The determination to cease proselytizing activities and "specialize" in politics was officially affirmed during the party's Tenth General Congress in May 2016. Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda's president and longtime leader while the movement was underground, explained that this transformation was not just a means of exiting political Islam to enter "Muslim democracy,"<sup>2</sup> but also the natural outcome of the party's full participation in a democratic society. "We would like to promote a new Ennahda, to renew our movement and to put it into the political sphere, outside any involvement with religion. Before the revolution we were hiding in mosques, trade unions, [and] charities, because real political activity was forbidden. But now we can be political actors openly," he said.<sup>3</sup>

Specialization (*takhsusus*) denotes the complete separation of political action from preaching (*dawa*). Focusing exclusively on electoral politics means Ennahda has to set aside its historical mission as a revivalist movement inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, which sought the Islamization of society through preaching and cultural activities.<sup>4</sup> From these Islamist origins, Ennahda today aims to project itself as a conservative political force capable of managing public affairs and achieving compromise and consensus with Tunisia's secularist parties. With this change has come a deemphasis on its religious foundation, a shift away from the ideology of political Islam, and the dedication of human and financial resources to electoral politics. In other words, specialization is an attempt to redefine the relationship between religion and politics. It is meant to release political activity from religious considerations on the one hand and free religious stances and activities from political manipulation on the other.

Ennahda's leadership insisted that Tunisia's transition to democracy, along with the complex domestic and regional political environments, required the party to adapt. However, the 2016 decision to redirect

exclusively toward electoral politics, though approved by most delegates to the party congress, remains problematic. 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.

While the specialization decision implied a total restructuring—in which all Ennahda activities related to proselytizing would be detached from the party and either dissolved or assigned to independent civil society and religious organizations—that complete separation has yet to occur. This reveals the ambivalence that prevails more than three years after Ennahda's landmark decision about its identity. Exiting political Islam, in all its aspects, is hardly a foregone conclusion.

After decades spent as an underground group in opposition to the authoritarian regimes of Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba and his successor, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Ennahda has had to make consequential choices since its legalization in 2011. It has changed from an illegal opposition movement to a legitimate party that wields power and competes for votes in a pluralistic setting. With its decision to specialize in politics, Ennahda renounced political Islam as its overall guiding framework, but the party is still figuring out how to proceed from there and what place to assign Islam in its new “Muslim democracy” project. How Ennahda chooses to address this identity crisis will not only have an impact on the future of its fragile national and international legitimacy. It will also entail consequences for the entire Tunisian democratic experiment, which Ennahda has taken a lead role in shaping since 2011.

## ENNAHDA'S JOURNEY FROM PREACHING TO POLITICS

Ennahda's decision to specialize was the end result of internal debates over the relationship between politics and religion that have shaped the movement since the 1970s. The hostile political environment in which Ennahda emerged also influenced this gradual transformation. Under authoritarian and repressive regimes in Tunisia, the movement long prioritized its survival and was unwilling to risk fragmentation by choosing between proselytism and political action. However, after the 2011 revolution, the movement became a legal political actor and participated in government with skeptical secular partners, accelerating the urgency to settle the issue.<sup>5</sup>

The movement that would become Ennahda first emerged among conservative swaths of the population in the 1960s, in reaction to fears of Westernization in postindependence Tunisia. After Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956, its first president, Habib Bourguiba, initiated a modernization process that dismantled traditional religious institutions and marginalized the religious establishment. This modernization program sought not only the confiscation of assets used to fund mosques, Quranic schools, and charities, but also reform of the religious curriculum of Al-Zaytouna Mosque, the premier educational and Islamic institution in Tunisia.<sup>6</sup> Polygamy was prohibited and a personal-status code that promoted women's rights was adopted by presidential decree in 1957.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1960s, a group of young men motivated to defend Tunisia's Islamic identity founded the Islamic Group (al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya). Led by Rached Ghannouchi, Abdelfatah Mourou, and Hmida

Ennaifer, and inspired in part by the Tablighi School—a nonpolitical missionary movement focused on religious education—the Islamic Group was a *dawa* movement that promoted the teaching and practice of a pure form of Islam. It sought to revive Islam in the public sphere through preaching in mosques and an emphasis on individual piety, morality, and righteousness.<sup>8</sup> It also rejected both Bourguiba’s modernization project and the country’s traditional religious elites, who were perceived as old-fashioned or co-opted by the dictatorship. Initially operating underground, Islamic Group activists found an unexpected ally to help them expand their outreach in the Islamic wing of the ruling party, the Socialist Destourian Party (PSD).<sup>9</sup> The Islamic wing of the PSD aimed to counter the far left and advocated for the Islamization and Arabization of Tunisian society by supporting the activism of the young preachers through the Association for the Safeguard of the Quran, an official and legal channel created in 1967.

The Islamic Group’s expansion in the late 1960s and 1970s was not just the result of religious or spiritual demand. Socioeconomic factors also played a crucial role in widening its appeal. The Islamist movement was particularly attractive to members of the “new social periphery” who emerged after independence in rural and semirural areas.<sup>10</sup> This included graduates of religious and classical education institutions who saw their social advancement thwarted by the country’s modernization reforms under Bourguiba, and young people from modest backgrounds who had access to free public education but still could not benefit through social promotion. Both groups were marginalized by the new, Westernized bourgeoisie.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Islamic Group activists, many from Tunisia’s marginalized south and interior regions, opposed the sociocultural values championed by secular elites.<sup>12</sup> For these marginalized segments of society, Islam became the foundation for a socioreligious movement and provided a political narrative to mobilize the masses.

In the late 1970s, following the expansion of *dawa* activities to universities through the opening of faculty mosques, Islamic Group activists increasingly began to advocate for the politicization of the movement. This development was largely due to activists coming into contact with both leftist and PSD students, and their exposure to political ideologies as campuses became grounds for intellectual rivalries.<sup>13</sup> The 1979 Iranian Revolution also played a crucial role in inspiring the Islamic Group’s decision to engage in political activism.<sup>14</sup> With the university branch of the Islamic Group advocating to politicize the movement in opposition to Bourguiba’s secularization and authoritarian policies, the leadership moved to adapt to the students’ activism and prevent a split. The Islamic Group adopted the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which promotes Islam as a political, economic, and social system that transcends the framework of religion and faith to cover all aspects of people’s lives.

In 1979, the Islamic Group changed its name to the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI), or Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami. This marked the birth of the first Tunisian political Islamist movement that encouraged both preaching and political activism. This period also saw the emergence—and, later, the departure—of a group of intellectuals within the MTI known as the Islamist progressives. This breakaway faction articulated a progressive interpretation of Islamic doctrine and advocated for an explicitly Tunisian identity narrative distinct from Muslim Brotherhood doctrine.<sup>15</sup>

The 1980s witnessed two significant developments within the MTI that would play a crucial role in influencing the political trajectory of the Ennahda movement after the 2011 Tunisian revolution. First, the Islamists demonstrated a willingness to engage in pluralist politics and coordinate with other opposition groups. Second, debate began within the movement on the relationship between sociocultural and political activism.

During the last decade of Bourguiba's rule, MTI activists increasingly aligned the movement's socioeconomic and political positions with those of other opposition groups opposed to the regime. This was spurred mainly by the government's confrontations with Tunisia's labor movement, which resulted in hundreds of deaths during the general strikes of 1978 and 1984. In 1981, MTI publicly declared its acceptance of multiparty politics and requested official recognition. This was rejected by the Bourguiba regime, which cracked down on the MTI and forced the movement underground. Despite the MTI's lack of legal status, Islamist activists still managed to coordinate with secular opposition parties, and many joined civil society organizations, such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights, and labor movements. By 1989, Islamists made up nearly 20 percent of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT).<sup>16</sup> This period reflected the Islamists' growing acceptance of pluralist politics and the need for coexistence with non-Islamist actors.

In the 1980s, foreshadowing the future debate over specialization, the MTI began to examine the relationship between sociocultural activism and political activism within the movement. Sociocultural activism aimed to champion Islamic values and transform Tunisian society through preaching, education, and cultural activities. Political activism aimed at building a strong opposition movement to Bourguiba's decadent regime. This reflected a sort of Islamization from below, whereas political activism implied Islamization from above. Because of the constrained political environment, this debate remained unresolved. However, the ambivalence about combining features of both the sociocultural movement (*haraka*) and the political party (*hizb*) continued to shape the trajectory of Tunisian Islamism.<sup>17</sup>

When Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali became president in 1987, MTI leaders hoped for better relations with the new regime. In 1988, MTI decided to take its political project a step further and changed its name to the Ennahda movement (Harakat Ennahda, or the Renaissance Movement), conforming to the Political Parties Law of 1988, which prohibited the creation of parties on religious or ethnic grounds. Despite not being granted official recognition, the movement participated in the 1989 parliamentary elections through independent lists. The electoral success of the Islamist lists, estimated to be 15 percent of the national vote and reaching 30 percent in some urban areas, threatened Ben Ali's regime, which began to see the Islamist movement as its primary opponent. In response, the government falsified the results and announced a victory for the new ruling party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD).<sup>18</sup>

This brief political opening precipitated a crackdown on Ennahda networks. In 1990, thousands of the movement's activists were imprisoned, tortured, or subjected to other human rights violations. In response, many fled the country and went into exile, mostly in Europe. In the absence of any space for preaching under Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, investing in politics became almost the only option left for the leaders in exile to ensure the movement's survival. Ennahda also sought to counter the regime's attempts to isolate it from the rest of the opposition during this period by negotiating a rapprochement with secular opposition parties, by claiming allegiance to human rights and democratic politics.<sup>19</sup>

With the fall of the Ben Ali dictatorship in January 2011, Ennahda leaders' first priority was reactivating grassroots networks and rebuilding the movement's organizational structures in preparation for another foray into politics. Thirty years after its first request for legal recognition, Ennahda received an official license in March 2011 under the name "The Party of the Ennahda Movement."<sup>20</sup> More than 2,000 party offices were opened across the country in the lead up to the October 2011 elections to the Constituent Assembly.<sup>21</sup> Activists returning from exile—most notably Ghannouchi—met with traumatized grassroots

members who had remained in Tunisia and suffered fierce repression. Some Ennahda officials characterized these encounters as reconnecting the exiled or imprisoned “head” with the persecuted and besieged “body.”<sup>22</sup> The reconstruction or rebuilding of the movement was not without its challenges, however, especially in the highly political context of Tunisia’s transition to democracy.

Ennahda managed to win first place in the 2011 elections with 37 percent of the vote. It allied with two secularist parties, Ettakatol and the Congress for the Republic (CPR), to lead what became known as the Troika government between 2011 and 2013. Ennahda’s internal debate over politics versus preaching was also reopened in 2011. Specialization in partisan politics had been first broached as a topic of discussion in the 2000s, but the heavy hand of the Ben Ali dictatorship and divisions within the movement between those in exile and those in Tunisia prohibited examining such a critical issue.

During Ennahda’s Ninth General Congress in 2012—the first one organized in Tunisia since 1990—strategic and ideological differences of opinion publicly emerged among members. The movement split into two camps: hard-liners, who wanted sharia, or Islamic law, to be the basis of lawmaking in Tunisia’s yet-to-be-written constitution; and pragmatists, who argued for a more flexible approach.<sup>23</sup> However, amid the divide, the grassroots constituency’s high expectations for meeting the 2011 uprising’s objectives—namely to fight corruption and purge the political scene—preoccupied both the hard-liners and the pragmatists. With the leadership concerned about ending the congress with a show of unity, no major decisions were made on either specialization or the party’s position on the role of sharia in the constitution.<sup>24</sup>

Participation in electoral politics not only influenced the movement’s ideology but also had an impact on the party’s political positioning. When Ennahda became a governing party in Tunisia in 2011, it was forced to manage national affairs as part of a ruling coalition. This meant that the party had to negotiate contentious issues on the nature of the country’s emerging democracy with its secular coalition partners and endorse compromise policy choices.

Political polarization inside Ennahda, and in Tunisia as a whole, increased during 2013, precipitating a crisis for the country’s emerging democratic experiment. In July, Tunisia’s secular opposition took to the streets and threatened to withdraw from the National Constituent Assembly and interrupt the writing of the constitution. The protests came in reaction to the political assassination of two leftist leaders, Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi, in February and July 2013, respectively, and a growing number of attacks against security forces and state institutions by hard-line Salafists. Meanwhile, on July 3, Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood–led government was toppled in a coup d’état that ended the country’s democratic moment.<sup>25</sup> In response, Ennahda recognized that it had to yield some ideological ground to preserve Tunisia’s democracy and protect itself against a fate similar to its fellow Islamists in Egypt. The party began to forge compromises with secularists later that year during an unprecedented Tunisian national dialogue.

### **The National Dialogue: A Moment of Pragmatism and Transactional Politics**

For Ennahda leaders, the decision to distance the movement from its ideological principles was guided by pragmatism and transactional political calculations. Both secularists and Islamists had to make concessions to guarantee and consolidate their participation in Tunisian democracy. The consensus around the 2014 constitution came as the result of a national dialogue between Islamists and secularists, including

representatives of the former regime. Four civil society organizations known collectively as the Quartet (the UGTT; the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handcrafts [UTICA]; the Tunisian Order of Lawyers; and the Tunisian Human Rights League) were instrumental in bringing the parties together and mediating among them.

The national dialogue contained three interdependent tracks, and the outcome of each was fundamental to the success of the entire process of national reconciliation and crisis management. The constitutional track sought to work out compromises on issues such as blasphemy, the role of sharia as a source of legislation, equality between men and women, and freedom of belief and conscience. Concessions from Islamists on these issues were fundamental to finalizing the constitution in January 2014 and moving on to the government track. The government track negotiated the composition of a new cabinet charged with governing the country until parliamentary and presidential elections could be held in October and November 2014, respectively. This track concluded with the agreed-upon resignation of the Ennahda-led government of Ali Laarayedh, which was replaced by an independent technocratic government. The electoral track was responsible for developing mechanisms for electing members to the National Independent Electoral Commission, which was to organize the upcoming elections.

The new Tunisian constitution adopted in January 2014 settled disputes between secularists and Islamists as to the nature of the state. The constitution recognized Islam as a key identity marker for the Tunisian people. However, Ennahda abandoned its proposal to use sharia as a source of legislation in response to massive protests organized by secular forces and representatives of civil society. Calls for the criminalization of religious offenses such as blasphemy were also watered down, and the state's obligation to "protect the sacred" only warranted a cursory mention.<sup>26</sup> Making these concessions was not easy—Ennahda's leadership had to organize workshops and meetings with the party's more militant members to convince them that their doctrinal demands were untenable in the existing national and regional context.

Political pressure, both domestic and international, was a key driver in strengthening the influence of Ennahda's more pragmatic leaders who advocated for compromise. For instance, while hard-liners in Ennahda had argued to exclude former regime representatives from politics, the leadership core around Ghannouchi called for a practical form of national reconciliation, most notably with Nidaa Tounes, a newly created party built from a coalition of Bourguibists, secularists, and leftists.<sup>27</sup> The rapidly deteriorating regional environment following the Egyptian coup of July 2013 only reinforced the pragmatists' view that it was necessary to make peace with former regime officials and prevent Tunisia's destabilization.<sup>28</sup>

The argument for accommodation eventually won out, and Ennahda made a major political concession by voting against the exclusion of Ben Ali's officials and representatives.<sup>29</sup> This compromise and others helped define the national dialogue as a fundamental moment of pragmatic politics. Ennahda's leadership believes its concessions were and still are indispensable to preserving Tunisia's democratic experiment. In the end, the constitution guaranteed "a neutral state that is neither Islamist nor secular, but instead the champion of freedom of thought, belief, and religion."<sup>30</sup>

For the party's leadership, the affirmation of religious freedom and Muslim identity in Tunisia accomplished Ennahda's historical mission of rebuilding society according to principles inspired by Islam. With the Islamization of society no longer pertinent, Ennahda used its Tenth General Congress in 2016 to

adapt its identity to the realities of the new constitution. During the congress, members finally settled the long-running internal debate over preaching versus politics with the decision to specialize exclusively in the political area. In justifying the momentous decision, Ennahda's leadership framed the move to forsake proselytism as a natural consequence of its commitment to the new constitution's principles and Tunisian democracy.<sup>31</sup>

The question of whether Ennahda's ideological shift was purely tactical or also a strategic move is a legitimate one. Ennahda demonstrated pragmatism and an ability to maneuver opportunistically, as it was forced to adapt to constraints and public pressure from secularist counterparts and the international community during 2013. However, the party's leadership adjusted to the new rules of a game that it helped establish. And by doing so, it transformed an external constraint into a driver of change for the party's ideology and identity. Thus, specialization is a strategic decision because of its implications for Ennahda's ideology moving forward, for the recruitment of future members, and for the party's goal of domestic and international recognition.

The choice of specialization—as opposed to simply separating into political and preaching branches, as Islamist movements in Morocco and Jordan have done—reflects Ennahda's commitment to a political path at the expense of religious activism.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Islamist movements that combine proselytism and political activities in one organizational structure are often tempted to take ambiguous stances for fear of undermining their credibility with either their religious followers or their political constituents.<sup>33</sup> Conscious of the danger of pursuing two conflicting agendas simultaneously, Ennahda has engaged in a transformational process that aims to evolve in a more liberal direction and end the ambiguity over whether its decisions are motivated by politics or religion.

By strategically adopting specialization, Ennahda also targeted another reluctant audience: Tunisia's international partners. Many debates about political Islam among Western policy circles focus on whether Islamist movements are committed to democracy.<sup>34</sup> In a statement acknowledging international partners' apparent preference for secular groups, an Ennahda party official said, "Ennahda is not a good geopolitical actor. Tunisia is an extrovert country while Ennahda is an introverted political actor."<sup>35</sup> There is also little doubt that the turbulent regional environment and some Gulf states' extreme aversion to political Islam also contributed to Ennahda's decision to become a "normal" political actor. However, while the decision to abandon political Islam and focus on electoral politics helped Ennahda cope with various domestic and international pressures, specialization also forced the party to reckon with a new set of questions on its future nature and direction.

## SPECIALIZATION'S RISKY OUTCOMES

Specialization has created several challenges for Ennahda. The first is the need to reevaluate Islam as a basis for the party's political legitimacy and as a primary frame of reference. The second is that the decision neutralized the party as a driver of social change. The third is the need to develop a strategy for retaining Ennahda's core supporters while also appealing to a wider electorate. These challenges imply not only an ideological recasting but also a rethinking of the party's relations with the religious sphere and the wider conservative electorate. Such a reassessment is crucial, as Ennahda has been losing a segment of its

more devout followers (mainly Islamists) while also struggling to attract non-Islamist conservative voters. The discrepancy between Ennahda's current voter base and its desired electorate suggests that the party must move out of the strictly religious sphere and expand into other domains.

The strategy of specialization was a vital and logical step toward fulfilling Ennahda's decades-long quest for recognition and acceptance. As a party leader said, "Since the creation of the Islamist movement in 1981, we have been waiting for legal recognition. We only achieved legalization of the movement after the revolution of 2011. For thirty years, we were second-class citizens, and this created barriers between society and us."<sup>36</sup> However, Ennahda's origins in political Islam have made the party an outlier in Tunisian society, and many people find it difficult to accept the party as a so-called normal political actor.<sup>37</sup>

Even as Ennahda has officially moved from being in the opposition to governing and renounced preaching for politics, its strategic transformation has been cautious. The leadership decided not to change the name of the party during the 2016 General Congress, keeping the official moniker Party of the Ennahda Movement (or, more simply, the Ennahda movement). Interestingly, the statement announcing the decision to specialize, titled "Management of the Project: Specialization As a Strategic Choice," didn't define exactly what Ennahda's new project was.<sup>38</sup> Rather, Ennahda's current focus on electoral competition and the exercise of power imply the professionalization of the party as a goal in itself. This potentially risks deactivating some of its core support base, ending the sociocultural movement that Ennahda has historically represented in Tunisia. Ennahda's present identity crisis promises to have considerable consequences, especially if the party's new direction fails to catch on among Tunisian society.

### Recalibrating the Place of Islam and Relations to the Religious Sphere

In leaving behind political Islam, Ennahda faces an old dilemma that Islamists have grappled with in pluralistic societies: how can Islam form the basis of political legitimacy and serve as a primary frame of reference in a democratic setting?<sup>39</sup> The political compromises Ennahda has made over the years have reshaped its relationship with the party's religious base and prompted it to revise its ideology to dilute its explicit religious identity. This is a complicated position for the party, as compromising with secularists over major issues such as the 2014 constitution did nothing to end politically driven battles over identity in Tunisia.

Today, Ennahda risks political isolation and a return to oppositional status if it takes sides in politically polarizing debates. By way of illustration, Ennahda has refrained from taking official positions on ideologically loaded identity and legal issues, such as equal inheritance rights for women, for fear of jeopardizing an agreed-upon consensus with secular parties on the one hand, and worries over alienating its conservative support base on the other.<sup>40</sup> This cautious attitude has led to contradictory statements from the party's representatives, some of whom have defended traditional values while others have urged the party to abandon "the monopoly on protecting Islam."<sup>41</sup> These fissures within Ennahda reflect the party leadership's awareness of Tunisia's evolving religious beliefs and dynamics. At the same time, it has proven difficult for the party to navigate these murky waters.

Ennahda must articulate its new identity as new forms of religiosity are gaining popularity in Tunisia. In the years preceding the 2011 Arab uprisings, Salafist clerics based in Gulf states and preachers from the Levant, adopting a style similar to that of American televangelists, successfully grabbed Tunisians'

attention on television and social media by promoting piety, moral values, and personal success.<sup>42</sup> Shifts in religiosity toward individualization and moral values weakened the appeal of traditional Islamist movements that advocate for the Islamization of society through a combination of political action and preaching, a stance the younger generation considers excessively dogmatic and rigid.<sup>43</sup> This shift in Tunisia was also assisted by the suppression of Ennahda under Ben Ali's regime, as the movement was not able to openly articulate a religious alternative.

Still, even after its legalization in 2011, Ennahda has not been able to devise a genuine religious position adapted to Tunisian voters, especially younger people. According to a polling expert, only 20 percent of new voters (aged eighteen years or older) voted for the party's candidates in 2014.<sup>44</sup> This means that the Ennahda electorate is mostly older, and a gerontocracy in the party seems to be fast approaching.

Ennahda's precarious position in the religious sphere means that moving to the center of the political spectrum is unavoidable. For one thing, voting patterns indicate that Ennahda cannot build its political and electoral strategy based exclusively on religion. Pious Tunisians are important for the party, but these people seem increasingly inclined to distinguish between religious beliefs and politics. Most are looking for the freedom to practice religion rather than a militant form of Islam. Plus, the freedom of belief guaranteed by democracy has lessened the need for religiously oriented political engagement. This shift is visible among Ennahda's voter base. According to surveys conducted by the Washington, DC-based International Republican Institute, Ennahda voters' support for granting Islam a significant role in government dramatically decreased from 84 percent in 2014 to 62 percent in 2017. The belief that religion should have a role in politics decreased at a much higher rate among Ennahda voters than among the Tunisian public overall, indicating that Ennahda voters' ideological realignment likely followed the party's shift on politics and preaching rather than caused it.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, however, most Ennahda voters do not want to abandon Islam and their Muslim identity. Rather than defending rigorous religious principles and Islamic law, they seem attached to Islam as a frame of reference. This situation was summed up by one of Ennahda's leaders: "The majority of Ennahda's voters are religiously observant people. Some of them are Salafists, of course. We estimate that only 10 percent of Salafists vote for us, and their proportion is decreasing because of the pragmatic choices made by Ennahda since 2014. However, it's obvious that many conservative people don't vote for us. They consider that Ennahda is too closed, too rigid. Only one-third of the conservative electorate votes for us. This is our big problem."<sup>46</sup>

Such observations suggest that Ennahda needs to engage a broader conservative electoral base. That means appealing to people who are attached to Islam as an identity marker, even if religion is not the main criterion that determines their vote. Appealing to these voters implies an inevitable recalibration of the role of Islam within a newly elaborated ideological framework.

For other observers, specializing in politics is problematic. As one Tunisian political expert noted, "Ennahda seems to be keen to progressively abandon religion. This might be good for Ennahda, politically speaking, but it could backfire. It would have been far better both for the country and for Ennahda if it undertook a reform of religious interpretation toward a more innovative and modernist understanding. Ennahda can leave political Islam, but Islam is still there, and it's still important for many Tunisians."<sup>47</sup>

Thus, Ennahda is facing a difficult choice: Exiting political Islam could well create a vacuum that would benefit other, more fundamentalist groups or Salafist movements.<sup>48</sup> But retaining Islam as an identity marker without offering a newly articulated ideology that connects religion and politics—one that translates Islamic values into concrete policies at the political, economic, and social level—will likely fail to satisfy both old supporters and potential new ones.<sup>49</sup>

The future of Ennahda will depend on how it recalibrates the role of Islam to move beyond ideology and toward identity politics. In other words, the challenge is to shift from classical Islamism—which emphasizes religion as a source of legislation, a reference for behavior in society, and a framework for good governance—toward a more generic conservatism. At the same time, Ennahda’s move toward identity politics and the center right risks a rift with religiously devout constituents and activists, along with religious figures and organizations. In particular, these elements might reject the political pragmatism displayed by the party—visible in Ennahda’s decisions to abandon *dawa*, drop the demand for sharia as a source of legislation, and commit to a civil state—as an abandonment of the movement’s traditional religious values and supporters.

Thus, the challenge for Ennahda is to articulate a conservative vision and platform that affords Islam a prominent place in its rhetoric and concerns but does not pose a challenge to the fundamental basis of the political order. For example, Ennahda might push for a more Islamic-oriented educational system, or for alcohol-free hotels and beaches that offer prayer rooms, or advocate a foreign policy centered on strengthening relations with Muslim countries.<sup>50</sup> But these policy stances should be formulated within democratic institutions and not challenge the freedom of belief, conscience, and respect for human rights to which Ennahda committed in the Tunisian constitution.

### Abandoning Ambitions for Socioeconomic Change

Part of Ennahda’s grassroots membership is disenchanted not only with the progressive dilution of the doctrinal aspects of the party’s activities but also by the fact that the party so far has failed to be a driver of political, economic, and social change while in government.<sup>51</sup> The neutralization of Ennahda’s historical position of championing socioeconomic reform is proving detrimental to the party’s legitimacy—having abandoned Islamist ideology, the party can no longer use economics, either. Aligning with the government’s agenda has meant that Ennahda’s policy choices have become indistinguishable from representatives of the old regime.<sup>52</sup> In other words, the party is unable to attract new voters seeking more state support for socioeconomic struggles. Thus, the party’s move to the center of the political spectrum raises the question of whether its capacity to expand, or even preserve, its electoral base can consolidate its role as a change agent in present-day Tunisia.

While in power, Ennahda has been unable to implement reforms. Despite heading a handful of ministries since 2014, the party has had marginal influence over the policymaking process. This incapacity is not just related to its status as a junior partner in a governing coalition since 2014. Ennahda led governments between 2011 and 2013 but was just as unable to push through bold reforms. Ennahda’s members broadly agree that stepping down from government in 2013 and allying itself with Nidaa Tounes after the 2014 elections was a key step toward protecting the movement and Tunisia’s democratic experiment during a particularly unpropitious period for political Islam. However, tensions within the party have

emerged over its inability to proceed and promote tangible changes with either socioeconomic reforms or anticorruption efforts.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, setbacks in the transitional justice process have fed the disillusionment of Ennahda's grassroots members who were victims of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. Parliament's failure to establish the long-awaited constitutional court has also exacerbated concerns that Tunisia's transition to democracy is still uncertain, potentially reversible, and doesn't offer substantial guarantees against the risk of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian restoration scenarios.<sup>54</sup> These risks increase the pressure on the Ennahda leaders who chose specialization, as the party's constituency is unlikely to support transactional politics that fail to secure the survival of the movement, ensure the safety of its members, or consolidate nascent freedoms.<sup>55</sup>

Ennahda has lost the ability to promote an anticorruption platform as a result of its governing alliance with representatives of the former regime—a symbol of corruption and nepotism in Tunisia. This evolution is striking, given that, for decades, the movement aimed to represent social and political contention and mobilize the oppressed. During the 1980s, it looked to leftist groups for inspiration. Indeed, many of Ennahda's leaders embraced political activism because of their contacts with left-wing groups while at university. Unlike many Islamist movements in the Arab world, which tack center-right on economic issues, Ennahda considered leftists and progressives worthy of emulation and drew from their ideology and organizational experience.<sup>56</sup>

While Ennahda was willing to compromise to secure its position in an uncertain democracy and an unstable regional environment, representatives of the former regime have used the consensus to neutralize contention and tame social anger even as they perpetuate their capture of the state. This “rotten compromise” explains both the conservative pace of the transition and the fragile stability that Tunisia is experiencing.<sup>57</sup> The neutralization of Ennahda's historical goal of effecting socioeconomic change has alienated part of its base and increased disenchantment among the Tunisian population by lending credibility to the notion that all politicians are the same and “only wish to share the cake” among themselves.<sup>58</sup>

The perception that Ennahda has been co-opted by the country's traditional elites and is serving the status quo has gained traction among the lower and middle classes. Despite its influence in parliament, Ennahda hasn't promoted key fiscal or land reforms due to its unwillingness to antagonize influential socioeconomic groups.<sup>59</sup> A prime example of the party's growing accommodation with elites occurred in 2015, when Ennahda parliamentarians voted to decrease taxes on imported alcoholic beverages. The move generated public derision as neither the party's social justice nor religious values could justify such a decision.

Ennahda has also supported reforms recommended by the International Monetary Fund that run counter to the economic interests of both its base and the Tunisian middle class voters the party has started targeting. Measures implemented include a freeze in public sector hiring, cuts in fuel subsidies, and an increase in electricity and gasoline prices.<sup>60</sup> This apparent turn toward neoliberalism and privileged elites has put Ennahda in a predicament well-described by one of its leaders: “We are getting trapped. We are forgetting people who always supported us, and serving people who always rejected us. Ironically, it makes me think of [Egyptian singer Mohammed] Abdel Wahab's song: ‘I think of who is forgetting me and forget who is thinking of me.’”<sup>61</sup>

Ennahda's failure to promote socioeconomic reforms is partly related to its inability to recast political cleavages and move beyond the identity question. Because it aims to normalize its image among social and economic elites and craves recognition from national and international bodies, Ennahda has refrained from politicizing economic and regional inequalities or stoking social conflicts. To the contrary, the party has increasingly played down social antagonisms, hoping to appeal to different social groups with contradictory interests.

Because of its traditional electorate, Ennahda could still be a suitable representative for disenfranchised regions and the lower and middle classes, evidenced by the results of elections held since 2011.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, over the past eight years, Ennahda has performed well in national and municipal elections. In the 2011 elections to the National Constituent Assembly, Ennahda won a plurality of the vote. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, Ennahda came in second with 27.7 percent; in the 2018 municipal election, Ennahda also came in second, behind the independent lists but ahead of all other political parties, with 28.6 percent of the vote. However, these figures also suggest that Ennahda's electoral base is contracting. This phenomenon is not specific to Ennahda but instead reflects the national climate of dissatisfaction with political parties. Therefore, Ennahda's alliance with former regime officials—and acquiescence to their policies—is not only a hindrance to the party widening its electoral base. It also threatens to demoralize a large part of its existing support base, which feels this political strategy has reaped neither symbolic nor economic rewards.

The socioeconomic circumstances in Tunisia require that Ennahda redefine its current position and elaborate a strategic economic and political vision—one that goes beyond short-term political calculations and maneuvering designed to ensure the survival of the organization or its participation in power sharing.<sup>63</sup> This may prove too tricky for Ennahda to achieve, due to the population's apathy and general disenchantment toward a representative democracy that is unable to deliver tangible progress on social or economic fronts.

### Looking for a Wider Electorate

Ennahda realized that Islamization was not the answer to socioeconomic challenges and chose to focus on developing public policies instead of ideology. For the party's leadership, heading a governing coalition between 2011 and 2013 and participating in unity governments since 2015 revealed two main requirements. The first was the importance of building the party's credibility as a political actor that could legitimately aspire to govern the country. The second was the crucial need for both domestic and international recognition. To accomplish these goals, Ennahda has sought to expand its membership beyond its traditional religious base to include more professionals and career politicians. However, this expansion has also forced the party to balance the demands of old and new members, who often hold differing conceptions of Ennahda as a party, how it should formulate policy, and what it should be advocating for.

For an Islamist movement that spent decades engaged in religious activism while underground and in exile, the ability to participate in national politics marked the start of a new phase in its history. As an Ennahda official put it, "In 2011, we left dissident political Islam to enter electoral politics. This was a big change. We have been participating in post-2011 governments, with the exception of the technocratic one in 2014, and I must say, we still have a lot to learn about electoral politics."<sup>64</sup> By focusing on the practical processes of understanding how to become a political party and rule effectively, Ennahda's leadership realized the overriding importance of coherent public policy.

One significant challenge Ennahda has faced since 2011 is learning how to govern and make state institutions work. As one of Ennahda's leaders said, "Basically, we at Ennahda didn't know until 2011 what the state was. We have opposed it for forty years. We have suffered its violent repression, its oppression, and its exclusion. When we took the reins in 2011, we lacked the resources and the networks. We understood very little of administration and bureaucracy, so we were not able to govern effectively."<sup>65</sup> In government, Ennahda has gained valuable exposure to power relations involving entrenched networks of privilege and interests, the practical nature of political action, the need for expertise and technocratic know-how, and the importance of serious, developed economic programs. Operating inside the halls of power has also wised Ennahda to the extent of resistance to reform by lobbies, entrenched interest groups, and some representatives of the old regime.

Participation in government has also taught Ennahda a few lessons about the powerlessness of Islamist ideology when it comes to designing public policy and managing Tunisia's economic, social, and developmental challenges. By 2016 the movement had become painfully aware of how difficult it was to balance tackling reform, developing new social and economic policies, and dealing with the heavy legacy of the former dictatorship. As an official in the movement said, "Ennahda is simply immodest if it wants to do everything: politics, preaching, education, culture. It's simply impossible."<sup>66</sup>

Given these challenges, Ennahda's leadership has prioritized channeling resources to party politics and the recruitment of professionals and technocrats. These moves are vital for raising Ennahda's profile as a legitimate ruling party—one able to reform Tunisia and address its numerous economic problems. Today, Tunisia's political actors must somehow tackle reform of the country's welfare system and subsidy regimes, and of the education, health, and transport sectors. Ennahda also anticipates that privatization of state-owned companies and reforms to the public sector will fuel popular opposition, particularly from the influential UGTT labor union. Enacting the necessary measures will potentially require reducing state subsidies for a broad range of services, reconsidering existing pension schemes, and diluting the economic privileges enjoyed by some of the country's elite who benefited from decades of crony capitalism.

The specialization strategy and subsequent channeling of resources to electoral competition spurred Ennahda to revise its recruitment process. The 2016 General Congress officially removed the two-year probationary period before full membership in the party. These amended recruitment procedures reflected Ennahda's desire to attract new members from outside Islamist circles who might be more interested in political activism.<sup>67</sup>

Electoral competition also pushed Ennahda to implement a "strategy of openness" intended to broaden the party's electoral and support base.<sup>68</sup> For the municipal elections of May 2018, the party opened its lists to independent candidates. This tactic was designed to increase Ennahda's appeal among conservative social groups and individuals that did not share its core constituency's religious ethos but favorably viewed the party's move to the center and thus might be interested in pursuing a political career under its umbrella. In the end, this strategy diversified Ennahda's municipal council candidate profiles and attracted new upper-middle-class representatives.

Ennahda's choice of candidates for the elections was based on competence and focused on their work-related and sociological profile, specifically targeting professionals such as engineers, lawyers, professors,

and doctors. One of Ennahda's leaders explained this approach by saying, "We tried to attract people who have skills, who have expertise in managing local affairs. Some of them were in the Democratic Constitutional Rally—the ruling party under the dictatorship. It was also an attempt to say that we are not against these people, and we are open to people who served the former regime. We are against the oppressive system they served but not against these people."<sup>69</sup> Along with promoting pragmatic local managers and capitalizing on their expertise and local networks, Ennahda also aimed to adapt to the realism of local politics by presenting candidates who were less ideologically aligned. In that sense, local elections were an opportunity to readjust the party's focus and dilute religious references. More pragmatically, this strategy was an attempt to adapt the organization and its representatives to political competition at the local level, where candidates win votes by building their profile and mobilizing social networks.

Around 4,000 independent candidates ran on Ennahda's electoral lists for the 2018 municipal elections. Ennahda came in second, after the independent lists, winning 30 percent of municipal council seats.<sup>70</sup> Of the 2,139 municipal council positions won by Ennahda, half were filled by independent members who did not formally belong to the party.

This strategy of openness did not go unquestioned, however. As one of the party's leaders who was skeptical about including independent candidates on Ennahda's lists observed, "We can't say that this strategy broadened our electoral base. Many interesting profiles are now representing the party. That's true! But it would be an exaggeration to say that it increased the appeal of Ennahda to a new electorate. It served mainly to attract individuals."<sup>71</sup>

Reaching out to independents and non-Islamists undoubtedly increased the diversity of party representatives by mixing careerists with old militants, but this has not come without tensions. The main divide between the two groups lies in their different perceptions of and reasons for political engagement. For the older members, political affiliation with Ennahda is driven by devotion. They recall when membership in the movement was a highly risky endeavor, and their experiences with repression under the Ben Ali regime have built a shared memory of trauma and resistance. The sacrifices made by the older generation have become a celebrated feature of the party's history. This legacy serves to legitimize the current leadership while also acting as an insidious barrier to the integration of new members who don't share the same experiences.

For careerists, affiliation with Ennahda is a vehicle for building professional expertise, personal skills, technocratic know-how, and social connections. There are also other material and symbolic benefits of participating in government (including favors, honors, notability, salaries, influence, and the expansion of personal networks).<sup>72</sup> These individuals bring with them a new understanding of political activism and fresh approaches to politics, which are less ideological and often antagonistic to Ennahda's grassroots members. These differing perspectives and priorities have created tensions between the two groups. The discomfort of old militants is even higher vis-à-vis careerists who previously served in the former regime.

Interestingly, Ennahda did not renew its strategy of openness in selecting candidates for parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2019. Instead, the party organized internal elections to choose its representatives. The reversal of this policy meant to diversify Ennahda's candidates is a sign that the older, more militant wing has likely gained the upper hand against new careerists in defining the future direction of the party.

Despite the decision to specialize and the strategy of openness in 2018, the internal structure of Ennahda is still an obstacle to expanding the party. Over the decades, it has developed into a closed hierarchical group tied together not only by the bonds of ideology but also by networks of personal and familial relationships, as well as a strong sense of organizational loyalty. While representing a source of solidarity and cohesion, these characteristics also represent a challenge for opening the party up to new members and representatives who don't share the same ethos and militant experience of old members. Thus, strategies to build the party's capacities and diversify its representatives, membership, and constituency are highly dependent on the leadership's capacity to manage its newfound heterogeneity and rebuild an identity that appeals to both current members and attracts new adherents. In particular, Ennahda must overcome the perception that it is a closed sect if it genuinely wants to transform into a center-right political actor that appeals to the broad conservative electorate.

## CONCLUSION: WHITHER ENNAHDA?

In exiting political Islam, Ennahda was bound to face a crisis. Its ideological and organizational decision to participate in Tunisian politics as a party, rather than a religiously based movement, has sown confusion as to the organization's identity and goals.

Even as it continues moving toward center-right conservatism, Ennahda will most likely accord Islam a place in its narrative. As an instrument of identity politics, Islam can guide certain policy proposals, but within a democratic context to reassure secularist political forces that remain skeptical about Ennahda's commitment to democracy. However, identity battles should not motivate any backsliding in the party's specialization strategy. Further success in this transformation will require a carefully tailored and inclusive approach that aligns with different forms and degrees of religiosity, from those of pious, observant Tunisians to those of nonpracticing Muslims who nevertheless adhere to conservative values.

As key ideological pillars of the party have disappeared, Ennahda has seen part of its electoral base melt away. De-emphasizing proselytism, allying with a regime it once opposed, and investing in electoral politics have all exacerbated the confusion about Ennahda's identity. What precisely does the party stand for? Does Ennahda prioritize electoral competition above all else, even at the cost of potential socioeconomic reform it could help effect? For some of Ennahda's leadership and base, winning elections is not an objective as such if it does not lead to greater social justice and a redistribution of power and wealth in the country. If Ennahda is prioritizing electoral success above all else, that implies it has bought into the system of entrenched interests that shape power and wealth-sharing in Tunisia that it opposed for decades. Both Ennahda's leaders and grassroots constituents agree on the importance of preserving the democratic institutions and on the fundamental basis of the democratic political order, but they don't agree on the party's role within this system. Ennahda's ability to keep alive hope for change while negotiating a modern electoral landscape will be critical to its continued survival as a party.

Overall, the current confusion over the party's identity is related to lingering indecision over what kind of party Ennahda wants to be and what its identifiable base is. The cessation of proselytism means an end to the movement functionally if not officially. However, political participation in an uncertain democracy and the socioeconomic constraints under which Ennahda operates make it difficult to discern precisely

what form this party will take and what its mission will be. Will it be a professionalized party focusing on electoral competition and the efficient management of the state, taking advantage of its representation at the local and national levels to access financial and political resources? In other words, will it become a sort of electoral machine in which the distinction between party members and nonmembers becomes blurred? Or will it be a party that prioritizes the expansion of its constituency, the articulation of an ideological and policy platform, and the promotion of social justice while preserving its Islamic reference?

Trying to balance these two distinct pathways could maintain the unity of Ennahda for a while but will likely become a source of division eventually. The party's increasing involvement in political competition has necessitated controversial changes to its recruitment and organizational structures—such as the 2018 strategy of openness. Organizational issues are key for the cohesion and unity of Islamist movements. On the rare occasions that Islamist movements have split, it has usually been over how to organize and act, not over ideology.<sup>73</sup>

Ennahda's ongoing transformation affords crucial insights into an Islamist movement's trajectory in a pluralistic and democratic environment. Perhaps more importantly, its unfolding and unfinished normalization informs us about the ambivalence of electoral success and ideological failure in an Islamist movement.<sup>74</sup> Islamism can be used effectively to mobilize people but not for governing them. Indeed, Ennahda's shift toward pragmatism at the expense of its founding ideology makes the case that, although an Islamist narrative might win elections, it keeps failing to fulfill its constituents' varied expectations.<sup>75</sup> Ennahda's unfinished transition could prove that an Islamist movement can adapt to a democratic context and win elections by transforming its ideology and organization, and widening its electoral base beyond its traditional religious core supporters. Ennahda's prospects are bound to influence how other Islamist movements attempt to legitimize themselves and navigate challenges within pluralistic political settings in the future.<sup>76</sup>

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## THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

# MOROCCO'S ISLAMIST PARTY: REDEFINING POLITICS UNDER PRESSURE

INTISSAR FAKIR

## INTRODUCTION

King Mohammed VI's constitutional reforms in response to the 2011 protests promised more dynamism for Morocco's predictable politics and an opportunity for its discredited political class. However, recent events indicate that the story is taking a turn. The constitutional reforms opened up the political space and provided opportunity for parties to play a bigger role in governing the country. This paved the way for Morocco's Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) to carve a larger role for government between 2012 and 2016. After making some notable progress in key reform areas, the party, led by incumbent prime minister Abdelilah Benkirane, went on to win a plurality of seats in the October 2016 parliamentary elections—largely because the populace perceived the PJD as capable of governing. But the palace soon began to view the party's success as a threat.

After the PJD's second historic electoral win, the palace, through political manipulations of opposition parties and former partners, maneuvered to block Benkirane from forming a second coalition—arguably to counterbalance the party's popularity and protect its own political and economic interests.

By March 2017, the king called for Benkirane to be replaced, naming the more subdued PJD figure Saadeddine Othmani as prime minister-designate. And during its eighth congress on December 9 and 10, the PJD elected Othamni as secretary-general, putting an end to Benkirane's leadership aspirations.

By neutralizing Benkirane and pressuring the party to be part of a large coalition, the palace created the conditions for a weaker PJD-led government, leaving the party internally divided and unable to capitalize on its electoral win and reform successes. Understanding the palace's intervention against the PJD and the broader implications for the country moving forward requires close examination of the party's experience in power, its testing of the palace's red lines while remaining loyal, and its direct linkages to the Moroccan

people. The palace and other political actors either underestimated or failed to foresee that any political party could take advantage of the constitutional openings and translate them into electoral success and greater outreach to the population. Only Benkirane and the PJD seemed to fully grasp the opportunities around greater citizen interest in politics and the post-2011 feeling of political empowerment.

The PJD's post-2011 achievements—and their implications for the broader exercise of power in Morocco—should not be diminished. The main legacy of the PJD's experience in leading the government from 2012 to 2016 was its efforts to negotiate a greater role and independence for the government and, by extension, for the party. While this furtive progress is coming to a halt, the PJD's experience remains an important case study for how a political actor created an alternative governing approach and attempted to redefine its relationship with the palace. For the palace, the PJD's experience—powerful enough to cause a backlash—risked dispelling the notion that political actors are ineffectual.

The monarchy's response to the PJD seeking a greater role for the parliament and for political parties, as mandated by Morocco's 2011 constitution, has been to retract the brief political opening and once again heavily manipulate politics and political parties. However, the monarchy's reassertion of control in such a heavy-handed manner has the potential to generate popular anger. One lasting legacy of the 2011 protest wave is citizens' interest in their political faith and future. The unrest in the central northern Rif region that went on for months is one example of how Moroccans are increasingly taking an interest in and ownership of the country's politics and development—demanding better governance, greater transparency, increased economic opportunities, and more respect for their basic rights.

Morocco provided an alternative to the post-2011 political trajectories across the region. By avoiding a revolution, the palace maintained stability and peace, and by offering some political space, it allowed its people to hope for more prosperity and growth. Yet the palace today is pushing for greater economic and security stability, even as it shuts down political engagement and independence. However, greater economic prosperity and development will depend on the strength of the country's institutions—which are overruled, heavily controlled, and often made obsolete by the king. As long as the monarchy resists allowing these institutions to become strong and independent, the country's long-term social and economic development will be limited and the potential for instability will be considerable.

## THE PALACE'S SHARING OF POWER

In contrast to other Arab monarchies, Morocco has a history of diverse and dynamic political parties and elections. However, prior to 2011, these parties rarely exercised any genuine power separate from the palace. In fact, the monarchy promoted a multiparty system to ensure that no single party could dominate politics and weaken its authority.<sup>1</sup>

There are currently thirty-three official political parties in Morocco, which span the spectrum of political ideologies from communist to Islamist.<sup>2</sup> They vary in size and relevance, with the most notable being the PJD; the center-right Istiqlal Party, Morocco's oldest, with a storied history as leader of the movement for independence; and the center-left Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), which was the torchbearer of opposition during the repressive years of King Hassan II. There is also an array of parties

closely connected to the palace, including the National Rally of Independents (RNI); the Constitutional Union (UC); the Popular Movement (MP); and a relative newcomer to Moroccan politics, the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), which was founded in 2008 by Fouad Ali El Himma, a close friend and adviser to King Mohammed VI and whose dislike of the Islamists is well known.

When Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in 1999, he inherited from his father, Hassan II, a system that generates and exploits unruly party politics to fragment and discredit the political class, helping the king to cement his monopoly over power.<sup>3</sup> Frequent infighting within Moroccan parties, as well as their disorganization, aided this strategy.<sup>4</sup> King Mohammed VI went on to cement the tradition of a political party deriving its power more from its proximity to the palace than the appeal of its ideology or program. Over time, the distinction between opposition and loyalist parties became harder to discern, as all parties, by choice or necessity, inched closer to the monarchy to ensure their political survival.<sup>5</sup> In that way, they increasingly lost their connection to voters, adding to Moroccans' disillusionment with their political elite. This was reflected by citizens' general apathy toward the political process, low voter turnout in elections, and mistrust of politicians, especially among youth.<sup>6</sup>

The so-called Government of Change (*Gouvernement d'Alternance*) in the late 1990s was illustrative of the challenges faced by Moroccan political parties. After the November 1997 elections, the palace invited leftists in the opposition, including the USFP, to form a government as part of a supposed reform plan. In March 1998, the USFP formed a coalition with six other parties, and though this government was severely checked by the palace, it raised expectations for reform. Ultimately, however, reform efforts were stymied by the palace's interventions and internal and intra-party discord, which proved insurmountable.<sup>7</sup>

Much like the PJD led-government, the USFP-led government in 1998 came into office following constitutional changes that granted expanded powers to the government and parliament; however, it struggled to determine a role for itself in the face of a powerful monarchy. While the USFP had an official role in government, its inability to tackle important social welfare projects discredited the party.<sup>8</sup> The USFP-led government had to contend with the presence of palace-aligned ministers who arguably stymied its work—most notably, at the start, the all-powerful minister of interior and Hassan II's right hand, Driss Basri. Once the new king came to the throne, items the government either prioritized or sought to tackle—such as human rights issues, women's empowerment, and other social and economic initiatives—were overtaken by the king. The government appeared completely overshadowed and grew useless in the eyes of Moroccans.<sup>9</sup> By appearing to give such parties a stake in the system while still tightly controlling them, the monarchy ensured that they would fail in the eyes of the public, dispelling any notion that they might become effective partners or alternatives to the monarchy.

As public perceptions of political parties sank, the palace was once again highlighted as the actor most able to address popular concerns. Especially early in his reign, King Mohammed VI fostered a reputation for being compassionate and kind, which created a sense that a new era of palace-driven openness and prosperity was coming. This further sidelined the political parties. The king acknowledged past human rights violations and sought to address the country's dire poverty and development issues. Most significant among these efforts were the 2004 reforms of the *Moudawana* (family status code), which legislated significant improvements in women's rights. Also in 2004, the king established the Equity and Reconciliation Commission to address past human rights abuses and, in 2005, launched a number of economic

and social development programs, including the National Initiative for Human Development.<sup>10</sup> This was in addition to personal charity initiatives, such as the Mohammed V Foundation for Solidarity that he established in 1999.<sup>11</sup>

Domestically, the king's popularity was high. A poll conducted in 2009 found that 91 percent of Moroccans judged his ten-year reign to be positive.<sup>12</sup> The international community was particularly impressed by his efforts; while viewed through a comparative lens, they rightly stood out against the oppressive efforts of his father.<sup>13</sup> At home, the king's reforms and initiatives, while welcomed by the population, also reinforced traditional political dynamics in the country. The king was the effective governing authority, while political parties were ineffective and even counterproductive when it came to Morocco's progress. Though the population was comforted in the knowledge that the most repressive of Hassan II's years were over, the enthusiasm over Mohammed IV's reign and what it could achieve gradually subsided; it became clear that attempts at reforms were largely symbolic and fell short of providing the needed economic, political, and social change.

In this context, the popular protests of 2011 resonated in Morocco. In early 2011, King Mohammed VI sought to get ahead of the antigovernment narratives sweeping the region. By March 2011, protests had effectively brought down the entrenched regimes of president Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and plunged Libya into civil war. Morocco's protests, labeled the February 20 Movement, brought together Moroccans across the ideological, religious, social, and political spectrums. The protests gathered momentum across Moroccan towns, with protesters calling for solutions to the country's urgent economic and social issues but particularly the country's persistent political issues: lack of accountability, corruption, nepotism, and inefficiency of government institutions, among others.

In response, on March 9, 2011, only two and a half weeks into Morocco's protest movement, the king made a televised speech promising constitutional changes.<sup>14</sup> The February 20 Movement gradually faded, largely because the king's response took the wind out of its sails and the population was appeased by his response and its promise. The movement also lacked a strong organizational structure that could hold it together, and, eventually, the variety of views and perspectives that gave it its initial strength contributed to its weakness. There are also allegations that it was infiltrated by government loyalists who sought to weaken it from within. But the movement's main contribution was that it helped bring on the constitutional revision, which, in turn, provided a greater role for government institutions. The movement showed the extent to which citizens were willing to engage when they perceive change to be possible—and potentially help bring about that change.

During the referendum of July 1, 2011, the new constitution passed with a 98 percent majority. About 73 percent of registered voters participated, greatly surpassing the turnout in most previous elections and underlining the popular expectation for change.<sup>15</sup> Although the constitutional changes fell short of what many hoped to see, they did expand mandates for the prime minister, the government, and the parliament to allow them a greater role in the legislative and governing processes while preserving the king's role.<sup>16</sup>

In principle, the constitutional changes would have allowed parties some opportunities for greater engagement. However, all but the Islamists found themselves unable to capitalize on that potential.<sup>17</sup> As in other Arab countries that faced uprisings in 2011, Islamists, notably the PJD, were better positioned than the

traditional political forces to benefit from the new political environment. While they were understood to be a part of the same political establishment that Moroccans were unhappy with, the PJD maintained a degree of comparative credibility that translated into more votes in the polls. Although the party had distanced itself from the February 20 Movement protests, the political openings allowed it to take advantage of its reputation as a relatively less corrupt political actor. Its clear platform, more democratic internal organization, strong grassroots connections, and reputation for relative independence appealed to the populace.<sup>18</sup> Also, its limited government experience was an advantage in this case, given the public's skepticism about traditional political forces. The party, which has been participating in elections since 1997 when it won eight seats, has gradually increased its shares of parliamentary seats but remained in the opposition until 2011.<sup>19</sup>

Prior to 2011, the PJD was not seen as having accomplished much as part of the political process, but the party's parliamentarians were more competent than their peers and not entirely driven by self-interest.<sup>20</sup> At that time, the PJD was focused on enhancing its governance credentials while strengthening its local presence and grassroots outreach. It is active on campuses and schools through civil society—namely the Movement of Unity and Reform (MUR), a large charity and educational (including preaching, or *da'wa*) institution with a presence across the kingdom—and further supported by an external network of loosely affiliated schools, health centers, and other professional organizations. The MUR is often considered the religious arm of the PJD and an ideological influencer. The two entities' histories are intertwined and they still draw from the same pool of talent: members of the PJD leadership. Ministers or former ministers have a role in the MUR, and they also maintain strong communication and organization channels. Although the MUR members and the PJD members deny any interference in the party's affairs and the two entities insist on boundaries, the links between them remain strong and have been characterized as “strategic cooperation.”<sup>21</sup>

The PJD's links to the MUR, with its religious proselytizing, only add to debate about the broader question of the exact nature of the religious versus political character of the party. As it evolved and its political participation increased, the PJD became increasingly less reflective of the traditional framework of Islamist parties. This has been especially true since it came to power in 2011. With respect to the role of religion and how it defined the PJD's political engagement, a decade earlier the 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca and the ensuing scrutiny of political Islam drove the party to emphasize its similarities with other political parties in Morocco. And as its engagement in national politics grew, it had to temper and play down its religious character. In practice, and certainly during its time in government, the PJD has largely operated as any secular party. The socially conservative elements of its agenda had already been toned down significantly. Benkirane, previously seen as a hard-line figure, realized that pursuing a religious—meaning a socially conservative—agenda would further pigeonhole the PJD and prevent it from gaining wide support. In 2011, as prime minister-designate, Benkirane declared that once he headed a government, “I will never be interested in the private life of people. Allah created mankind free. I will never ask if a woman is wearing a short skirt or a long skirt.”<sup>22</sup> From then on, there was little in the party's tone and focus that distinguished it from nonreligious parties.

Like other Islamist movements across the region, the PJD's connection to the population has been an important character and asset. Politically, the party's gradual and low-profile approaches to participation, together with its clear support for the monarchy's political and religious role, reassured the king that the

party did not constitute a threat to the political order.<sup>23</sup> This deference to the monarchy—a requirement to remain in the political game—and gradual participation in elections amounted to a more pragmatic agenda that mostly stayed away from divisive religious or dogmatic issues, especially after 2003. The combination of the PJD’s experience and the post-2011 mood in Morocco created an ideal situation for the party. Not too close to the palace to be seen as co-opted but close enough to be able to participate in politics, the party signaled it would focus on serving the Moroccan people. This message resonated in the November 2011 parliamentary elections, when the PJD came in first with 107 seats out of 395 in the lower house, followed by the Istiqlal Party with 60 seats.<sup>24</sup> On November 29, in line with the new constitution, the king asked Abdelilah Benkirane, the PJD’s leader, to form a government. About a month later, Benkirane formed a coalition that included Istiqlal, the MP, and the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS).<sup>25</sup>

## THE PJD IN POWER BETWEEN 2011 AND 2016

The PJD was in new territory. Not only was it leading a ruling coalition and working with former political opponents but, in a broader sense, it was implementing a new constitution, which involved working closely with the palace.<sup>26</sup> To what extent, then, was the PJD free to introduce constitutional reforms and thereby potentially alter the basis of Moroccan politics? Perhaps inevitably, the answer was equivocal.

The PJD’s first government evolved over three distinct phases. Between January 2012 and July 2013, the party was still learning to navigate a new political system in which it had no ruling experience. This somewhat unsuccessful phase ended when the Istiqlal Party—which had increasingly become more loyal to the palace—withdrawn from the government, obliging the PJD to form a new coalition. This brought on a second phase in which the party began implementing its agenda with more ease. In the third phase, starting in the fall of 2015, the party focused on two important electoral cycles: the 2015 local and regional elections and the 2016 national election.

Once in power, the PJD had an opportunity to secure a more robust role for the parliament and the government. The party communicated a certain hope that it could navigate the palace’s red lines, despite the reported tensions between the new Islamist-led government and the palace.<sup>27</sup> Overall, the media coverage portrayed the PJD as slowly coming to grips with the intricacies and limitations of the country’s governance model.<sup>28</sup>

### Learning to Coexist (2012–2013)

Initially, the PJD had to focus on establishing its place within the new power structure (especially vis-à-vis the palace) and determining where the opportunities and limitations lie. So in that sense, the composition of its first government, which the king approved on January 3, 2012, was important to the PJD. The party sought to gain as much influence as it could and to set a precedent for how a leading party could balance its interests against those of the palace. Not surprisingly, in turn, the palace aimed to ensure that it did not cede any more power than it needed to under the new constitutional amendments.

During this period, the PJD was careful to demonstrate its commitment to change while it avoided alarming the monarchy.<sup>29</sup> It was also able to gain control over key ministerial posts despite pushback

from the palace. These included the Ministry of Justice under Mustapha Ramid and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation under Saadeddine Othmani.<sup>30</sup> The palace maintained some oversight through its advisers, who are collectively seen as a shadow government that wields significant power. They included the former foreign minister Taieb Fassi Fihri and the king's close friend and notable adversary of the PJD, Fouad Ali El Himma.<sup>31</sup>

Not surprisingly, the PJD soon faced tensions with the monarchy and its advisers over the approach and scope of various reforms related to, for example, a new press code, judicial independence, subsidies, and anticorruption. This showed the public that, in contrast to other party leaders, Benkirane had the ability and willingness to push back against the palace. The prime minister never overtly challenged the king, but neither did he shy away from pointing out the restrictions the palace placed on the government's ability to act in accordance with the constitution.

The occasional disharmony helped Benkirane insulate himself from popular discontent should he and the PJD face criticism for particular failures.<sup>32</sup> It also emphasized the widely known but rarely highlighted extent of the palace's control over politics in Morocco. Altogether, this allowed Benkirane to claim that he was fighting the status quo to better serve Moroccan citizens. He managed to transform the tension between the PJD-led government and the palace into a political gain, without jeopardizing his standing or his party's chances of staying in power. This dual use of the monarchy as both an obstacle and a source of validation was no contradiction but rather illustrated the prime minister's ability to play within the confines of the political system.

Throughout this first year, and to a lesser extent the rest of the PJD's mandate, tensions over the scope of the government's and the prime minister's mandate and power continued with the monarchy. For instance, in 2013, PJD parliamentarians fought to determine the details of the investigative committees that would serve as watchdogs over the government per the constitution;<sup>33</sup> the parliament was supposed to draft the law regulating the committees' work, but the legislature's secretariat-general—a body that reports to the palace—ultimately took control and drafted it.<sup>34</sup> This frustrated the PJD bloc in the parliament and highlighted the palace's effort to minimize the impact of constitutional reforms and safeguard its monopoly over power.<sup>35</sup>

Earlier, in September 2012, Abdelali Hamieddine, a prominent and outspoken young member of the PJD, wrote an op-ed to emphasize the importance of the new constitution and rule of law. He criticized a royal order that had called for an investigation of and disciplinary action against customs officials accused of misconduct.<sup>36</sup> Hamieddine argued that the order was unconstitutional because it hijacked the administrative prerogatives of the government and the prime minister. This bold argument went to the heart of the debate over the palace's political role and how it fit in within the new political system. It also dovetailed with the PJD's emerging strategy of explaining the importance of this debate to the public. This was partly to shield the party from potential criticism—on the grounds that it was not fully accountable for any shortcomings given its limited room for action. However, it also worked to demystify the rules of political engagement in Moroccan politics and identify the red lines drawn by the palace.

In response to increased popular interest in domestic politics and in light of the new context—a new constitutional framework and, for the first time, a leading Islamist party—the media reported extensively

on political developments, including the details of the government formation negotiations, and even brought a sense of what was happening behind the scenes to the public. Benkirane took advantage of the increased curiosity spurred by the media coverage to explain the tension between the palace and the party and to increasingly draw attention to the palace's involvement. Its role, while always understood, had not been previously highlighted in such a way.

Also novel was Benkirane's propensity to speak publicly about tensions with the palace in the early days. His approach, which might have seemed potentially dangerous as it could draw the ire of the palace, was a point of pride for Benkirane himself. He often remarked that he would always be candid with the people, including about the challenges he faced. However, whenever he was critical of the palace, he often emphasized his devotion to the monarch and affirmed that he served at his pleasure. He even at times accused the press and other politicians of seeking to muddy the waters between him and the palace.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, other PJD members acknowledged that building a new political culture requires a stronger relationship with the monarchy as well as the opposition.<sup>38</sup>

In maintaining a careful balance with the palace, the PJD also had to navigate significant tensions with notable political parties such as the USFP, the PAM, and its own coalition partner, Istiqlal. Benkirane was vehement when facing the opposition's attacks, particularly those of the PAM.<sup>39</sup> His speeches and parliamentary question-and-answer sessions were caustic and spared no one. The prime minister lamented the obstructionism preventing his government from developing a legal framework for constitutional reforms and moving forward with an ambitious program. Benkirane mainly blamed Istiqlal's leader, Hamid Chabat, who had become a virulent critic of Benkirane and the Islamists and led some to refer to him as the "real opposition."<sup>40</sup> By early 2013, the animosity between Benkirane and Chabat had grown, taking on a personal quality.<sup>41</sup> Officially, Istiqlal's spokesman, Adil Benhamza, said his party was disenchanted with Benkirane's partisanship and specifically highlighted its disagreement with the PJD's subsidy reform plans, which the Istiqlal Party felt would have had an outsized impact on the poor.<sup>42</sup> Chabat also claimed that the PJD was overshadowing his party and that the government's program no longer represented the agreed-upon vision.

Two events in 2013 altered the political context in Morocco: the July coup that removed Egypt's president Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood from power and the decision of Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda Party to withdraw from government to facilitate national dialogue and reconciliation. Both developments created an opening for the PJD's adversaries, who assumed that the turning tide against Islamists elsewhere would lead to a shift in public perception against the PJD. Along with the palace, Chabat and other political actors saw an opportunity to weaken the PJD or even bring down its government. It was also rumored that Morocco's Gulf allies and donors, particularly the United Arab Emirates, had been displeased to see the Islamist party in power and may have indicated that it should be kept in check.<sup>43</sup> Although the PJD was founded on a moderate Islamist platform that emphasized participation in the political process and shunned violence, its Islamist character seemed too convenient a target.

Beyond his own opposition to the PJD, Chabat was a willing instrument through which the palace could weaken the PJD-led government.<sup>44</sup> In a blow to the PJD, the Istiqlal Party's ministers announced in May 2013 that they would resign from the government. The party then officially withdrew from the coalition on July 8, 2013, halting implementation of the PJD's program.<sup>45</sup> To minimize damage to himself and the party, Benkirane played up his confidence in the palace's protection. With Islamists under

pressure across the region and the lack of political support for the PJD among other parties, if the palace had wanted to drive the PJD out of office, this would have been a good moment to do so. However, Benkirane was still a pragmatic politician who emphasized his submission to the palace; his party was still popular; and, at that moment, the PJD was viewed as a victim of the opposition's maneuvering and gained more sympathy as a consequence. So the palace demurred.

The palace likely calculated that a weakened PJD in government was preferable to an empowered and aggrieved one in opposition—and to the political disruption and potential popular anger that a collapse in government might cause. In the end, the palace helped facilitate Benkirane's efforts to form a new coalition. Nonetheless, this episode demonstrated that the PJD's hold on power was tenuous and needed the palace's backing. Yet, to a certain extent, it also showed that the PJD's subtle balancing strategy with regard to the palace and its electorate was a source of resilience.

Benkirane was both humbled and emboldened by the experience—humbled in his approach to the palace and emboldened in his dealing with the opposition. Subsequently, party members underlined the need to improve their relationship with the palace; for example, one party member spoke about “securing a democratic transition [and] making sure big structural reforms [that] take place can only happen in cooperation with the palace.”<sup>46</sup> In terms of his relationship with other political parties, however, Benkirane remained combative and played up his image as a disrupter of the status quo. In one of his often-entertaining parliamentary question-and-answer sessions, Benkirane stressed that “we do not have a crisis of government now, we have a crisis of opposition.”<sup>47</sup>

Istiqlal's departure and the drawn-out process of forming another coalition tested the PJD, but the party and Benkirane quickly recovered and the latter emerged as a skilled politician on the national stage. Even his more combative performances as prime minister garnered goodwill in various political circles that quietly supported his approach.<sup>48</sup> Certainly, Benkirane had and still has many critics and detractors, but by the fall of 2013, having recovered from the collapse of his first coalition, his position as prime minister, at least with the palace, was improving and his new government stood ready to push forward programs that had come to a halt or had yet to start.

### **Delivering on Its Promises (2013–2016)**

With the Istiqlal Party out, the RNI joined the government coalition, allowing program implementation to begin in earnest. In this second phase of the PJD's experience, the party still grappled with pushback from the opposition and the palace, but it was able to focus more on governing and delivering on its electoral promises.

During its campaign in 2011, the PJD promised ambitious reforms and solutions to address the broad problems facing Morocco's public administration. The party emphasized cutting unemployment and poverty rates, “recovering the macroeconomic indicators,” restoring the trust of citizens in their administration, and improving service delivery.<sup>49</sup>

Assessing what the party did and did not accomplish helps to shed light on its ability to convince voters that it could expand the roles of government and the parliament despite the heavy hand of the palace.

Examining the fate of the PJD's reform efforts also shows the extent to which the monarchy remained entrenched bureaucratically and how, at times, the party was unable or unwilling to exert enough political will to actualize the reforms. Three particular areas demonstrate the party's mixed record: anticorruption, judicial independence, and structural economic reforms.

### *Fighting Corruption*

The PJD's most resonant campaign promise was fighting corruption. The use of politics and power for financial gain and the divide between a rich elite and the rest of the country were at the very heart of the 2011 protests. Some of the protesters' most powerful slogans were directed against those who had used their proximity to the palace to amass wealth, as well as against the palace's well-known control over significant portions of the economy. With the exception of a minor improvement in 2014, Morocco's rankings in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index have been consistently low since 2012. In 2016, Morocco ranked 90 out of 176. Even without the reminder of these international rankings, Moroccans are all too aware of the prevalence and cost of corruption.

Not surprisingly, then, given the PJD's reputation for internal discipline and transparency, its promises to fight corruption galvanized voters and set high expectations for change. However, their hopes were soon dashed, when the PJD essentially gave up on its anticorruption drive. Whether because of a lack of political will or the strength of vested interests, this became one of the party's biggest failures in the eyes of voters.

In a televised debate at the end of 2014, Minister of Justice Mustapha Ramid discussed his government's plans to address corruption.<sup>50</sup> He highlighted fifteen projects as examples of its efforts so far, as well as laws to improve financial oversight and disclosures and administrative, investigative, and prosecutorial practices. Other early efforts were largely symbolic measures, such as awareness-raising campaigns that included the distribution of anticorruption children's books in schools and the setting up of a toll-free number to report abuse.<sup>51</sup>

At the institutional level and per the new constitution of 2011, the government announced, in 2014, plans to reform the Central Body for the Prevention of Corruption, renaming it the National Body for Integrity, Prevention, and the Fight Against Corruption (INPPLC). The government gave it a new mandate that strengthened its independence—for example, by removing it from the oversight of the government—and gave it a more active role in investigating instances of corruption before the start of the judicial process.<sup>52</sup> The body is composed of twelve members other than the president; four are appointed by royal decree, two by the speaker of parliament, two by the president of the house of councilors, and four by decree of the prime minister.<sup>53</sup> Civil society activists criticized the body for falling short of what the constitution allows in terms of mandate; they especially called into question whether the body would be empowered to initiate investigations and provide feedback on relevant legislation. They also lamented the lack of civil society representation in the new body, unlike the previous one, which was composed of one-third civil society representatives.<sup>54</sup> Prior to its passage, the law to establish the INPPLC proved divisive in the parliament—even between majority and government—some actors wanted to grant the body self-referral to ensure the anonymity of plaintiffs and to allow it to create branches across the country.<sup>55</sup> Once passed, the law did not grant plaintiffs anonymity nor did it allow the body to create branches or independently pursue investigations. Civil society blasted it as a body to “elaborate studies and play a

consultative role,” highlighting that its members are all to be appointed by government or the palace and that it has even less independence, financial or otherwise, than the entity it is replacing.<sup>56</sup> This was seen a significant backpedaling on the government’s part as anticorruption efforts go.<sup>57</sup> The law was adopted in June 2015, but as of November 2017, the body’s president and members have yet to be named.<sup>58</sup>

In May 2016, the government also launched the National Anticorruption Strategy. The comprehensive plan included 239 detailed projects within ten different categories to be completed by 2025. Each category will be coordinated by a particular ministry, with one under the oversight of the General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises (CGEM,) the country’s largest private sector representative.<sup>59</sup> However, delays have also plagued the National Anticorruption Strategy; the committee to implement it, the National Anticorruption Committee (CNAC), was not created until June 2017 after Othmani came into office.<sup>60</sup> According to the cabinet’s decree, CNAC’s members were to be ministers and the committee would have a budget of 1.8 billion Moroccan dirhams (about \$190 million). The committee’s permanent secretariat would meet four times a year to assess implementation of the strategy.<sup>61</sup> After a critical open letter from Transparency Maroc,<sup>62</sup> the local branch of Transparency International, the government agreed to allocate two committee seats for nongovernmental organizations.<sup>63</sup> The decree was made law in October 2017.<sup>64</sup>

The government planned, drafted, or passed a number of laws to improve financial disclosure and oversight, increase access to information, and ensure protection for whistleblowers.<sup>65</sup> But the perception—and reality—remained that these laws made no discernable difference in the lives of people. Even as his government was preparing its comprehensive anticorruption strategy, Benkirane recognized the futility of the fight. He famously said on January 13, 2015, during a parliamentary session: “I don’t fight corruption, corruption fights me”<sup>66</sup>—a reference to the entrenched interests that were impeding his government’s policies.<sup>67</sup> Beyond showing effort, his government’s attempts to improve transparency achieved little. In one notable attempt from 2012, the Ministry of Transportation published a list of beneficiaries of transportation agreements—similar to and including taxi medallions. Though it is not clear how these agreements are granted or procured, the list did include some well-known political and cultural figures and it is presumed that some were received as favors.<sup>68</sup> The move generated intense debate, came at a relatively low political cost to the party, and demonstrated to the public that the government had the capacity to be more transparent. However, the overall campaign was not one the PJD could win against the palace, linked economic interests, and establishment political actors. The sort of sweeping change the party had promised as part of their election program was not to be.

### *Judicial Reforms*

Morocco’s judicial system has long been at the nexus of corruption and inefficiency, leaving citizens frustrated and distrustful.<sup>69</sup> In the 2016 Transparency International survey of nine countries in the Middle East and North Africa, 49 percent of Moroccans reported paying bribes in courts, with higher percentages coming from only Egypt and Yemen.<sup>70</sup> For years, there have been calls for judicial reforms, even from within the judiciary itself, and Benkirane’s government also identified it as a priority.<sup>71</sup> Here, too, the PJD experienced both opportunities and limitations. The new constitution mandated changes that would give the judiciary increased independence and make it more efficient—while still maintaining the king’s control over it. Yet the opportunity proved difficult to seize, and the stalled reform process ultimately produced few tangible changes.

The constitutional reforms of 2011 included replacing the Higher Council of the Judiciary with the Higher Council of Judicial Power and granting it an expanded mandate and greater financial independence. The new council—formed in April 2017 after a lengthy process—still has the king as its president, but its vice president is the president of the Court of Cassation rather than the minister of justice—a career judicial official rather than a political appointee. The council, which had previously served mostly to advise the Ministry of Justice on judges’ careers and conduct, is still not fully independent, but the proportion of judges nominated by other judges to serve is now higher compared to those appointed by the executive.<sup>72</sup>

More significantly, the constitution also mandated the creation of a constitutional court. Previously, the Constitutional Council reviewed draft laws and regulations before they were approved to determine their constitutionality and validate elections and referendum results. The Constitutional Court, inaugurated in April 2017—with half of its twelve members appointed by the king—is now empowered to decide on the constitutionality of laws even after they have been promulgated.<sup>73</sup> While these and other changes, including the establishment of a new statute for judges, are mandated in the constitution, the government and the parliament has to pass specific laws, known as organic laws, to define their details.

Minister of Justice Mustapha Ramid, a lawyer by training and a former president of the Karama Forum for Human Rights, had a reputation for integrity, piety, and fairness.<sup>74</sup> Part of Ramid’s task was to introduce greater judicial independence as the constitution had mandated. In May 2012, the king launched the forty-member Higher Commission for Dialogue on Judicial Reform at the royal palace to determine the scope of the ministry’s reforms.<sup>75</sup> The symbolism of the king doing this at the palace highlighted the difficulty the PJD-led government faced in owning the judicial reform process. As news reports at the time pointed out, the king had called for judicial reforms in 2009, prior to the new constitution and the PJD’s appointment to lead the government.<sup>76</sup> While the PJD was responsible for initiating and implementing the reforms, it consistently had to account for the often unclear—yet overarching—role played by the palace.

After roughly a year of consultations, in September 2013, Ramid unveiled a judicial reform charter. The charter included 353 detailed draft recommendations, such as passing specific laws or adjusting budgets.<sup>77</sup> For example, the charter specified an annual budget for the Higher Council of Judicial Power and designated a building in which to carry out its meetings. Previously, it had neither. The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) lauded the efforts to grant the Higher Council of Judicial Power institutional, administrative, and financial independence and described the selection process for members as “fair, transparent and consistent with the provisions of the law.”<sup>78</sup>

By November 2016, Ramid asserted that 78 percent of the objectives outlined in the charter had been fulfilled.<sup>79</sup> And ahead of the October 2016 parliamentary elections, the PJD’s communications team released a campaign video that explained what the government had done in its nearly five years in power. Ramid summarized the main judicial reforms, particularly those directly affecting the population. He explained that judges had been given a raise to improve their pay so that they would be less susceptible to bribery, and any judges who could not explain a significant and sudden increase in their wealth would face disciplinary action. Ramid also emphasized that courtrooms had been modernized and trial waits had decreased. He also indicated that there had been no incidents of forced disappearances since

January 2012, that the use of torture was decreasing, and that all claims of torture were investigated to enforce accountability. Likewise, the ministry had begun to review all cases of alleged corruption and had transferred a comparatively larger number of corruption cases to the courts.<sup>80</sup>

However, not everyone agreed with the minister's upbeat assessment. The Association of Judicial Journalists, a local Moroccan group, highlighted many of the shortcomings of the reform project—including delays in passing the reform laws, many of which did not guarantee greater judicial independence and were not always fully implemented. For example, the draft law to establish the Higher Council of Judicial Power was supposed to be passed in 2014, but the parliament did not pass it until 2016,<sup>81</sup> and the council did not begin work until the king appointed its members in April 2017.<sup>82</sup> As of October 7, 2017, the council will also oversee the public prosecutor's office, which had previously been under the oversight of the Ministry of Justice, in a move meant to limit political influence in public prosecution.<sup>83</sup> The association also argued that increasing judges' pay was not a sure way to prevent bribery. There was still little accountability and transparency within the system—for example, with regard to the disciplinary process for judges.<sup>84</sup> The ICJ echoed these concerns, noting that “the disciplinary system was not fully in line with international standards, in particular because it provided for some disciplinary offences that undermine the right of judges to freedom of expression, association and assembly.”<sup>85</sup> Regarding the Constitutional Court, the ICJ observed that the member selection process, done through the parliament, was “far from ideal, or merit based,” noting that it was driven by political interests and was a “missed opportunity to break up with past practices and to ensure that the election of the court members is based on transparent, merit-based, and gender-represented procedures.”<sup>86</sup>

So while on paper the reforms have sought to grant the judiciary greater independence, in practice, the judiciary remains linked to entrenched political interests—be that of particular groups who oppose new regulations or other actors reluctant to relinquish control of the judiciary, particularly the palace. The grave issue of judicial corruption remains as prevalent as ever. Although the ICJ has lauded the presence of “enough safeguards in the current system” to promote accountability and combat corruption, the political will to implement them and properly combat corruption is not present.<sup>87</sup>

Although international observers have deemed many of these reform efforts positive, it is not clear whether they will significantly improve the judicial system; in many cases, their implementation has fallen short. And it is also not clear whether the PJD will benefit politically from the long-term impact of these reforms. Benkirane's comment about the barriers of corruption and vested interests also applies to judiciary reforms. And in this case, too, the PJD managed to claim credit for the process of passing these reforms, even if in outcome they amounted to little.

### *Structural Economic Reforms*

Among the economic priorities the PJD vowed to tackle were Morocco's public finances and inflated budget, which the country was under pressure to address from international lenders, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank.<sup>88</sup>

According to World Bank figures, by 2012, the cost of subsidies had reached 6.6 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and had contributed to driving public debt up by 12 percentage points

from 2008 to 2012, reaching 60 percent of GDP.<sup>89</sup> However, the aftermath of the 2011 protests complicated subsidy reform plans. Reforming subsidies often has negative repercussions, which risk undermining public support and causing social unrest. But the PJD mitigated this risk by taking a gradual approach and first targeting energy subsidies, which constituted the bulk of the subsidy spending program known as the Compensation Fund. Together with an effective communications strategy and a bit of luck (such as a drop in global oil prices), this approach ensured the government's success—for which it received international praise.<sup>90</sup>

As early as June 2012, the government began to gradually increase fuel prices.<sup>91</sup> In 2013, it increased the price of gasoline and diesel at different percentages, relying on a “partial indexation mechanism.” In January 2014, gasoline and industrial fuel subsidies were lifted,<sup>92</sup> and by early 2015, subsidies on all remaining fuels had been removed. The government helped mitigate the rise in fuel costs by monetarily supporting urban transport, especially taxis.<sup>93</sup>

The PJD and Benkirane worked tirelessly to prepare the population for the difficult but necessary set of measures.<sup>94</sup> The government—including Benkirane, Minister of Economy and Finance Mohamed Bousaid, Minister of General Affairs and Governance Mohammed El Ouafa, and Director of the Compensation Fund Salima Bennani—effectively communicated the details and process of the reforms. They also stressed that they were economically necessary and that the fuel subsidies targeted primarily benefited companies (only 15 percent of those subsidies were helping individuals).<sup>95</sup>

The party gained credit for initiating the reform process without major disruptions or unrest, but the more politically sensitive portion of the reforms—lifting subsidies on cooking gas, flour, and sugar—has yet to begin. The cutting of butane gas subsidies was supposed to occur in 2016, but the government delayed it until 2017 to avoid a backlash ahead of the parliamentary elections, and it has since been postponed again.<sup>96</sup> Even so, according to local newspaper reports, spending under the Compensation Fund decreased from 40 billion dirhams (\$4.2 billion) in 2013 to 25 billion dirhams (\$2.6 billion) in 2014 and was forecasted to lower further to 10 billion dirhams (\$1.1 billion) in 2015.<sup>97</sup>

Among party officials, there was an undeniable sense of pride at having tackled even just a portion of the subsidy reforms and of ownership for having improved macroeconomic indicators, at least for the time being. According to the Ministry of Communications, the PJD-led government effectively reduced the budget deficit from 7.2 percent of GDP in 2012 to 3.5 percent in 2016.<sup>98</sup> Further, the government's reforms helped to achieve a growth rate of 3.7 percent between 2012 and 2015.<sup>99</sup> The IMF projects a higher growth rate of 4.5 percent in 2017 and a lower budget deficit of 3.5 percent of GDP, as reforms continue to be implemented.<sup>100</sup> Overall, the IMF has lauded these structural reforms. In July 2016, the institution approved another \$3.47 billion for Morocco under the Precautionary and Liquidity Line, following two previous two-year agreements.<sup>101</sup> The IMF cited the subsidy and banking reforms in justifying its decision, as well as the expansion of programs supporting the poorer segments of society.<sup>102</sup>

Other efforts to stabilize macroeconomic indicators came toward the end of the PJD's first term. Following contentious negotiations with unions and syndicates, and despite these organizations' opposition, the parliament passed a pension reform bill in summer 2016.<sup>103</sup> The bill, focused on improving public finances, increased the retirement age from sixty to sixty-three (to be raised gradually) and increased

worker and employer contributions to the fund.<sup>104</sup> Other important structural reforms remain unimplemented. The World Bank and IMF have long called on Morocco to liberalize its currency. However, because this move could devalue the dirham and potentially increase inflation, the government fears that it could generate instability.<sup>105</sup> Thus, the reform has once again been put off.

The palace was likely content to have a political party own the minutia-driven structural reform process, given a potential for unrest—which is in keeping with its approach of publically distancing itself from the governance process while keeping a close eye on how it is unfolding. Although potentially more painful reforms are yet to come, party leaders have downplayed their risks. The party sees its ability to manage these sensitive economic reforms as evidence of its capacity to govern. Benkirane, in particular, was credited with effectively implementing a socially risky program. This both bolstered the PJD's governance credentials and proved its usefulness to the palace.

During the reelection campaign, the party highlighted these reform successes as well as the expansion of medical coverage for the poor and the establishment of a fund to support widows and single mothers. The PJD saw its experience in government as a success. This perception became especially clear when contrasted with the subsequent but weaker PJD-led government's image as struggling.<sup>106</sup> Although the party's performance was mixed and, more importantly, not enough to significantly change people's lives, the party leaders' belief in the effectiveness of their performance in government—and, to some degree, their own surprise at what they viewed as tremendous accomplishments—was at the heart of their reelection message.

### Securing an Electoral Win (2015–2016)

Ahead of the two electoral cycles, the party largely focused on ensuring that its achievements would translate into electoral success. The PJD wanted to prove that a political party's performance (in other words, its record in tangible governance) could be a determinant of its success and popularity. In effect, the party wanted to contrast itself against others that have grown popular purely through their links to the palace (notably the PAM and other loyalist parties before it). Evidenced by the PJD's successes in local and regional elections in 2015 and again in parliamentary elections in 2016, the party was able to convince the population that this approach was sound. The PJD demonstrated an ability to expand and maintain connections to its base, setting it apart from other Moroccan parties. It also revealed its effectiveness in selecting and preparing ideal candidates for each seat—rather than relying solely on candidates with patronage links in certain areas.

The party's communications strategy especially contributed to its electoral gains by packaging the narrative of success in a way that was clear and easy to deliver. An important factor is that, early on, PJD leaders invested in strengthening the party's ties to the broader public and gave it additional attention after 2011.<sup>107</sup> Regardless of whether the PJD's reforms have borne significant improvements for the population or achieved the sort of fundamental change that people seek, the party communicated a sense of possibility.<sup>108</sup> Benkirane and other party officials are accessible to the press. The PJD itself has an effective presence on the internet, including through social media, specifically Facebook. This “permanent campaigning” approach has gone a long way toward generating enthusiastic public support.<sup>109</sup> And through its communications, which often highlight the challenges the party faces, the PJD conveys a strong sense of accomplishment, using language that is accessible even to those who are not politically minded.<sup>110</sup>

A few months ahead of local and regional elections, Abdelhak El Arabi, a member of the party's secretariat general and head of its elections commission, explained in an interview with local media outlets that the PJD did not regard preparing for the elections as a "seasonal" endeavor, thereby expressing a similar idea to the concept of permanent campaigning presented by other party officials. But for these elections specifically, the party had crafted the slogan "let the reforms continue."<sup>111</sup>

By the time local elections drew near in 2015, the party could sum up its accomplishments fairly effectively. The prime minister galvanized voters through campaign stops, especially in cities, focusing on what his government had achieved and its future intended policies.<sup>112</sup> A recurring theme was the PJD's commitment to completing the reforms it initiated. Party members armed their election campaigns with some tangible accomplishments and Benkirane's status as a popular "political phenomenon." The party had banked on a positive election cycle, at the local and regional levels and also at the national level, but the extent of their win stunned them.

The PJD scored an important electoral victory when, for the first time, on September 4, 2015, Moroccans directly elected both regional and local council representatives. In the local elections, the PJD was able to take 5,018 seats out of 31,482, coming in third behind the PAM (6,662) and the Istiqlal Party (5,083).<sup>113</sup> In the regional elections, the PJD came in first, winning 173 regional council seats out of 678.<sup>114</sup> This was an important achievement for the party because its significantly increased presence at the local and regional levels allowed it to compete with palace-aligned parties that had hitherto dominated these councils. Prior to the 2011 constitutional referendum, only local council members were elected by popular vote while members of regional councils were elected by the incoming local councilors. The previous round of local elections in 2009 was dominated by the PAM, which had only been formed a year earlier.<sup>115</sup> The PAM, the PJD's fiercest critic and challenger, has benefited from its closeness to the palace and risen quickly through the ranks ever since.<sup>116</sup> Back in 2009, the PJD came in sixth, with about 1,513 local council seats out of 27,795.<sup>117</sup>

The consensus after the 2015 elections was that the party's win in major urban centers reflected its expanded appeal to areas previously dominated by older parties such as Istiqlal, the USFP, the RNI, and the Popular Movement.<sup>118</sup> The PJD's ability to gain ground where it previously had not—including in some rural areas where historically people voted overwhelmingly for pro-palace parties strongly connected to local communities through local notables—gained attention despite that PAM came in first.<sup>119</sup> The rivalry between the two parties only grew after these elections and in the lead up to the parliamentary elections the following year.

Internally, the PJD's performance in local and regional elections was seen as strongly validating its disciplined approach and record in government.<sup>120</sup> Members declared, prematurely, that the win was a loss for the PAM and other opposition parties and that the "era of manipulation [in Moroccan politics] was over"<sup>121</sup>—a reference to the role played by the palace. The 2015 elections solidified the PJD's rise in Moroccan politics and its status as the dominant political party.

Following the 2015 elections, and prior to the 2016 parliamentary elections, the political polarization between the government and opposition intensified. Underlying the rivalry between the PJD and the PAM was the palace's wariness of the former's rise. The polarized and contentious environment gave way to attacks in the press, leaks implicating one party or another in perceived wrongdoing, rousing speeches,

and even a march—which the PJD alleges was backed by the PAM and the Ministry of Interior—denouncing the “Islamization of society.”<sup>122</sup> For months, Moroccans witnessed a protracted political campaign between the two parties that had little precedent in modern Moroccan history. PAM leader Ilyas El Omari ramped up attacks on the PJD and its leader for their performance in government and their Islamist ideology, comparing it to that of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.<sup>123</sup> PJD leaders, in turn, implied that El Omari is implicated in improper financial dealings.<sup>124</sup>

Notably, the palace was publicly dragged into the mudslinging as politicians increasingly spoke about *tahakout* (manipulations or control); Benkirane used the term to allude to efforts by the king’s advisers to manipulate and influence politics and governance. Perhaps concerned that the notion had become too widespread, the king condemned any mention of such manipulations and issued a statement in defense of the PAM’s founder and his own adviser, Fouad Ali El Himma—whom one of the party’s allies, Minister of Housing and Urbanism Nabil Benabdellah, had mentioned as one of these “manipulators.”<sup>125</sup>

In this polarized environment, Moroccans went to vote for a new parliament on October 7, 2016. The PJD came in first, with a historic total of 125 out of 395 parliamentary seats, topping its previous record of 107 seats in 2011. The PAM emerged as the PJD’s main rival, coming in second with 102 seats, compared to the forty-seven seats it had won in 2011.<sup>126</sup> There is no doubt that the political atmosphere of 2016 was different from that of 2011, but the PAM’s rise validated the view that Moroccan politics was increasingly turning into a two-party model, with the PAM being the palace’s response to the Islamists’ rise. But though the PJD won, in many regards it proved to be a Pyrrhic victory. After protracted negotiations to form a government, Benkirane was forced to step down and the weak government the PJD subsequently agreed to lead has proved to be a setback for the party.

### The Consequences of Success

Benkirane’s growing popularity inside and outside the party and the PJD’s consecutive successes in elections turned the party and its leader into a target. Worried, the palace and traditional power brokers in Morocco worked to hamper Benkirane’s efforts to form a second government and ultimately drive him out of party leadership.

For a party to form a government on its own, it needs a majority of 198 seats in the parliament. This has never happened in Morocco, given the country’s multiplicity of parties and election laws designed to prevent any single party from dominating the system. Therefore, the PJD needed to form a coalition, but this time, the palace actively worked to undermine the PJD. Employing parties that viewed the PJD’s rise as a challenge to their interests as proxies in the political process, the palace sought to weaken the PJD and rid it of its most valuable asset: Benkirane.

Self-assured from the PJD’s electoral victory, Benkirane believed, wrongly, that he had the luxury of choice. The prime minister-designate first looked to his former coalition partners—the PPS, RNI, and MP—to form a government, but the latter two did not want to join unless they were part of a bloc of like-minded parties. The seats that both the PJD and the PAM had won were at the expense of other parties, including the PJD’s coalition partners—the RNI won a total of thirty-seven parliamentary seats compared to fifty-two in 2011, and the MP won twenty-seven seats, down from thirty-two in 2011.<sup>127</sup>

With fewer seats and less negotiating power, these smaller palace-aligned parties saw little benefit in joining Benkirane's new government individually, as this would have diluted their influence even further. Therefore, the RNI, whose leader Salaheddine Mezouar resigned in reaction to his party's poor performance, created a bloc with the MP and the UC, and later the USFP, to gain more negotiating power.<sup>128</sup>

However, Benkirane refused to invite the entire bloc into his government because it was dominated by parties long loyal to the palace, including the USFP, a party Benkirane had initially invited but then adamantly rejected as a partner on the grounds that its leader had been an obstacle.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, as he saw it, accommodating the entire bloc into the coalition would have diluted his own party's share of portfolios and influence.

At the same time, Benkirane began looking toward the Istiqlal Party, whose leader—Hamid Chabat, previously an avowed political enemy—had emerged as an unlikely ally. In interviews, PJD members spoke of an alleged meeting that happened shortly after the election that, they claim, was an effort to undermine the PJD's second government.<sup>130</sup> According to these accounts, during the meeting, leaders from various parties—including the PAM, RNI, and MP—discussed ways of sabotaging Benkirane, while Chabat refused to be part of what was akin to a political coup. The purported meeting highlighted the reversal in relations between Chabat and Benkirane. Regardless, the Istiqlal Party was soon plunged into a leadership crisis of its own, which some PJD members believed the palace had orchestrated to undermine Chabat for growing too independent and too sympathetic to the PJD. The king also was presumably unhappy with the prospect of a coalition with diminished pro-palace influence—especially as the Istiqlal Party's loyalty to the palace was in question.<sup>131</sup>

Negotiations were at a standstill by December 2016. The Istiqlal Party was no longer in consideration; Benkirane was still rejecting the RNI-led bloc; and the RNI's leader, Aziz Akhannouch—now a key player in negotiations and referred to as “the king's new friend” by the press (usually a reference to Fouad Ali El Himma)—was out of the country.<sup>132</sup> As weeks turned into months, debate grew in Moroccan political circles and within the PJD about the viability of Benkirane's approach. Finally, on March 15, 2017, the king asked Benkirane to step down and allow another PJD leader to establish a new government.

The king's decision seemed prompted by Benkirane's inability to make any progress. Benkirane had calculated that if the party was not satisfied with the composition of the new coalition—especially one that diluted its electoral win—he could wait for other political actors to come around. Alternatively, if the party was not able to form a coalition, Benkirane seemed to view being in the opposition a better option, as the party would at least maintain its strength. Benkirane and the party accepted the king's decision, but his dismissal was a shock.<sup>133</sup> The king appointed Saadeddine Othmani, a former secretary-general of the party and former minister of foreign affairs from 2012 to 2013, as the next prime minister-designate.

Under pressure, Othmani had formed a coalition within a week with the partners that Benkirane had rejected. As Benkirane had feared, the coalition of six parties—the PJD, USFP, PPS, RNI, MP, and UC—effectively diluted the PJD's influence (the previous government had four parties), blunting the impact of its significant electoral victory. The composition of Othmani's government led to major disagreements and polarization within the PJD. The party's rank and file wondered what had changed the PJD's previously intractable position between March 15 and March 25, when the coalition was approved. Members

wanted to understand why Othmani had backtracked on the party's position, but they received no clear answers from their leadership.<sup>134</sup>

Within the party, there was talk of betrayal, revolt, and mass resignations over the way Benkirane had been disposed of and Othmani had formed his government. The base was incensed by those within the leadership who seemingly accepted the imposed compromise—including several members of the party's secretariat general—and by the decision to integrate the entire RNI-MP-USFP-UC bloc into the government. Those within the PJD who favored a more collaborative approach with the palace were increasingly seen as corrupt and as having been intimidated into “siding with the ruling establishment, not the people,”<sup>135</sup> jeopardizing the party's relative independence.

Similarly, the faction within the PJD leadership that rejected Othmani's approach, particularly the youth, resented the strategy for being unnecessarily deferential to the palace. It felt the democratic process, which had brought the party to power, should not be subverted, especially in the post-2011 environment of heightened political awareness.

There was also a sense in the PJD that the new government would damage the party's reputation. As part of a weak coalition, the PJD would inevitably be forced to validate—and be seen as complicit in—its own political regression. This would cost the PJD internal unity and credibility. Even as Othmani forged ahead, seeking to make up for months of deadlock, internal discussion about how to mitigate the damage continued. Without any workable options, the debate subsided, but even PJD members in the parliament displayed disunity and opposition to the government.<sup>136</sup>

Once the dust of the government formation settled, Benkirane began quietly angling for a way to remain relevant and guide the party's direction by winning a third term as secretary-general. Benkirane, however, often denied his interest and stressed that he would accept whatever the party asked of him—to serve as secretary general or to step aside once and for all. Benkirane's ambition for a third term further divided the party in the run up to its national congress and threatened to create a bifurcated leadership. But the party's national council, ahead of its eighth congress, voted against an amendment of its bylaws that would have allowed Benkirane to be named for a third term.<sup>137</sup> In doing so, the party, once again, put its pragmatism on full display. There was a sense among party members that the amendment of the bylaws was almost assured—whether or not he would get the votes was another question. While keeping the two-term limit on leadership goes to the heart of the party's democratic principles and the emphasis that the institution is larger than any one individual, many felt these were exceptional times and that the precious progress the party made required such sacrifices as changing the bylaws.<sup>138</sup> It is also likely that the pragmatists within the party—who understood the palace's growing unease with Benkirane and its desire to see him out of leadership—did not want to send the palace signals of defiance by reelecting Benkirane as secretary general for a third time. So, during the party's congress on December 9 and 10, Othmani was voted secretary general, ending Benkirane's leadership role.

After all, just last September, Morocco had witnessed the excruciating end of a public leadership crisis—one that affected the Istiqlal Party for months. The Istiqlal Party was bitterly divided over whether Chabat should remain or go. This fight—which became physical on several occasions during meetings between those who supported him and those who wanted a more predictable, palace-approved leader—culminated

in what became locally known as the congress of the flying plates.<sup>139</sup> During the congress, proponents and opponents of Chabat threw plates at each other, in one of the most degrading instances in the history of a once-revered party. In the end, the Istiqlal Party elected a palace-approved figure, Nizar Baraka, and Chabat became somewhat of a political pariah. The public leadership struggle the Istiqlal Party went through—which one of its members characterized as a fight for the party’s soul—serves as a cautionary tale to other parties not to push against the monarchy.<sup>140</sup>

The PJD is much too disciplined to risk such an erosive display of division on a national scale. Also, for the moment, the party seems to have weathered the question of a split that many, including Benkirane, had feared. Still, Othmani has the difficult task of managing a government that is already perceived as inefficient and weak. This perception has been driven in part by the inadequate way the Othmani government has dealt with the unrest in Al-Hoceima and the central northern Rif region. Protests in Al-Hoceima were ignited in October 2016 following the death of a local fish vendor, who was crushed in a garbage compressor while trying to retrieve fish confiscated by the local authorities. The incident brought to light many of the profound social and economic problems facing the country and reflected human rights and governance deficiencies. The unrest has worsened with the state’s crackdown on protesters, mass arrests, violence, and the censorship of journalists covering the events.<sup>141</sup>

The king, who had been reluctant to respond directly to the Rif protests, soon used the issue as an opportunity to once again scapegoat politicians and bureaucrats. Using the Rif protests specifically and the overall state of Morocco’s social and economic challenges, the king blamed politicians and technocrats in an unusually harsh Throne Day speech on July 31, 2017.<sup>142</sup> The speech was followed by another on October 13 during the opening session of the parliament, in which he promised a “political earthquake” to fix the country’s many governance issues—and, in particular, as a belated and indirect response to the Rif crisis.<sup>143</sup> In the speech, he also called for the creation of a minister delegate for African affairs (within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the creation of two departments for follow up within the ministries of interior and finance. He also called for an expedited process for administrative decentralization to go along with Morocco’s advanced regionalization program, which has long been in the works and has so far failed to come to fruition.<sup>144</sup>

The “earthquake” came on October 24, with the sacking of ministers and high-ranking government officials and bureaucrats. They included the minister of education and higher learning (and former minister of interior in Benkirane’s government), Mohammed Hassad; the minister of housing, Nabil Benabdellah; and the minister of health, El Houssaine Louardi. These sackings were meant to provide a sense of accountability to the people of the Rif and show the king’s interest in fixing public administration.<sup>145</sup> The move reinforced the monarchy’s image as an arbiter of politics and undermined the government. It also called into question the previous government’s record and its narrative of success—and reaffirmed the king’s predominance.

## CONCLUSION

The PJD’s two electoral victories and its ability to pursue a more independent stance with regard to the palace—in which the party was neither defiant nor submissive—created a new approach in Moroccan politics. This approach proved successful and raised the alarm of a palace wary of independent politics.

While Benkirane was prevented from forming a government in 2016—due to the palace’s determination to push back and reassert its control of the political space—the PJD has nonetheless shown that it is possible, and popular with voters, for a party to adopt a more independent line with regard to politics and governance. Although the party’s reforms were modest, the way its approach resonated with many voters is noteworthy in terms of Morocco’s outlook. In many ways, the PJD’s experience is more consequential than any specific policies it pursued.

The PJD has shown that investing in direct linkages to the people is effective when it comes to achieving electoral success. Its experience demonstrated that voters matter just as much as the palace. More significantly, it implicitly showed that the interests of the voters and the palace are not always aligned. The push and pull that the PJD faced—between submission to the king and duty to the voters—has further exposed other parties’ distance from the electorate. In response, the palace closed the door on political openings that it had reluctantly given. However, in backing Othmani into a weak government and gradually marginalizing Benkirane within the party, the palace, in a way, validated the brief success of the PJD.

The palace’s reaction to the PJD, summed up as a resurgent king looking to overshadow and marginalize political parties, has once again fallen back on familiar tools. The palace first pressured the PJD—after its strong electoral showing—to accept and work within the confines of a weak government. To achieve this, the palace granted other parties influence far larger than their electoral strength, as was the case when it used the RNI to stymie the government-formation process after the 2016 elections. The second blow was the removal of Benkirane; a blow that sheds light on the palace’s propensity to intervene in internal party dynamics.

What has transpired for the party over the past few months is indeed similar to the process of delegitimization that other parties have gone through. But although weakened, the party is still strong at the local administration level. And its experience in government cannot be completely taken back. The PJD ran an effective government that tried to maintain some independence, undertook some reforms in earnest, and showed a desire—and to some extent an ability—to serve the people.

While the palace’s approach here is not new, the king’s heavy-handed intervention could have potentially profound implications for the palace. It now has to contend with a greater popular understanding of the consequences of its political manipulations and resistance to reforms. The current royal maneuvers are not taking place in a vacuum; Moroccans are more interested in politics, and the willingness to speak out and mobilize remains (as the Rif protests have shown, albeit on a regional level).

Although the national and regional contexts are different than in 2011, the need for credible political actors independent of the monarchy remains. Without viable political actors enjoying a degree of independence, the palace alone could struggle to meet the higher political expectations of Moroccans. And with such disempowered political actors, public dissatisfaction may well turn toward the palace.

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## THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

# THE SOCIOPOLITICAL UNDERCURRENT OF LEBANON'S SALAFI MILITANCY

RAPHAËL LEFÈVRE

## INTRODUCTION

Lebanon has been a main target of Islamist militancy since the Syrian conflict began in 2011. Militants affiliated with Salafi-jihadi groups—such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as the al-Nusra Front and then Jabhat Fatah al-Sham)—have killed scores of civilians by carrying out suicide bombings and rocket attacks in and outside of Beirut and by engaging in bloody clashes with the army. By 2014, their numbers and strength had grown to such an extent that they came to hold significant sway in parts of the Beqaa Valley, Sidon, and Tripoli, where, according to security officials, they wanted to create an “Islamic Emirate.”<sup>1</sup> To address this challenge, the Lebanese government arrested hundreds of suspected militants and led a military crackdown on suspected terrorist cells. As a result, acts of violence have greatly receded, but this security-focused approach has done nothing to address the root causes that led to the rise of Salafi militancy. Until these issues are tackled, the specter of radicalization will keep looming over Lebanon.

Salafism is a puritan Sunni religious movement advocating a return to the practices of the *al-salaf al-salih*, the companions and successors of the Prophet Muhammad. For decades, this religious school of thought only had a marginal presence in Lebanon, where merely a quarter of the population is Sunni and secular parties and notables dominate religion and politics. Although Salafism was introduced in the 1940s by Tripolitan cleric Salem al-Shahhal, it was not until the 1990s that its influence began to expand, mainly as a result of increased financial assistance from wealthy, like-minded Salafi associations in the Gulf. Throughout this initial period, Lebanese Salafism remained a largely peaceful religious movement. Even among its most radical members, Lebanon was often considered a “land of support” to transit fighters and weapons to wage jihad elsewhere, like in Iraq. And when some Salafi-jihadi groups did advocate for jihad at home, such as in 2000 and 2007, most other Salafis disapproved of their efforts, which were quickly

quashed.<sup>2</sup> Since 2008, however, the appeal of Salafi militancy has grown considerably, with varying views on the underlying drivers.<sup>3</sup>

Several explanations have been proffered on the rise of Salafi jihadism in Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> Some analysts suggest that, given Salafism's propensity to consider Shia Muslims as heretics, a more aggressive doctrine was bound to resonate in a society that has become profoundly polarized. Sunni-Shia relations deteriorated significantly following the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, the Sunni sect's leading figure, and the growth of Hezbollah, the Shia political party and militant group that is often accused of having carried out the killing.<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of this event, Salafi clerics began to strike a militant tone—which became more popular among sections of the Sunni public—and some Salafi militias were formed.

Other analysts attribute the rise to the proxy war waged by Saudi Arabia, which has been the main funder of Salafi mosques, charities, and arguably militias in Lebanon, pitting them against Iran, which supports Hezbollah.<sup>6</sup> Finally, more recently, Salafi militancy is being viewed as a by-product of the Syrian conflict, in which Salafi militias are leading actors.<sup>7</sup> While all these explanations are valid, they overlook deeper local causes that must be understood to be able to effectively address them.

Based on six weeks of field research in 2016 and interviews with fifty-five actors, including civil society activists, clerics, former militants, and security officials, it is apparent that, at its core, the rise of Salafi militancy in Lebanon stems from a sociopolitical revolt—one that originates in disaffected urban areas where the growth of Salafi groups has more to do with social dynamics than with any supposedly ideological appeal of extremism. For these groups, embracing Salafism is often a means to other ends, such as benefiting from generous Gulf funding; claiming implicit divine backing in struggles between neighborhood gangs; justifying, through radical, religious rhetoric, acts of violence that seem like Salafi militancy but rather align more with long-standing local traditions of social unrest; or providing a vocabulary and platform to contest local sociopolitical marginalization. Thus, although these groups have adopted the language and profile of Salafism, their militancy remains largely connected to local urban grievances, identities, and networks. The implications of these findings are profound because they illustrate the danger of viewing these militants, operating inside and outside Lebanon, through the prism of security only—they must also be seen as symptoms of the degrading social environments from which they originate.

It is noteworthy, however, that Salafi militants have not yet fulfilled their potential to leverage the sociopolitical unrest. For example, comparatively few Syrian refugees in Lebanon have joined militant groups or carried out attacks even though they face massive challenges. Of course, the government's securitization of these refugees, or attempt to portray them as a direct security threat, might result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, but, for now, their resilience to extremism remains striking. Ultimately, this resistance stems from the fact that Syrian and Lebanese Sunni communities consider their religious practices to be at odds with Salafi puritanism. This, in addition to the Salafis' own divisions and general rejection of militancy, indicates that the dynamics of radicalization are by no means unavoidable.

Actual radicalization, meaning the dynamic of clear ideological hardening, seems to primarily take place within the context of two experiences—having waged jihad in Syria and having spent time in Lebanese prisons. Both reflect the urgent need for the government to reform its current judicial and security approach and adhere in practice, not just in theory, to the policy of disassociation from the Syrian crisis.

Institutional reform is also needed to empower the country's moderate Sunni clerics. Many of them have attempted to take a lead role in combatting extremist ideologies in prisons and in certain mosques, but their efforts are hampered by a lack of means and the constant meddling of Sunni politicians—some of whom have become unpopular.

## QABADAY SALAFISM

While the Sunni-Shia rift is often seen as the most important divide in Lebanese society, the fast-growing social gap between the privileged and the poor is as, if not more, significant. Deprivation touches the Sunni community in particular. In Lebanon's second largest city, Tripoli, where Sunnis constitute the overwhelming majority of the population, 57 percent of residents are poor—a far cry from the 28 percent national average.<sup>8</sup> Yet what is even more notable is the fast-growing urban segregation between the gated neighborhoods of the well-off, where basic services function, and the marginalized districts, where residents struggle with worsening insecurity, deteriorating infrastructure, poorly performing public schools, and high poverty rates. In upscale urban areas such as Basatin Trablous, only 19 percent of residents are considered deprived, compared to 69 percent in Qobbe and 87 percent in Bab al-Tabbaneh.<sup>9</sup> And it is precisely in these types of neighborhoods that Salafism has found a fertile ground. There, puritan religious activists with ties to wealthy Gulf religious associations have earned the respect of many locals by opening schools, running charities, funding orphanages, and helping refugees—in other words, by stepping into the void and fulfilling state-like functions. There are at least five large Salafi associations active in Tripoli and three in Akkar. Moreover, in deprived neighborhoods where population density rates can sometimes be nine times higher than in wealthier districts, there is a growing scarcity of public space and the well-kept, neighborhood Salafi mosques can act as vectors of socialization for youths.<sup>10</sup> “We meet the needs of the poor,” argued a Salafi leader. “We provide them with dignity.”<sup>11</sup>

A key element of the growing appeal of Salafism in these deprived areas is the movement's ability to attract community leaders who bring their followers into the fold. For centuries, neighborhoods characterized by relative state neglect have been dominated by local strongmen called *qabadayat* (*qabaday* in singular form), who provide services, regulate social relations, and defend their district's identity in return for loyalty.<sup>12</sup> While wealthier neighborhoods, and the upper class more generally, view them as disorderly *za'aran* (thugs) given their propensity to engage in violent feuds with rival bands, they have often been hailed as heroes in their own communities. One *qabaday* in a deprived quarter said he is proud to be the area's informal leader and that he stands ready to use his weapon to enforce justice and security since, given the state's absence, “it's the law of the jungle here.” And if, in the past, many *qabadayat* justified their actions and episodic acts of violence by seizing the mantle of left-wing ideologies, a growing number of them now seem attracted by the Salafi discourse.

Salafism is infiltrating the grassroots by merging the figure of the neighborhood strongman with that of the religiously inspired activist. “The Prophet valued strength over weakness,” argued one of the many leaders who could be described as “Qabaday Salafis.” “As a *qabaday* and as a Salafi, I protect my neighborhood from physical and moral threats,” he said before specifying that he provides protection and religious education to the area's impoverished population and strictly prohibits the sale and consumption of alcohol. The spread of the phenomenon of Qabaday Salafism in such neighborhoods also goes hand in hand

with a local culture of exacerbated masculinity, where “being a real man” often means showing “courage” by wielding weapons and using violence for the alleged “good of the community.” Salafi discourse—which emphasizes the archetypal chivalrous *fata* (youth) and constantly references the *sahaba* (the companions of the Prophet) and the “brave” battles they waged—is well placed to channel the militant tendencies of these neighborhood strongmen. A Salafi leader acknowledged as much when he proudly stated that traditional values such as “chivalry, honor, and revenge” are being “Salafized.” “Salafism meets the need of our warm-blooded youth for dignity. Salafis refuse to forgive and they don’t just talk but rather act.”

Yet the brand of religious doctrine that these Qabaday Salafis are promoting is not always consistent with Salafism. For instance, while Salafism prohibits the targeting of fellow Muslims, the *qabadayat* and their partisans do not hesitate to use violence against those in wealthier Sunni districts. In Tripoli, they are widely suspected of standing behind a racketeering scheme involving chic shops and restaurants and the 2012 looting and torching of a U.S. fast-food branch catering to the local elite.<sup>13</sup> They also routinely engage in skirmishes with gangs from rival neighborhoods and often target the security forces, who are widely unpopular because of their crackdown on illegal housing and illicit trade. Many *qabadayat* are, in fact, more akin to gangsters claiming divine backing than actual Salafi scholars. Most of them are not even clerics; they are self-made imams who are knowledgeable in aspects of Salafi doctrine—often quoting Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah, a twelfth-century religious scholar highly influential in Salafi thought—but are unaware of wider theological debates. Moreover, as *qabadayat*, they have to remain in tune with the social and religious practices of most residents in their neighborhood—and these have long been more informed by a legacy of Sufism, liberal in certain respects, than by the more conservative Gulf-type Wahhabism. Some of them, in attempting to remain close to residents, thus enact fatwas (rulings) that make *their* Salafism seem more aligned with local practices. One proudly pointed out that he allows *his* Salafis to listen to music, watch television shows, and even smoke—all taboos in doctrinal Salafism. Their ideology is thus Salafi in name only and largely driven by the local social context.

The journey of one of these Qabaday Salafis, Shadi Mawlawi, illustrates the danger of viewing these local militants through the lens of security only. Born and raised in Qobbe, one of Tripoli’s largest and most deprived districts, he became, by the late 2000s, one of the area’s Qabaday Salafi. As a *qabaday*, he quickly built a following by providing residents with limited services funded with money he had acquired via weapons smuggling and by resorting to violence against the police to defend locals involved in the informal economy. Today, he is still seen by some locals as the “hero of Qobbe” who “protected the district.”

His adherence to Salafism, by all accounts, was initially not rigorous. One of his followers explained that together they grew beards, prayed five times a day, met with the city’s famed Salafi clerics, and advocated the creation of an “Islamic Emirate” in Tripoli, but they also smoked hashish, took pills, flirted with girls, and traveled around on mopeds while shooting in the air in wealthy areas. Widely viewed in the rest of the city as “attention seekers” involved in petty criminality, Mawlawi and his partisans used the discourse and practice of Salafism to gain wider respect and status while giving religious sanction to their acts and intimidating rivals. Their militancy, which mainly targeted wealthier Sunnis and symbols of the state as expressions of their sociopolitical marginalization, may thus have taken the garb of Salafism, but it was inherently local and more akin to traditional forms of urban unrest.

Two experiences would turn Mawlawi from a Qabaday Salafi guided by local issues into a more ideologically driven militant with actual ties to the Islamic State and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. First, the security

forces arrested him in 2012, and although he only stayed in prison briefly because the authorities had to release him in the face of angry protesters in Tripoli, the experience nonetheless seems to have been enough to radicalize him.<sup>14</sup> According to a source close to him, he was greatly affected by the “oppression” suffered by prisoners in jail. Second, upon his release, he started caring about broader issues beyond his neighborhood. He became particularly moved by the deteriorating situation in Syria. One of his followers explained that, as a result, he joined Syria’s Islamist rebels in the border village al-Qusayr, where he fought for a few weeks against the Syrian army and Hezbollah.

Mawlawi returned to Tripoli as a battle-hardened militant with deeper ideological convictions than before, encouraging his local followers to join the ranks of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, prepare attacks in Lebanon, and wage a “revolution” to overthrow the country’s whole political order. His status as a neighborhood leader pushed many of his partisans to follow his path. Loyalty among his followers was so deep that one of them, who was a Christian, had been prepared to blow himself up at a Lebanese army outpost in the district.<sup>15</sup> A security operation in 2014 eventually forced Mawlawi to escape and seek refuge in the Palestinian camp of Ain al-Hilwe and then in Syria, where he joined Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>16</sup>

## FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD TO SYRIA

As many stories similar to Mawlawi’s suggest, the phenomenon of Qabaday Salafism, as an essentially local form of militancy centered on the *hara* (neighborhood), is threatening to turn more ideological and radical in the context of the lingering Syrian conflict. There is disagreement over the exact number of Sunnis who left Lebanon to fight the Syrian regime—from an initial estimate of 900 to a recent estimate of 6,000—but what is clear is that they waged jihad for a variety of reasons.<sup>17</sup> According to those interviewed, while some Sunnis joined the Syrian opposition’s ranks out of a sense of “humanitarian duty” or “chivalry” aimed at “defending the honor” of Sunni demonstrators who faced a brutal crackdown by President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, others were driven by “a thirst for revenge” for some of the “torments” caused by Syria’s 1976–2005 military occupation of Lebanon and, in particular, the Syrian army’s 1985 crackdown in Tripoli and its involvement in the 1986 massacre of local Sunnis in the neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh. One militant who fought in Syria also observed that most of his Lebanese jihadi friends happened to hail from deprived Sunni areas and that the “humiliations” they faced there—stemming from a sense of rejection from society, rampant poverty, and difficulties in getting married and starting a family—had pushed them to join a battlefield on which they would be able to “release their frustration and rage.” Only a minority, he insisted, went to Syria with ideological goals such as establishing an Islamic state in Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria). And, in fact, when these Lebanese militants reached Syria, most actually joined moderate rebel groups. A security official explained that this initially happened in unorganized ways, with local groups of supporters of the revolution sending money, weapons, and fighters to brigades they sympathized with in Syria.

Given that Lebanese society remains largely connected to the Syrian hinterland—especially because of lingering family relations between Homs and Tripoli on the one hand and Beirut, Damascus, and Sidon on the other—it is hardly surprising that kinship ties trumped ideology. “At first, we joined the Free Syrian Army because many had family ties with its fighters,” explained a Lebanese Salafi. “Back then, our militants were not even considered as foreign fighters!” Over time, however, support among Lebanese jihadists for Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades sharply declined. Some became frustrated by the large degree of “infighting” that took place in rebel ranks and the FSA’s apparent “inability to live up to its promises.” Others

lambasted the FSA's rampant "corruption." One Tripolitan Salafi who sent some of his followers to fight alongside FSA brigades in Homs expressed his bitter disappointment at the way some rebels "surrendered" to the regime. Another one concluded that "the only hope for the future of Syria lies with the Islamists."

Thus, by early 2013, most Lebanese militants had shifted their support to Salafi rebel groups. This trend increased as violent battles unfolded in al-Qusayr, in the countryside of Homs, during which Hezbollah officialized its armed intervention in Syria on the side of the regime. Two Lebanese Salafi clerics in particular, Ahmed al-Assir and Salem al-Rafei, reacted to the Shia militia's growing involvement across the border by issuing fatwas of their own—making it a religious duty for Lebanese Sunnis to strike back and join the jihad in Syria.<sup>18</sup> The sectarian component of their Salafi discourse, emphasizing the need to "defend the Sunni villages" from the Syrian regime's and Hezbollah's hands, quickly made their fatwas popular. One Salafi recruiter said he became "overwhelmed" by the number of candidates for jihad. From then on, Salafi networks gradually came to monopolize the flow of Lebanese militants into Syria. While some were sent to local Salafi brigades in Homs, such as Liwa Fajr al-Islam and Liwa al-Haqq, others joined larger factions, such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam. One Lebanese Salafi explained that these groups earned his followers' admiration because of the degree of their "Islamic commitment" but also because of their "military achievements" on the ground and their "uncompromising opposition" to both the Syrian regime and Hezbollah.

While it is tempting to blindly assume that all Lebanese Sunnis who fought with Salafi brigades came back from Syria radicalized, the reality is more nuanced. For instance, many militants grew highly critical of al-Assir and al-Rafei, whose fatwas, they argued, were issued more out of emotional instincts than sound, strategic calculations—thus unleashing a flow of fighters who haphazardly joined various factions. In the short term, the lack of strategy accentuated the fragmentation of opposition factions in Homs, and in the long term, the lack of a political cover rendered the return of militants to Lebanon harder. In retrospect, al-Rafei himself acknowledges that his decision to issue a fatwa about jihad was taken hastily and "without really taking the time to think and discuss with others."

Some Sunni fighters were also traumatized by the difficulties they encountered on the Syrian battlefield. Tripolitan fighters in the Salafi group Jund al-Sham rapidly came under siege by regime forces near Homs; some died of starvation, others were ambushed and killed, and those who made it back to Lebanon were arrested and sent to prison. "Wives were widowed, kids orphaned, and families destroyed," bitterly concluded a figure close to them. Another Lebanese Salafi who has relatives currently fighting for opposite Islamist factions complained about the "absurdity" of war. "My own relatives are killing each other in Syria," he said, before wondering in a rhetorical fashion: "Is this still really a revolution, a jihad?"

There are, of course, numerous other Lebanese militants who take pride in their jihadi experience in Syria and would do it over again "a hundred more times." Many seem to have been particularly inspired by the intense social bonds they forged on the battlefield. "While in Syria, I understood what it meant to be brothers in Islam," explained a Lebanese militant; for the first time in his life, he experienced in practice, and not just in theory, this deep sense of belonging. "We fought during the day and shared a fire at night!" Other militants were taken in by a more ideological vision of the world. One said that witnessing the scale of the crisis made him realize that Syria had become the "epicenter of the Islamic world" and that this land now felt even holier to him than Jerusalem, which, until then, had been considered the holy grail of jihad. Another Islamist militant who fought with the rebels in the Syrian town of Yabroud until the city fell to

the regime in 2014 said that he would remain forever scarred by the deeds of Hezbollah's men in Syria: "I saw with my own eyes the atrocities they committed against Sunnis there . . . they [Hezbollah] killed kids and wives . . . they are the absolute enemy." These are the militants who may become attracted to the ideological, sectarian, and violent breed of Salafi militancy that is espoused by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or the Islamic State, each in their own way.

## PRISONS AS FACTORIES OF RADICALISM

The dynamic of ideological hardening is amplified by the experience of militants in prison. Roumieh prison, the country's largest detention facility, has over the past decade been known as a "factory of radicalism," where jihadi groups recruit new members and plot terror attacks.<sup>19</sup> However, since 2014, the problem has taken on new dimensions and now extends to all prisons. The formation of a new government allowed the Lebanese army to carry out a "security plan" that involved arresting hundreds of suspected Sunni militants throughout Lebanon; the crackdowns on hideouts and cells continued until the summer of 2017. In the short term, this naturally restored a sense of security as militant attacks greatly receded. Yet it also resulted in the overcrowding of the country's prison and justice systems—the effects of which could now make matters worse by raising the specter of long-term radicalization. The scale of the challenge is indeed unprecedented. While Lebanese prisons were originally designed to house a total of 2,700 detainees, official estimates in the late 2000s put the number at 4,700 inmates, and, by 2016, over 7,000.<sup>20</sup> Most of the new detainees are charged with having ties to Syrian rebel groups deemed "terrorists" by the state. "The crisis in Syria puts major strains on our prison system," admitted a high-level prison official. "We don't have the capacity to deal with it."

To respond to this challenge, the Ministry of Interior, which in theory oversees all prisons, has encouraged the Ministry of Defense to hold a growing number of inmates in its own detention and interrogation facilities, such as those in Yarze and Rihaniye. Officially, military officers explain that "we don't keep the prisoners in such prisons very long—only during the investigation." But other officials acknowledge that, in reality, inmates are often kept there for much longer. Worse, the Lebanese Center for Human Rights reported that "arrests, torture and detention in these places continue with impunity" and accused the military intelligence branch of violating human rights, extracting forced confessions, and keeping inmates in prolonged isolation.<sup>21</sup> A former prisoner in Rihaniye alleged that, while being detained there, he was forcibly "sleep-deprived" for days, "beaten up," and the victim of "sexual perversions."

And when the detainees are finally transferred to a civilian prison—sometimes after six or seven months in military custody—they face conditions that put their health at further risk. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have visited detention centers often stress that prison overcrowding has not been matched by efforts to renovate and upgrade the infrastructure and to address a shortage of medical staff, thus resulting in the rapid degradation of the health and hygiene situation. In 2015, the Ministry of Interior publicized the renovation of some of the buildings of the infamous Roumieh prison, but officials at Tripoli's Qobbe prison, the second largest in the country, complain that "Roumieh monopolizes the whole budget" and, as a result, "other prisons are neglected." The bad state of Lebanese prisons, as well as the violent treatment some inmates have experienced, also puts their psychological well-being in harm's way. One NGO working with prisoners noted the increase in undiagnosed mental diseases. It assessed

that as many as 75.8 percent of inmates at the Roumieh prison suffer from obsessive compulsive disorders, 60.6 percent from depression, and 43.4 percent from anxiety disorders.<sup>22</sup> The situation is worsened by long waiting periods before detainees can face trial. Statistics show that an estimated 66 percent of all detainees have not yet been judged—and over half will have to wait six months to over three years.<sup>23</sup>

There is a growing risk that these quickly deteriorating conditions might radicalize inmates. A social worker who regularly visits prisoners expressed deep concern after noticing in recent months a sharp increase in hate speech targeting the state. One community leader who works with newly liberated inmates was even more alarmed, arguing that prison conditions had turned regular criminals into “time bombs,” driven by a thirst for revenge against society. Sunni prisoners seem to be particularly susceptible to radicalization as they form the majority of inmates and tend to think they suffer from more discrimination than others. The growing sectarian and antistate components of their speech paves the way for the spread of militant Salafi ideologies in prison. One cleric who gives spiritual advice to Sunni inmates noticed that jihadi groups like Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and the Islamic State have recently earned popularity in prison, with their discourse providing “meaning” to the prisoners’ sense of injustice, especially after all of Lebanon’s major Sunni politicians acquiesced to the security plan.

An additional factor contributing to the spread of militant Salafi ideologies in prison is the absence of a rigorous mechanism to classify detainees according to their crime—which means that minor dealers and thieves mix in cells with jihadi ideologues and leaders. The officer in charge of a major prison in Lebanon said that this situation is unfortunate, as it has led to repeated instances of “brainwashing” in which criminals become Salafi militants. Even in the Roumieh prison that, on paper, separates “Islamists” and “non-Islamist” inmates by detaining them in different blocks, categorizations are fluid. A high-level prison official, for instance, regrets that most of the detainees in “Islamist” Block B were at first more akin to *qabadayat* and local gangsters hostile to authority than to hardened Salafi militants; after putting them in the same jail as jihadi ideologues and Islamist leaders, many had changed. The official insisted that both the recent rehabilitation of Block B and the construction in 2018 of a high-security facility to detain the “most dangerous terrorists” provide room for hope, but he also acknowledged that, in the meantime, radicalization would remain a problem. A former prisoner in Roumieh’s Block B confirmed the extent of the challenge by recounting that some of his friends joined militant Salafi organizations after sharing a cell with members. Rather than preventing and sanctioning terrorism, he concluded, prisons were “producing” it.

## THE FAILURES OF DAR AL-FATWA

In theory, Dar al-Fatwa, the state-sanctioned body dealing with Sunni religious and civil matters and managing the mosques, seems well placed to counter radicalization in prisons, yet a lack of means and the interference of politicians complicate this task. After nearly a decade of paralysis due to an internal crisis linked to the management style of its mufti, or head, Mohammed Rashid Qabbani, the 2014 election of a more dynamic head, Abdel-Latif Derian, provided hope that the body would become proactive.<sup>24</sup> A high-level prison official expressed confidence that if the moderate clerics affiliated with Dar al-Fatwa were more involved in providing relief and sound religious guidance to the Sunni inmates, it would balance radical voices in prison and contain the appeal of extremism. Religious dignitaries insist that, since 2015, they have been sending clerics to deliver Friday sermons in Lebanese prisons where they have preached

“tolerance and moderation.” But the scope of their influence still appears to be severely limited. An official at the Qobbe prison started laughing when asked about the activities of Dar al-Fatwa clerics in his facility: “We only see them coming for an hour on Friday mornings—they are not doing much here!” A former inmate at the Roumieh prison said that Dar al-Fatwa had become widely unpopular because it visited too infrequently and did not speak out enough against prison conditions.

One key issue that restricts Dar al-Fatwa’s activities in prisons is a severe lack of funding. While, for instance, the area of North Lebanon comprises five detention facilities housing thousands of inmates, the religious institution’s local branch can only afford to employ three clerics to deliver religious lectures. One cleric acknowledged that “so much more needs to be done. . . . We see that prisoners are in daily contact with terrorist convicts. What we should do is provide them with moderate religious education but right now we don’t have the budget, which means that we are too few and we don’t have enough time.” It is paradoxical that Dar al-Fatwa faces financial constraints because the endowments it has are plentiful and, if invested, could generate enough revenue for itself. For example, in the city of Tripoli alone, Dar al-Fatwa has inherited over 1,200 properties—from plots of land and dilapidated houses to new buildings—and yet runs a small budget. The roots of this contradiction might lie in the red tape plaguing the institution’s work and in the lack of business management training for clerics, but these explanations will not stop the accusations of indifference or corruption that tarnish Dar al-Fatwa’s reputation.

Notably, the consequences of Dar al-Fatwa’s financial woes extend beyond the prison cells. Budgetary constraints also limit the body’s ability to oversee the nature of religious speech in the country’s mosques. First, Dar al-Fatwa is unable to pay a decent salary to Sunni clerics, which might push some of them to seek additional funding from the more generous Salafi associations or Islamist groups accused of being terrorists. An official in Dar al-Fatwa summed up his frustration: “We can only afford to pay some clerics \$100 a month while Gulf-based associations give an extra \$1,000,” he said before adding that the imbalance restricts Dar al-Fatwa’s capacity to control sermons. This problem is particularly acute in marginalized districts where the body’s influence is low; in the neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh in Tripoli, it only controls two mosques out of fifteen. Second, budgetary constraints signify that it suffers from a shortage of administrative staff, making it difficult to hold examinations to verify the religious credentials of its new clerics. This means that Dar al-Fatwa is prone to infiltration by extremist elements. Two of its clerics, Omar al-Atrash and Khaled Hoblos, were arrested in 2014 and 2015, respectively, for having ties to jihadi groups.<sup>25</sup>

Yet despite the urgency to reform the way it is funded and its clerics trained, no significant change has happened to Dar al-Fatwa since the 2014 election of Abdel-Latif Derian as mufti. This paralysis seems to stem mainly from the meddling of Sunni politicians who have traditionally used their leverage at the heart of the institution to engage in patronage, promote cronies, and politicize religious speech so as to serve their interests. One cleric employed by Dar al-Fatwa spoke for many others when he lambasted the institution’s lack of political independence: “Politicians disagree with each other on virtually all issues except on their common interest to keep us at Dar al-Fatwa dependent upon them.” Currently, the mufti is elected by an electoral college comprising nearly a third of politicians, who also constitute a fourth of the Higher Islamic Council overseeing Dar al-Fatwa. These politicians are mostly members of the Future Movement party, which means that they exercise a significant degree of influence over the religious institution’s policy and speech. It is thus hardly surprising that the mufti is regularly criticized for being a “stooge” of the Future Movement—not only in Salafi circles but also in the wider community of pious

Sunnis. Such accusations have become even more pronounced since 2015, when Derian publicly praised the party's head, Saad Hariri, for endorsing the presidential nomination of Sleiman Frangieh, a Christian lawmaker controversial with many Sunnis because of his close ties to the Syrian regime. And when Hariri backtracked months later to instead support the candidacy of Michel Aoun, who is close to Hezbollah, Derian again backed his choice and gave it religious sanction.<sup>26</sup> "Yes, the Mufti is a friend of the Future Movement," summed up one of Derian's close advisers. Yet it is precisely this type of political meddling in religious affairs that weakens the credibility of Dar al-Fatwa's centrist message and slows down the pace of reforms—thus hampering its ability to raise funds and to initiate counter-extremism projects.

## THE SECURITIZATION OF REFUGEES

Reportedly, another group likely to radicalize and embrace jihadism is the community of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This process of securitization—through which refugees are increasingly viewed as a terrorist threat—largely stems from anecdotal evidence and the growing populist tone of state rhetoric. Lebanon's social affairs minister has warned that an alleged 100,000 refugees have "received military training," and the foreign minister has argued that "terrorists have infiltrated the refugees," leading politicians allied with Assad to call for cooperation with the Syrian army and the return of all refugees to Syria.<sup>27</sup> Beyond the political calculations behind such statements, there have also been more "scientific" reports suggesting that refugees in Lebanon are allegedly prone to radicalization.<sup>28</sup> These reports, however, seem more driven by widespread clichés than by hard data from the ground. Statistical evidence instead suggests that Salafi militant groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Islamic State do not enjoy significant support from Syrian refugees in Lebanon.<sup>29</sup>

There is, of course, a limited number of Syrians who have in recent years joined jihadi groups and participated in operations against the Lebanese army and suicide attacks against civilians. Yet it is remarkable how resilient the Syrian refugee community has broadly been to the extremist message, particularly given their increasing vulnerability to considerable challenges in Lebanon. Data collected by the United Nations (UN) suggest that their socioeconomic situation has severely deteriorated since 2012. Seventy-six percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon now live in poverty or extreme poverty (up from 49 percent in 2014), 87 percent are indebted, and up to 91 percent are food insecure.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, their legal situation is fast becoming precarious. Difficulties in paying the \$200 annual fee and providing a Lebanese sponsor—both required by the General Security agency to renew their residency permits—are pushing a growing number of refugees into illegal residency. Some refugees are even avoiding registration with UN agencies, thus depriving them of aid. To address this issue, the General Security relaxed some of its conditions for residency renewal in early 2017, but Syrian refugees continue to report facing significant challenges. By late 2017, a staggering 74 percent of refugees above 15 years old still did not have legal residency. In addition to driving them further into poverty and debt, this also makes it harder for them to fulfill key tasks, such as finding a job and enrolling their children in local schools. Finally, they are suffering from worsening insecurity. Figures from 2015 suggest that more than a fourth of Syrian refugees in Lebanon "do not feel safe," but the statistic may now be higher as anti-refugee protests, harassment, and evictions have since multiplied.<sup>31</sup>

In theory, this situation could easily reinforce the appeal of ideological extremism among refugees, particularly as Lebanese Salafi activists have been working to spread their worldview by providing refugees

with much-needed aid. Officially, of course, they are simply engaged in charitable activities. “We pay the rent of the refugees, and we provide them food and diesel,” proudly stated the leader of a Salafi NGO in North Lebanon. He went on to point out that he liaises with other Salafi-oriented charities in the rest of the country and that their humanitarian impact is greater than ever before, especially as the private Kuwaiti and Saudi donations on which they rely have only increased. But, in reality, they also hope that their charitable work will earn them new Salafi followers. “Our help is unconditional,” stressed the Salafi leader, but “of course, we also run religious classes and hope that our message can convince some refugees.” In some cases, these Islamist activists might even push the refugees to return to Syria to join one of the many large and powerful Salafi rebel brigades fighting the regime and its allies. “We do educate the refugees about the situation in Syria,” cautiously acknowledged the head of the Salafi NGO. “We teach them how to be effective citizens—not just passive refugees.”

Despite such efforts, though, there is no evidence pointing to an indoctrination of the refugees. In fact, the type of indirect pressure that Salafi activists sometimes put on them can even be counterproductive. A refugee in Tripoli echoed others when he expressed his distrust of local Islamists who “think that we are betraying the revolution and should instead be fighting.” Moreover, the fact that Lebanon’s 1 million Syrian refugees are scattered throughout the country and across cities and small settlements rather than concentrated in one area makes it harder for the well-organized but still small Lebanese Salafi community to extend its reach. And, even when their influence affects a settlement, Salafi activists still have to compete with Syrian clerics who are often best attuned to the refugees’ religious customs and traditions. This is especially the case when the Syrian clerical presence is organized like in the case of Akkar, the stronghold of the Commission of Syrian Scholars (Hay’at al-‘Ulama al-Suriyin), a gathering of refugee clerics who are mostly Sufis and from Homs, like many other refugees. “We teach Islam the way it was taught back in Syria,” explained one of its leaders, noting that the group holds courses, celebrates weddings, and issues fatwas on a range of matters. “Through our activities, we were successful in limiting and curbing ideological extremism.”

Thus it appears that while a limited number of Syrian refugees join jihadi groups and go on to carry out various attacks, the reasons have little to do with Salafi ideology. Rather, the nature of refugees’ relationships to such groups seems instrumental and fluid. One refugee who had been about to return to Syria and join Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham said he was inspired by the idea of “taking revenge” for the siege of Aleppo, during which relatives died, but he changed course after being offered a job in Lebanon and saw his prospects brighten. A report by International Alert confirms the extent to which processes of radicalization and deradicalization, sometimes held as evident from the outside, are actually far from linear.<sup>32</sup> This particularly seems to be the case with younger refugees. The head of a school for Syrian youth in Lebanon noticed a correlation between, on the one hand, the rise of extremist beliefs and aggressive behavior among some refugees and, on the other, the extent to which they have been able to recreate communities of solidarity and trust after having suffered traumas. A large-scale investigation by the NGO Save the Children demonstrated that as many as two-thirds of Syrian children are said to have lost a loved one, had their house bombed, or suffered war-related injuries—experiences that likely underlie the fact that 71 percent of them now have post-traumatic stress disorder and 80 percent have become more aggressive.<sup>33</sup> Rather than viewing, as some officials do, Syrian refugees as a security threat—accentuating patterns of marginalization and resentment—they should be treated, educated, and empowered.

## THE LIMITS OF SALAFI EXPANSIONISM

There is no doubt that the revolutionary discourse endorsed by militant Salafi groups and clerics has piqued the interest of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian Sunni communities—as shown by the quick growth of these groups in Lebanon in recent years. Yet, it has also become evident that there are limits to a true expansion of extremist thinking. One reason is that proportionally few within Lebanon's Salafi community sympathize with the Islamic State, an organization many call “criminal” and “terrorist” for killing so many civilians. According to several Salafi clerics, the group did initially succeed to attract some of their younger followers who showed “enthusiasm” after its declaration of the so-called caliphate and others who, in the context of political chaos in Lebanon and sheer violence in the region, became convinced of the need to establish an “Islamic entity.” But they also pointed out that grassroots support for the Islamic State had almost entirely disappeared, replaced by a sense that it had used Salafi texts and ideas “for its interests” and that “it does not represent Islam.”

Some speak more favorably of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, but this is often driven more by admiration for the group's fighting record against the Syrian regime than for its ability to enforce Salafi precepts in the areas it controls. Many also find the two groups to be “two faces of the same coin” and, seven years into the Syrian uprising, express disillusionment.

Another reason is that Lebanon's Salafis are bitterly divided along ideological and political lines. Indeed, Salafism is a broad school of religious thought advocating for a return to the puritanical practices associated with early Islam more than a structured movement with a set of clearly articulated political ideas. Throughout the region, therefore, Salafis are fractured among those who eschew politics to focus on proselytizing and those who believe that political involvement matters. Lebanon is no exception, but given the polarized nature of its local politics, Hezbollah's growing clout, and the war in Syria, another powerful line of fracture relates to which political line Salafis should adopt. These divisions have sometimes become heated, pitting the Hay'at al-'Ulama al-Muslimin, a gathering of mostly Salafi clerics who support the rebellion, against the Liqa al-Salafi, a much smaller platform that one of its leaders claims “represents real Salafism” but is, in fact, close to Hezbollah. Beyond these ideological and political feuds sometimes also lie bitter personal and financial rivalries between clerics who are thirsty for attention and compete over sources of funding. As a result, their own divisions are often irreconcilable, hampering Salafism's credibility.

Moreover, even the militant Salafi clerics who support ideas close to those of al-Qaeda or the Islamic State may help these organizations in Iraq and Syria on moral or logistical grounds but have traditionally rejected the idea of turning Lebanon from a land of support to a land of jihad. One such figure argued that it is impossible to create an Islamic state in Lebanon given the high degree of religious diversity. “Lebanon isn't black or white—it's grey and, as activists, we have to be a part of that society rather than applying on it an imported ideology.” Yet perhaps their realism also stems from an acute awareness of the current balance of power, which would overwhelmingly favor Hezbollah and the Lebanese army in the event of a confrontation. This, at least, seems to have been one of the lessons that some of them drew from the bloody clashes between the Lebanese security forces and the partisans of Salafi clerics Ahmed al-Assir and Khaled Hoblos that rocked Sidon in 2013 and Tripoli in 2014. “These attempts at launching a revolutionary Salafi movement clearly failed,” argued a figure close to the latter to justify why he does not want Lebanon to become “another Iraq or Syria.”

A final factor limiting Salafi expansionism is that while corners of Lebanon's Sunni community might be attracted by the fierce type of political discourse embraced by some Salafi clerics, this by no means seems to translate into an actual embrace of Salafi ideology. For instance, polling data have recently shown that local Sunnis overwhelmingly oppose Hezbollah's intervention in Syria whereas Shias support it and that views are equally split on the issue of Iran's role in the Middle East. But this political polarization has not significantly affected interfaith relations in Lebanon, with the number of Sunnis who accept that Shias are Muslims—a view opposed by Salafi activists—remaining comparatively high.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, when it comes to religious practice, evidence suggests that Salafism still represents a minor trend in a Lebanese Sunni society traditionally quite secularized.<sup>35</sup> Even in Tripoli, often portrayed in the media as a “bastion of Islamism,” a poll showed that while 90 percent of the mostly Sunni Muslim youth “perform their religious duties regularly,” only 9.2 percent agreed with typical Salafi religious precepts, such as finding it “obligatory” that women wear a *niqab* (full body veil).<sup>36</sup> There, Sufi traditions are resilient; they take pride in coexisting with the Christian minority and celebrating the Prophet's birthday—both taboos in Salafism. And, when it comes to electoral behavior, in Tripoli and elsewhere in Lebanon, local populations are more likely to vote for one of the area's leading *za'im* (political boss) than for any of the Islamist parties which, according to polls, typically do not receive higher than 5 percent of the votes.<sup>37</sup> This all suggests that, despite Salafism's rising profile, the religious practices and belief systems of Lebanon's Sunnis are still situated far from those held by the Salafi mainstream.

## ADDRESSING A POLITICAL REVOLT

In conclusion, it seems reassuring that the primary drivers of Salafi militancy in Lebanon might not be as religious or ideological as they appear at first glance, since it points to the continued unlikelihood that parts of the country will act as bases of support for militant groups. Yet it also means that if policymakers wish to contain the threat and prevent its further growth, they should address the roots of this inherently sociopolitical revolt. Even though terrorist attacks have greatly receded since 2014, giving a false sense of stability, militant groups are still able to recruit new sympathizers and they could take advantage of both the political turbulences that might precede upcoming parliamentary polls and the looming instability in security flashpoints such as Lebanon's Palestinian camps and the Beqaa Valley. And, then, the current security-centric approach might no longer be enough to contain them.

While there is no specific profile for the typical recruit of Salafi militant groups, the prevalence of the phenomenon of Qabaday Salafism in deprived neighborhoods nonetheless suggests that social and urban marginalization acts as a driver of recruitment. A key priority for the Lebanese government should therefore be to design an ambitious nationwide plan aimed at reducing unemployment, mitigating the spread of the underground economy, developing infrastructure that provides public spaces and deals with overcrowding, and fixing a crumbling public school system. Only confidence in the state and in its capacity to assure the welfare of marginalized citizens will quash the thirst for a social revolt. Qabaday Salafism, rather than being viewed through the lens of security only, should thus be first understood as a symptom of the degrading social environment in which it embeds itself.

The context of Lebanon's reaction to the Syrian crisis since 2011 has also made matters worse. While the country's political parties all officially pledged to disassociate themselves from the turmoil next door, in

reality, the government did not prevent Hezbollah from intervening militarily on the sides of the Syrian regime even as it jailed Sunnis fighting for the rebellion. This blatant double standard is leading to accusations among the Sunni public that the Lebanese state has become dominated by Hezbollah and the Shias—a political discourse long spearheaded by the Salafis but which has become more mainstream in recent years. To avoid this type of speech from becoming even more prevalent, steps should be taken to pressure Hezbollah into withdrawing the bulk of its troops from Syria, to discuss the future of its arsenal, and to issue a partial amnesty for Sunni militants who may have fought in Syria but not in Lebanon. Lebanon's prison and justice systems should also be urgently reformed to accelerate procedures, improve infrastructure, and ensure the protection of human rights.

Yet the spread of Salafi militancy—far from merely embodying a Sunni pushback against Hezbollah's domination—is also a response to the Sunni elite's failure at tackling the grievances of their co-religionists. Their fast-declining political credibility became visibly evident after the Future Movement suffered major setbacks in the 2016 municipal elections, and it is now at an all-time low. Crucially, this disaffection with politicians is accompanied by a widespread frustration with the way Dar al-Fatwa's Sunni clerics operate, therefore endangering their moderate message. Thus, before empowering centrist Sunni politicians and clerics, they must reform their ways. On the one hand, Dar al-Fatwa must better manage its funds, train its clerics, and monitor the content of religious speech; on the other hand, Sunni politicians must give the institution greater independence and leverage. To regain the trust of their electorate, Sunni politicians must also make their work more transparent, embrace civil society, encourage the rise of a new generation of young activists, and commit much more effort and money to help the less privileged sections of society. The current state of relative political stability offers a unique window of opportunity for policymakers of all stripes to come together and enact much-needed sociopolitical reforms.

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## THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

# LOCALISM, WAR, AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF SUNNI ISLAM IN SYRIA

KHEDER KHADDOUR

### SUMMARY

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

### Key Themes

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

## Findings

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

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

## STATE CONTROL AND LOCALISM PRIOR TO THE SYRIAN UPRISING

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

### The State as Overseer of the Islamic Field

The state has routinely been involved in religious matters in Syria and has generally exercised its authority through three mechanisms. It has controlled the ownership and financing of religious institutions; it has exerted bureaucratic control over the appointment of religious figures, such as imams, in both larger and smaller urban areas; and it has had a final say over the curricula of religious schools. In 1992, for instance, about 5,000 mosques were under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments. In official propaganda it was said that no leader had supported the construction of mosques as had then president Hafez al-Assad following the “corrective movement” that brought him to power in 1970.<sup>1</sup> This claim contributed significantly to Assad’s legitimacy.

In the 1960s, the state set up the first state-run, pre-university level Islamic institutes in Syria’s history, as well as an institute of further education for clerics.<sup>2</sup> Religious affairs were centrally run by the state bureaucracy prior to the uprising—primarily through the Ministry of Religious Endowments and various local administrative bodies. Religious figures, whether in cities or villages, traditionally interacted with and depended upon elites and regime officials in Damascus and Aleppo. These cities were also home to

Syria's largest official religious schools, to which schools in the rest of the country were connected through personal ties among imams, employees of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, and security officers—with each security branch having an office for dealing with religious affairs. There were also ties based on ideology, namely with regard to the types of Islamic jurisprudence that schools practiced.

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

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

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

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

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

The man leading this effort was Assef Shawkat, Bashar al-Assad's late brother in law. From 2005 to 2009 he served as director of Military Intelligence and was effectively in charge of religious affairs. During his tenure, the priority was to counter the rise of Salafi ideologies by controlling religious curricula and

overseeing religious institutes. Under Shawkat's guidance, the Ministry of Religious Endowments interfered extensively in the Hosari institute's curriculum, insisting that it devote many more hours of instruction to "universal subjects," such as math and physics. Members of multiple security services, including Military Intelligence, State Security, and Political Security, would visit the institute to receive reports on its actions, and its leading figures had to meet with the religious endowments minister every Tuesday.<sup>11</sup> Lessons were prohibited after evening prayer without the prior approval of the security services.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The example of Berwa also illustrates the expanding role of local imams and how their appointment was driven by local realities. The town is located in Rural Aleppo Governorate and is inhabited by around 7,000 people of Sunni tribal and nomadic background. Traditionally, the state would appoint an imam

from Aleppo City to serve in Berwa's sole mosque, as it was difficult to find locals who had studied Islamic law. But in 2004, a Berwa native was appointed for the first time. He had obtained a diploma in Islamic law and was named after prior approval of the local *mukhtar*, or local administrative official, and the security services in Aleppo. The imam was young and had limited experience, but built up his credibility after the *mukhtar* tasked him with resolving local disputes.<sup>13</sup>

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

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

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

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

By the time the Syrian uprising began, therefore, the heightened localism of Islamic institutions outside Syria's major cities had to an extent reduced central state control over the religious field. Mosques came to

serve a wider social role than simply as places of worship, while the influence over religion of local figures or families was also enhanced, based on their local legitimacy. However, localism was not the sole factor that lessened the state's sway over the Islamic field. Individuals close to the regime would also contribute to that erosion.

### Regime-Linked Businessmen and the Religious Sphere

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

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

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

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

## THE ISLAMIC SPHERE DURING THE SYRIAN UPRISING

The uprising accelerated the decentralization of the Islamic field in Syria. It broke the linkages between smaller and larger urban areas, between local religious leaders and formal religious institutions, and between major and minor mosques. As armed groups took territory, they further isolated localities from one another even as they were compelled to operate through existing family structures around local mosques. This

fragmentation of the religious landscape would have major repercussions on the dynamics of conflict, creating spaces for outside actors to intervene through local armed groups with a religious identity.

### Local Mosques and Armed Groups

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

For example, protesters in the town of al-Tall mobilized around the mosque controlled by the Arnous family, rather than the Great Mosque controlled by the Ministry of Religious Endowments. In May 2011 the protesters asked Arnous to convey three demands to the regime: that the security services cease arresting people; that the regime address ownership issues relating to the military takeover of local land in the 1970s and 1980s; and that information be provided about family members arrested in the 1980s for working with the Muslim Brotherhood and whose fate remained unknown. Arnous was unable to deliver on any of the protesters' demands and was also reluctant to oppose the regime. These factors, and the harassment he faced from rebels for not adopting a stronger stance against the regime, pushed Arnous to move to Damascus in summer 2012, then later to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

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

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

Relations between local religious leaders and militias in Ehsim, in the Jabal al-Zawiya area of Idlib Governorate, exemplified such dynamics. During the early phases of the fighting in 2012 and 2013, the rebel groups Jabhat Thuwwar Suriyya and Suqour al-Sham controlled the Western and Eastern Mosques in the town, respectively. The imam and *khatib* in each mosque was linked to the armed group controlling it. In the Western Mosque the relationship was especially close, because of tight connections among the

Fadl family from which the imam hailed, the mosque itself, and the armed faction. By 2013, the more radical Ahrar al-Sham group had become increasingly active in Jabal al-Zawiya, without however daring to interfere in the family management of mosques.

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

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

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

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

## The Return of the Syrian Regime and Religious Dynamics

As government forces began retaking areas from the rebels after 2015, they further fragmented the religious landscape. In opposition areas, religious figures who had gained prominence during the uprising continued to retain their role, while preaching more radical versions of Islam. In areas retaken by government forces, the regime was obliged to devise ways to reintegrate religious institutions into the state. Until now the regime has not formulated clear-cut policies in this regard and devising a long-term solution remains a work in progress.

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

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

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

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

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

In 2014, political dynamics in the region south of Damascus provided a good illustration of how the regime was able to use local rivalries to its advantage during the conflict.<sup>21</sup> Many clerics in the region had

at first sided with rebel factions and rejected calls for reconciliation with the regime, while others played a more ambiguous game. One cleric, Anas al-Tawil, mediated a long truce with regime forces, even as others, by exploiting rifts among armed opposition groups, actually assisted it in reconquering territory.<sup>22</sup>

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

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

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

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

If the example of East Ghouta showed how the regime exploited local dissensions to reconquer opposition-held areas, the example of al-Tall illustrated how the regime used religious figures in local reconciliations, allowing it to reimpose its authority. During the first decade of the century, the town saw a proliferation of new mosques built and sponsored by large families. These mosques featured young *khatibs*, many only in their twenties, and were built in neighborhoods dominated for the most part by wealthier, well-known families. Each mosque had an official name given by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, but was known locally by the name of the family that had built it. These families also paid the salaries of the imams and *khatibs*.

The most prominent religious figures in al-Tall were Rabie Shammo, the *khatib* of the Ikhlas Mosque; the previously mentioned Salem al-Arnous, *khatib* of the Arnous Mosque; Mansour Mansour, the imam

of the Bibeh Mosque; and Mohammed Hijazi, the *khatib* of the Basha Mosque.<sup>26</sup> With the exception of Mansour, all of these figures had enjoyed close ties with Damascus before the uprising. They attracted large crowds, many of them younger locals drawn by the clerics' willingness to address contemporary issues, unlike other mosques.<sup>27</sup> To accommodate the crowds, the Arnous Mosque even had to expand its facilities.

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

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

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

One of the most prominent returnees was Badr al-Khatib, imam of the Great Mosque and regarded as a Baath supporter. His return showed how the regime would rely on local allies to reassert its authority. During the siege of al-Tall, local rebels did not harm him out of fear of provoking a dispute with his family. Yet they did try to remove him from his mosque. Residents intervened to protect him, but he ended up fleeing to Damascus at the end of 2013. When the regime took back al-Tall, it appointed Khatib to his old position.<sup>29</sup> Today, he acts as the local mufti, and the regime relies on him to hire other imams in the area. This has turned him into a central figure in the regime's local networks of religious institutions and figures.

Al-Tall also provides an example of how, once the conflict had ended there, the regime expanded local religious networks in towns it had recaptured to consolidate its hold over religious institutions. Its dealings with the Qubaysiyat association in 2018 demonstrate this. The association, which focuses on the role of women in Muslim life, was established during the 1960s and named for its founder Munira al-Qubaysi. Before the uprising, the association's sole center was in Damascus, and it controlled a network

of religious schools for educating females. Students in a location such as al-Tall would have had to go to Damascus to study in its institutions. In late winter 2018, however, the regime allowed the association to establish a branch in al-Tall, thereby introducing a less strict method of control as part of its expansion into local networks. As of early 2019, the Qubaysiyat was running its activities in three mosques in al-Tall—the Moaz bin Jabal, Fardus, and Noor Mosques.<sup>30</sup> This demonstrated how the regime has reasserted itself through friendly local institutions and families rather than by simply attempting to impose central authority over the religious sphere.

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

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

## CONCLUSION

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

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

Years of war have resulted in a stronger sense of Sunni identity among local religious actors than what had existed before the conflict. This will probably bring about the entrenchment of “state imams,” in other words clergy less able to engage with their own Sunni community, through the policy of normalization by

force adopted by the regime in areas its controls. At the same time this will leave religious institutions in opposition areas outside the framework of Syria's official Islamic institutions, where they will remain more radical and isolated—their radicalism employed to discredit the official religious establishment. All this will make it much more difficult for the regime to use Sunni Islam as it had before—a unifier to enhance its own power and legitimacy.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

# RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE POLITICS OF ISLAMIC ENDOWMENTS IN IRAQ

HARITH HASSAN

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic endowments are key components of Iraq's religious field. They can be divided into two main categories. First, mosques, shrines, and other public religious sites. Second, lands, real estate, and any kind of property declared as such by their original owners. The way they are governed and structured is essential in shaping the experience of lived Islam and in defining the relative positions and roles of religious authorities. Mosques and shrines are key nodes of public gatherings, giving those in charge of them platforms to disseminate their messages and assert themselves in the religious domain. They often have facilities that can be used for commercial purposes or as real estate, and they receive donations and charities from pilgrims and philanthropists. Together with other endowments, they generate revenue that provides the authorities that control them with the means to sustain themselves. Some, especially the shrines of Shia imams and leading Sunni figures, also boost the social status and religious authority of those supervising them.

The terrain of Islamic endowments has seen a major restructuring after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, which resulted in significant changes that had an impact on the roles and relative positions of religious authorities. This led to the growing confessionalization of the religious field and to opposing effects on the Sunni and Shia religious authorities. It led to fragmentation and deepened rivalries among religious actors in the Sunni religious field, while resulting in the consolidation and centralization of Najaf's religious authority in the Shia religious field.

## ISLAMIC ENDOWMENTS AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE RELIGIOUS FIELD

Prior to 2003, the government controlled most of the important Islamic endowments in Iraq through the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA), which was the main official tool to strictly watch

over the religious domain and propagate a unified, state-sanctioned message in mosques.<sup>1</sup> Shia shrines and Sunni mosques were run by administrators appointed by MERA, often selected based on their demonstrated loyalty to the regime. Imams and preachers were mostly state employees or licensed by MERA and the local Baath Party branch, and the party and other security organs monitored their sermons.<sup>2</sup> Clerics and imams who did not follow the instructions of the government or whose sermons contained messages inconsistent with the official version were labeled as “noncooperative” or “disloyal” elements.<sup>3</sup> They were often sacked or arrested—or even executed.<sup>4</sup>

Shia parties and religious authorities considered the Baathi state anti-Shia by virtue of its oppression of the Shia population and clergy (especially after the 1991 uprising), the execution and assassination of prominent Shia clerics, and the restrictions imposed on the performance of Shia rituals. Although the Baath Party was secular, the regime came to be dominated by Sunni Arabs who were suspicious of the autonomy of the Shia clergy and clashed with Shia Islamists who opposed the regime.<sup>5</sup> Following the fall of the regime, Shia parties and religious authorities sought to alter what they perceived as an oppressive policy designed to obscure Shia identity, of which MERA was seen as one key tool. Yet, even Sunni Islamist parties, primarily the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), were critical of the former regime’s secular tendencies and saw its fall as an opportunity to reassert the position of religion in the public life.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the post-2003 official policy adopted a new model that recognized the autonomy of religious institutions and their right to operate independently in the public sphere. The first step in implementing this model was the decision made in August 2003 by the Provisional Governing Council (formed by the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority to include members of Iraqi political factions in decisionmaking) to abolish MERA.<sup>7</sup> The decision, which was promoted by Shia Islamist parties, in coordination with the IIP, replaced the ministry with confessional offices of endowments: the Office of Shia Endowment (OSHE), the Office of Sunni Endowment (OSE), and the Office of Christian, Ezidian and Sabeian Mandaean Endowments. This was meant to end the state’s control over the religious field and allow Iraq’s multiple sects and religions more freedom to express their identities and beliefs within a new political framework that asserted plurality and the representation of ethnoreligious communities. Yet, this shift in the field of Islamic endowments generated new struggles over the identity of Islamic sites and the jurisdiction of the new confessional endowments. It accelerated the confessionalization of the religious domain and the rivalry among religious actors—between the two confessions and within each one—for status, revenue, and economic profits.

In the context of the turmoil and lawlessness that followed the U.S. invasion, several religious groups competed to control Islamic endowments,<sup>8</sup> which further justified the effort to restructure them institutionally. Yet, assigning mosques, religious sites, and other endowments to the OSHE or the OSE was not an easy task, given that it required setting acceptable criteria to decide what belonged to either office. Many Shia Islamists and clerics were convinced that the former regime had built Sunni mosques and forced philanthropists and donors to register their endowments as Sunni ones, as part of its strategy to obscure the Shia identity.<sup>9</sup> On its website, the OSHE argued that the regime had created many obstacles to prevent donors from endowing resources for Shia mosques or Hussaniyyas,<sup>10</sup> and it said that the office had found documents proving the existence of a deliberate policy to neglect and minimize Shia endowments and religious sites.<sup>11</sup> OSE officials did not agree with this characterization. They argued that MERA had already made a useful distinction between Sunni and Shia endowments in its institutional structure, and that it was possible to rely on this in developing the new structure.<sup>12</sup>

An advisory committee including Shia and Sunni clerics and experts was formed in 2004 to distribute Islamic endowments. According to an OSE official, it made progress in the allocation of personnel, endowments, and most religious sites to the two offices. Still, problems remained with regard to the endowments that the representatives of the two sides claimed to be part of their jurisdiction or disagreed on determining their confessional identity.<sup>13</sup> A Committee of Separation and Isolation (*lijnata al-Fak wal-'Azl*) was then formed in 2008, with among its members a judge, an official of the Property Claims Commission, a representative of the Directorate of Land Registry, and representatives of the OSE and the OSHE. Initially, the committee agreed on four main criteria to determine the identity of endowments and religious sites: the endowment registry title, the confessional identity of the donor, the donor's documented will with regard to which confessional group the revenue or services targeted, and any other evidence that could help determining the confessional identity of the donor. However, this was not enough to solve all disputes between the OSHE and the OSE as they did not agree on a unified method to apply these criteria with regard to hundreds of mosques, buildings, and land plots. Therefore, they decided to resort to the courts in order to determine the identity of disputed endowments. But even this was not enough to solve the disputes, especially given that in many cases there was a lack of documentation as well as unwillingness, by the OSHE and Shia groups in particular, to recognize some of the documents that they argued had been forged by the former regime. As a result, the meetings of the committee rarely ended with a clear agreement on the points of contention.<sup>14</sup>

## CONFESSIONALIZATION OF ISLAMIC ENDOWMENTS

The restructuring of the Islamic endowments domain accelerated the process of confessionalization of the religious field in Iraq, which was reinforced by the deepening sectarian divide, violence, and rise of ethnosectarian politics after 2003. As a result, the boundary between the two Islamic confessions has been further solidified and neutral spaces became points of contention rather than of cohabitation. The “Shiaization” or “Sunnization” of religious sites reflected the new dynamic that reshaped the Islamic endowments domain and the urban space in which these sites functioned as markers of collective culture and identity.

One significant example of the process of confessionalization is the shrine of the tenth and eleventh Shia imams in Samarra, a predominantly Sunni city. The shrine was historically administered by a Sunni family with a Sufi background. In December 2005, the parliament passed a law for the management of Shia shrines, commonly known as *'atabat*, that assigned the responsibility for their administration to the OSHE. Several Sunni religious authorities and Samarra residents objected to this arrangement. The first OSE president, Sheikh Abdul Ghafur as-Samara'i, a native of the city, publicly criticized it, arguing that Samarra was a Sunni city and its inhabitants had always held the shrine in respect and protected it.<sup>15</sup> In 2012, the federal court rejected a lawsuit presented by the OSE regarding the legal basis upon which the jurisdiction of the OSHE was extended to the shrine.<sup>16</sup> Attacks on the shrine by Sunni jihadists in 2006 only reinforced the Shia belief that it was located in an unfriendly environment and needed special care and protection. This is why Muqtada al-Sadr ordered his Saraya as-Salam militia to be deployed to Samarra to protect the shrine when the self-proclaimed Islamic State began to march toward the city in 2014. Recently, some residents and Sunni officials have accused the OSHE and Shia militias of orchestrating a campaign to illegally control commercial and residential buildings surrounding the shrine as part of a policy to cause demographic change in the area.<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, some of Baghdad's historical mosques have been contested as the OSE and the OSHE claimed the right to manage them. These disputes have been driven by attempts on each side to assert its narrative about the history and identity of each mosque and its surrounding area. One example is al-Assiffiyya mosque in the center of the city. Built in 1017 and renovated in the nineteenth century, the OSHE claims it contains the grave of the prominent Shia theologian Muhammed bin Ya'qub al-Kullaini (846–941), while Sunni authorities claim the mosque, which for a long time was associated with the Sufi order of al-Mawlawiyya, contains the grave of the Sufi scholar al-Harith al-Muhassibi. Both the OSHE and OSE claimed the right to supervise the mosque until this dispute was resolved in favor of the former a few years ago.

Other disagreements took place with regard to the historical al-Khillani mosque in the center of Baghdad, which the OSHE appropriated based on the common Shia belief that it contains the grave of Muhammed bin Osman al-Omairi, one of the four deputies of the twelfth Shia imam, a claim that the OSE and other Sunni clerics dispute.<sup>18</sup> Both mosques came under the supervision of the OSHE despite the continuous objections of OSE officials, which reflects a pattern in post-2003 sectarianization and assertion of Shia hegemony in Baghdad. This hegemony became possible partly because of the dominance of Shia groups in state institutions and partly because of the success of Shia militias in quelling their Sunni counterparts.

A similar dispute emerged with regard to several Islamic endowments in Mosul and was exacerbated after the liberation of the city from the Islamic State. The OSHE demanded that twenty mosques in the city, some carrying the names of Shia historical figures, be placed under its jurisdiction, but the then governor of Mosul, Atheel al-Nujaifi, refused this request and emphasized their Sunni identity.<sup>19</sup> When the Shia militias gained more influence after the liberation of the city, they sought to take over these mosques or to assert the OSHE's authority over them. The OSE and Sunni politicians complained, deeming this an attempt to change Mosul's identity.<sup>20</sup>

Another dimension for these disputes was the location of Islamic endowments. Most historical mosques are found in commercial areas and are part of endowments that have stores, residences, or garages attached to them.<sup>21</sup> These extras often provide revenue to the institution or groups managing them, especially in the form of rent paid by tenants or investors who occupy them. Hence, these disputes were not purely religious but also largely linked to economic motives.<sup>22</sup> This dimension is particularly clear in the disputes over the so-called presidential mosques, about fourteen mosques with large facilities whose construction was ordered by Saddam Hussein. Some OSHE officials disputed their classification as Sunni and demanded their distribution equally between the OSHE and the OSE. Another disagreement emerged as to what qualifies a mosque as "presidential." The OSHE extended this definition to almost all mosques built during the Baathi era, an interpretation rejected by the OSE. In Baghdad, the OSHE eventually accepted the assignment of custodianship of presidential mosques to the OSE (given that most of them had Sunni imams appointed by the government or were located in Sunni areas) with the exception of Ar-Rahman mosque, which is located in the commercial al-Mansour area and is occupied by a Shia group following Sheikh Muhammed al-Ya'qubi, although it is legally assigned to the OSHE.<sup>23</sup> This mosque contains a large garage and land plot that secures good revenue for the institution that controls it. Elsewhere, the presidential mosques were assigned according to the nature of the sectarian majority in each province.

Additionally, the 2006–2007 sectarian fighting that was triggered by the attack on the Samarra shrine led to retaliatory attacks on Sunni mosques by Shia militias, especially in Baghdad. Some of these mosques

were taken over by these militias, as was the case with al-Qibaa mosque in the as-Shaab district, al-Muthana mosque in the Cairo neighborhood, and al-Mudalal mosque in al-Atafiyya. According to Sunni sources, Shia militias forced Sunni clerics to abandon these mosques or simply took over when their Sunni imams ceased to show up out of fear. This was not limited to mosques and other places of worship, but extended to commercial sites and agricultural lands that, according to these sources, belonged to the OSE and were taken over by the OSHE, with the help of militias or security forces.<sup>24</sup> In its defense, the OSHE argued that most of these Islamic endowments were in Shia areas and that the former regime had assigned to them Sunni clerics as part of its anti-Shia policy.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly true with mosques such as ar-Rashad, which is located in Sadr City and was contested in the 1990s between the Sadrists and the Salafists. After 2003, the Sadrists controlled the mosque and renamed it al-Sadrayn mosque.

In sum, the confessionalization of Islamic endowments has been part of a broader dynamic of sectarianization that accelerated after 2003. On the one hand, it reinforced the segregation of religious identities and minimized the shared Islamic memory and public spaces that would otherwise serve as points of reference for cross-sectarian solidarity. On the other hand, this separation gave public recognition to Iraq's multi-confessional fabric, allowing a space for different religious identities to be freely expressed in the public sphere. Yet, in the context of sectarian polarization and the competition of narratives and memories, this display of "differences" was in many cases a cause for tension, or even violent clashes. While there are indicators that, following the defeat of the Islamic State, sectarianism has become less dominant in shaping sociopolitical polarization, Iraq still faces the difficult challenge of reaching a balance between the need to recognize its multi-confessional fabric and the need to reconstruct a cross-sectarian identity, which means cultivating shared collective memories in the public space.

## ISLAMIC ENDOWMENTS AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE SUNNI RELIGIOUS FIELD

The disputes and rivalries triggered by the confessionalization of the Islamic endowments' management were not only inter-confessional but also intra-confessional. This was particularly obvious in the case of Sunni endowments, given the fragmentation of the Sunni religious field and the absence of a dominant religious authority within it. Unlike the Shia field, which has a discernible clerical hierarchy presided by the grand marja', there is no such hierarchy in Sunnism. This can be partly attributed to the long history of identification with the state among Sunni religious authorities, and the fact that MERA had effectively controlled Sunni religious institutions and that most Sunni clerics were state employees. MERA played the leading role in the management of Sunni endowments and religious schools and institutions, but it failed to exert the same degree of control over the Shia religious sites, as well as schools and seminaries (known as *hawza*). The *hawza* have a long tradition of autonomy from the state, a more informal setting of teaching and knowledge production, and a stronger presence of non-Iraqi, primarily Iranian, senior clerics who have a transnational base of support.

The creation of the OSE generated a new dynamic within the Sunni religious field, leading to rivalries among different groups. Initially, the Provisional Governing Council in place in 2003–2004, in which the IIP was the largest Sunni party, selected Adnan al-Dulaimi, an Islamic scholar who once was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, to be the OSE president (a ministerial-level position). This kicked off a

competition between the IIP and other groups such as the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), led by Harith al-Dhari, as each claimed to be the true representative of the Sunni community. However, the opposition of the AMS to the U.S. occupation and the nascent new state institutions ultimately weakened its position and played into the hands of more pragmatic elements. Eventually, other clerical networks and institutions entered the competition, sometimes by promising to decouple the management of Islamic endowments from political interests.

In August 2005, the Transitional Iraqi Government (in place in 2005–2006) appointed Abdul Ghafur al-Samara'i, a moderate cleric with Sufi roots, as the new president of the OSE, while Dulaimi became the head of the Sunni block in the parliament and took stances that were critical of the government, accusing it of collaboration with—or indifference to—Shia militias that targeted Sunni communities.<sup>26</sup> Samara'i had to deal with a difficult scene, given the fragmentation of the Sunni religious field and the influence of radical forces in a context of sectarian polarization and rampant violence. To gain political support, he coordinated with the IIP, and was accused by hardline groups, including the AMS and jihadi factions, of being a puppet of the Shia-dominated government. This criticism escalated when in 2007 he forced the AMS to close its office in the large Um al-Qura mosque in al-Karkh in Baghdad and hand it to the OSE.<sup>27</sup> In August 2011, Samara'i survived a suicide attack, likely perpetrated by the group that called itself the Islamic State of Iraq. The attack, which happened when Samara'i and several IIP members were attending a collective prayer, caused several casualties, including the death of an IIP member of parliament.

In 2012, the parliament passed a law for the Office of Sunni Endowment.<sup>28</sup> The law gave it several responsibilities such as the management of endowments, investing their revenues, and supporting Sunni religious and philanthropic institutions. According to Article 4.2 of the law, the OSE president shall be nominated by the Council of Ministers and his nomination approved by the Iraqi Jurisprudential Congregation (IJC), an institution formed by the Council of Senior Scholars of Iraq and consisting of five Sufi and five Salafi scholars, headquartered in the prominent al-Imam al-A'zam (Abu Hanifa) mosque in Baghdad. The IIP helped create this institution to partly counter the AMS and partly serve as a collective supreme religious authority for Sunni communities. The law, which the IIP played a key role in drafting and was certified simultaneously with a law for the Office of Shia Endowments, aimed to add more structure to the Sunni religious field.

Samara'i was forced out of office in 2013 after facing accusations of corruption, mainly from his Sunni rivals. As Sunni factions failed to agree on a replacement, then prime minister Haider al-Abadi appointed Abdul Latif al-Humeim as acting president of the OSE in 2015. His nomination was supported by the then speaker of parliament and leading member of the IIP, Salim al-Jubouri, despite the objection of Sunni clerical institutions, such as the IJC, that demanded to be consulted in the selection as stipulated by the OSE law.<sup>29</sup> Humeim, an Islamic scholar and former associate of the Baathi regime from Anbar, led a small group of moderate Sunni clerics and personalities named the Association of Iraq's Ulama and Intellectuals. Other Sunni religious groups, such as the AMS and the IJC, saw him as the choice of the Shia-dominated government, rather than of the legitimate Sunni authorities.

Despite criticism, Humeim went to assert his authority, adopting a moderate discourse and several initiatives for reconstruction and social reconciliation in post-Islamic State Sunni areas.<sup>30</sup> He continued Samara'i's approach of targeting radical imams and preachers, trying to exert further control over Friday sermons. He

announced a campaign to fight extremism and intolerance, and he advocated the professionalization of the production of legal opinions by limiting it to only well-established and certified Islamic jurists.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, Humeim faced competition for power and legitimacy from other Sunni religious institutions, including the IJC, headed by Sheikh Ahmed Hasan al-Taha, who previously was an AMS member. Al-Taha and Abdul Wahab al-Samara'i, his son and a leading member of IJC, have complained that their institution was ignored in the appointment of the OSE president, which has weakened the officeholder and made him susceptible to pressures from interest and political groups.<sup>32</sup> As a result, there seems to be an increasing tension between the OSE and IJC.<sup>33</sup>

The Shia-dominated government has used its power to appoint the OSE president as a means to strengthen loyalist or nonhostile elements within the Sunni religious field. It was concerned that a critical or disloyal OSE president would ally with Sunni insurgents. This can be understood as a policy aiming to reshape the Sunni religious field by directing OSE-related patronage to the government's allies and pushing out disloyal elements.

Likely, the fact that some of IJC members, primarily Sheikh Rafi' al-Rifa'i, who also carries the title of *mufti ad-diyar al-Iraqiyya* (the mufti of Iraqi territories), adopted an antigovernmental stance and even supported the Sunni protests against the government of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006–2014), played a role in deepening the suspicion of the government and other Shia groups toward the IJC. Yet, this governmental policy posed a problem regarding the legitimacy and representativeness of the OSE president, stressing the belief among many Sunni scholars and clerics that the government was biased and had an interest in weakening their independence. As a result, the opponents of the government's handling of this matter have often argued they are driven by a genuine commitment to defending and preserving Sunni identity, which they feel is under attack. Abdul Wahab al-Samara'i says: "We want to avoid extremism, without seeing our identity fully absorbed by the other (referring to the Shia sect)."<sup>34</sup> The first OSE president, Adnan al-Dulaimi, who died in 2017, went as far as saying that there is a systematic effort to achieve the "Shiazation" of Iraq. He said that the government and Shia parties led this effort by controlling Sunni mosques and turning Baghdad's Sunni legacy into a Shia one.<sup>35</sup>

One of the institutions that adopted a different approach by allying with Shia groups to improve its position within the Sunni religious field was Dar al-Iftaa', which is led by Mahdi al-Sumaida'i, who calls himself the grand mufti. Dar al-Iftaa' presented itself as a restoration of the Ottoman-era institution of Iraq's mufti, which lost its prominence after the foundation of the modern state and was abolished by the Baathi government in the 1970s.<sup>36</sup> Neither the OSE nor the IJC accept this. Some made the point that Dar al-iftaa' was in fact a one-man institution and that Sumaida'i was not qualified for the position of grand mufti. The IJC contested him at the Majlis Shura ad-Dawla (an administrative judiciary to resolve disputes between state institutions), resulting in the annulment of his attempt to legalize the institution.<sup>37</sup> This has not prevented Sumaida'i from continuing to present himself as the mufti.

Sumaida'i is a Salafi sheikh who grew critical of jihadi groups, replacing his previous anti-Shia stance with a quietist and pro-government Salafism that won him the support of Nuri al-Maliki's government and Iranian-backed Shia groups.<sup>38</sup> He and his followers managed to take over the mosque of Um at-Tubuul, one of the grandest mosques in the west of Baghdad, in 2013. Sumaida'i initiated a failed attempt to

rename the mosque after Ibn Taimiyya, the controversial medieval Hanbali theologian, while acting as its self-appointed imam. The mosque contains 132 apartments that, according to an OSE official,<sup>39</sup> Sumaida'i seized in order to fund his activities. The OSE contested these steps and resorted to the courts to reclaim authority over the mosque and its residential facilities. Sumaida'i reacted by sending a letter to the OSHE requesting to link the mosque to it, which the OSE considered an attempt to challenge its authority and an unjustifiable move to drag Shia religious authorities into the conflict.<sup>40</sup> Sumaida'i went as far as forming a militia under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), named *Harakat Ahrar al-Iraq*.<sup>41</sup> The likely objective of this move was to use the war against the Islamic State and the affiliation with the PMF to gain more leverage vis-à-vis his Sunni rivals. He frequently met with representatives of Iranian-backed PMF factions and appeared publicly with General Qassim Suleimani, the head of Iran's Quds Force.<sup>42</sup>

The spread of Salafism had an impact not only on Sunni-Shia relations, but on relations within Sunni communities too. This is primarily because of Salafi hostility to Sufism. Iraq includes some of the most ancient and prominent Sufi traditions, such as the Qadiri and Naqshabandi orders. In the 1990s, Saddam Hussein's regime increased its support for Sufi orders as a way to counter Saudi influence and the spread of Salafism and as part of its "faith campaign." This policy continued after 2003, with Sufi groups gaining more freedom and even support from the state and influential political groups. For example, former president Jalal Talabani, in office from 2006 to 2014, who was from a prominent family with a Sufi background, supported the Qadiri order and even appointed the custodian of its main mosque in Baghdad, al-Ghailani mosque.<sup>43</sup> Members of a prominent family in the Kasnazani order, which has noticeable Shia leanings, became involved in politics after 2003, gaining seats in the parliament and joining the government.<sup>44</sup>

Yet, Salafism seems to have gained more ground, especially in the context of the sectarian divide and radicalization that characterized the period after 2003. Some Salafi groups controlled several Sunni mosques in areas such as Fallujah and Baghdad's periphery and used them to propagate anti-U.S. and anti-Shia messages. When the Islamic State controlled major Sunni cities and destroyed Sufi mosques and other Sunni religious sites,<sup>45</sup> it put in action a version of "Sunnism" that challenged a long tradition, which had already been weakened by decades of state secularization and modernization. Even after the defeat of the Islamic State, some mosques in peripheral areas are either controlled by Salafists or host their informal gatherings. According to Hisham al-Hashimi, a scholar of Salafism in Iraq, the OSE and traditional Sunni institutions control mosques in the urban centers, while Salafists have undisputed presence in the mosques located in Baghdad's periphery and other urban peripheries.<sup>46</sup> Most Salafi networks today are quietist, avoiding involvement in politics and focusing their activism on religious matters and ethics. Generally, they offer a more egalitarian Islam than Sufi institutions, attracting the youth who are in search of a plain and less hierarchical religion. Yet, the spread of Salafism reflects the deeper crisis faced by the Sunni religious authorities as they struggle to strike a balance between the radicalizing effect of Salafism and the pressure to moderate the Sunni religious field.

The Sunni religious field will continue to be divided, with the OSE as a key player and a subject for rivalry. The consolidation of its control over religious institutions and endowments will strengthen its authority. Yet, in a domain manipulated by patronage and exclusionary practices, several other actors are concerned that this consolidation will harm their interests and marginalize them materially and ideologically. After the formation of the government of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi in 2018, several Sunni political and religious factions demanded to have a say in the nomination of the OSE president. Still, they find it difficult

to agree on a single nominee, especially since the post attracts several nonreligiously oriented entrepreneurs aspiring to gain a portion of the resources and patronage opportunities that the OSE could provide. This could produce a deal between these factions to apportion the senior positions, and hence the benefits, of the OSE among themselves, which will require placing a compromise figure as the head of the institution. At the same time, the Shia-dominated government will continue to prefer a moderate and conciliatory figure, viewing the OSE as an important tool to weaken radical Sunni elements. In the long term, given the multiplicity of actors and the differences between them, the fragmentation of authority within Iraq's Sunni Islam is likely to continue and the legitimacy and social acceptability of the OSE is likely to remain limited.

## ISLAMIC ENDOWMENTS AND SHIA RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

While the management of Sunni endowments failed to overcome the fragmentation and crisis of authority in Sunnism, the new institutional arrangements for the Shia Islamic endowments were instrumental in the consolidation of religious authority in Shiism. This can be seen in the way its main religious shrines (*'atabat*) have been managed during the last decade.

In the initial period following the creation of the OSHE, there was a competition among Shia factions similar to that among Sunni groups to control Islamic endowments. Several religious groups sought unilaterally to benefit from the symbolic and material resources of religious sites, including highly important places such as the shrines of Shia imams in Najaf, Karbala, Kazimiyya, and Samarra. During the 2004 battle between the U.S. army and Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi, many Sadrist fighters took sanctuary in the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf, with the intention of using its symbolic power to propagate their message of resistance and its facilities to treat the injured and store arms. Around the same time, a Sadrist offshoot group led by Mahmood Hasani al-Sarkhi sought to invade the shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala. A heterodox Shia group, Jund al-Samaa (Soldiers of the Sky), attempted to march on the shrine of Imam Ali in 2007, which led to military clashes with government security forces and ended with a great number of casualties and the death of the group's leader.<sup>47</sup>

Hussein as-Shami, a cleric and an associate of the Da'wa Party, was selected to be the OSHE's first president, through a deal between Da'wa and the other major Shia party, the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (SICI), which obtained another key religious position, that of the head of the Haj and 'Umra Commission. However, Shami's management of the OSHE was strongly criticized by other Shia groups, primarily the SICI and the Sadrist movement.<sup>48</sup> Najaf's religious authority, the *marji'yya*, was not satisfied with his role either, especially after accusations of corruption and mismanagement.<sup>49</sup> Shami was replaced in 2005 by Salih Muhammed al-Haidari, the imam of Khillani mosque, who occupied the position until 2015.

One of the OSHE's main functions is to administer the *'atabat* that attract millions of pilgrims every year and represent key pillars in the construction of the collective Shia memory and identity. In 2005, the parliament passed a new law for the management of the *'atabat* and Shia pilgrimage sites, which gave the OSHE president the authority to appoint the top administrators of the *'atabat* after obtaining the approval of the grand marja',<sup>50</sup> Ali al-Sistani, who represents the highest authority in the Shia religious hierarchy. This was the first time in Iraq's modern history that the role of the grand marja' in supervising the *'atabat* was clearly recognized and legalized, which helped in answering the question of authority that is still unresolved in the Sunni case. Yet, this was only possible because the *marji'yya* managed to maintain

its autonomy from the state, including by depending on funding from Shia communities and wealthy individuals in Iraq and from abroad, and by sustaining an autonomous tradition of learning and status-building that proved to be resilient despite the former regime's attempts at infiltration. This allowed it to emerge as the ultimate authority in Shia communities after 2003, thus forcing Shia parties to try to appeal to it and derive legitimacy from the identification with its leadership.<sup>51</sup>

The 2005 law created the position of secretary general in each of the five major shrines in Iraq (the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf, the Imam Hussein and Imam Abbas shrines in Karbala, the Imam Kazim shrine in Kazimiyya, and the al-Askariyayn shrine in Samarra). The office of the grand marja' was involved in the nomination of the secretaries general, some of whom were representatives of Sistani. Among them were two close associates of Najaf's religious hierarchy who grew to be influential figures, Abdul Mahdi al-Karbala'i, who became the secretary general and later the "legitimate custodian" of the shrine of Imam Hussein, and Ahmed as-Safi,<sup>52</sup> the secretary general and later the legitimate custodian of the shrine of Imam Abbas.

Within a few years, the *'atabat* administrations emerged as powerful entities, presiding over large operations that extended from expanding the shrines' courtyards and building new facilities for pilgrims to supervising the construction and operation of new hospitals, schools, and universities. In doing so, they partly imitated the model of the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad in Iran, which is administered by a foundation whose current chairman, Ebrahim Raisi, was appointed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and was the main rival to Hassan Rouhani in the 2017 presidential election. The *'atabat* administrations benefited from the tax exemption status and other allowances given to them as "religious institutions" beside the government funding for their operational expenses as part of the OSHE budget. This enabled them to undertake several projects of a "worldly" nature. For example, the administration of the Imam Abbas shrine founded companies operating in the fields of food, farming, and construction, whose revenue goes to the administration or is invested in new projects.<sup>53</sup> The administration of the Imam Hussein shrine signed a contract with an Iraqi-British company to build what is intended to be the largest airport in Iraq, despite the reservations of the governor of Karbala about the procedures.<sup>54</sup> Such projects are often decided on and managed by the central or local government, yet the *'atabat* administrations were able to lead these efforts in the shrine cities, largely because of their special status and unaccountability. Although legally they are part of the OSHE, and hence are considered public institutions, their dealings with the sacred space and their connection to the grand marja', who emerged as an extra-constitutional authority after 2003, liberated them from restrictions imposed on other public institutions.

Moreover, schools and universities run by *'atabat* administrations in Karbala attracted an increasing number of middle-class families who preferred to send their children to these paying establishments rather than the free public schools because they offered better quality education.<sup>55</sup> Further, following the 2014 fatwa by Sistani that called on civilians to join the security forces in the fight against the Islamic State, which was announced by the secretary general of the Imam Hussein shrine, the *'atabat* administrations formed new paramilitary groups that participated in the military operations. Among these groups were Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyya and Liwaa Ali al-Akbar. Such groups were sometimes labeled as Sistani's Hashd (Popular Mobilization) to distinguish them from groups backed by the Iranian government.<sup>56</sup>

Many residents in Karbala prefer projects and services conducted by these administrations over those of national and local state institutions that are notorious for their corruption and inefficiency.<sup>57</sup> This is

not to say that there have not been accusations of corruption against shrines administrations.<sup>58</sup> Some, including state officials, think that these administrations artificially amplify their personnel and activities in order to serve private interests, and that their actual funding is from the public purse despite their possession of resources that could self-sustain them.<sup>59</sup>

The activities and projects of the *'atabat* administrations have created new networks with differentiated interests and increasing social, economic, and political leverage.<sup>60</sup> Shia shrines possess great symbolic and material weight that can boost the sociopolitical status of those in charge of them. Besides, the Friday sermons given by Sistani's representative in Karbala became occasions to deliver his teachings to the public and to project his authority beyond the religious seminaries in Najaf. Consequently, by excluding any other clerical voice from the most significant religious platform, the undisputed authority of Sistani as a formally recognized grand marja' was legalized.

For these reasons, it is possible that those networks of status and interest that were created through the new institutional arrangements of Shia endowments will have strong leverage in the selection of the next grand marja' and in resisting attempts to drastically change the existing arrangements for the management of Islamic endowments. Those administrations that exemplify the overlap between the formal (the state-affiliated OSHE) and the informal (the grand marja') are the perfect embodiment of the unique processes through which Shia clerical authority became a key player in the reconfiguration of the sociopolitical order in post-2003 Iraq.<sup>61</sup> This reconfiguration was further legalized and institutionalized in the law of the OSHE of 2012, of which Sistani's office was the key drafter.<sup>62</sup> According to the law, the OSHE president must be nominated by the prime minister after consultation with the grand marja'.<sup>63</sup> Article 13 of the law stipulates that the OSHE is responsible for the management of any endowment that does not have a designated manager or that was transferred to its authority by its founder or by the grand marja'. Article 14 obliges the OSHE to follow Shia jurisprudence and the grand marja''s opinion in the appointment of managers of the shrines and endowments. Moreover, Article 15 stipulates that the OSHE has no authority over religious schools and seminaries and cannot interfere in their affairs without the consent of the grand marja'.

This does not mean that there are no other forces that share the authority over OSHE and *'atabat* with Sistani and his office. Indeed, the latter sought to achieve a consensus among senior clerics regarding some of these decisions. Among them was Muhammed Said al-Hakeem, who is the only Arab among the four main maraji' (plural of marja') in Najaf and is widely seen as a potential heir to Sistani.<sup>64</sup> He belongs to a prominent clerical family in Najaf, and his Arab-ness and Iraqi-ness boost his claim to authority, given that the *marji'yya* has been undergoing a process of "Iraqization" that the new arrangements for the Islamic endowments accelerated. Hakeem played a role in the appointment of the new OSHE president, Ala' al-Mussawi, in 2015 as well as in that of Ahmed as-Safi as secretary general and later legitimate custodian of Imam Abbas shrine. Both are followers of Hakeem. According to an informed source in Najaf, Hakeem's office pressured the OSHE to dismiss Nizar Habl al-Mateen as secretary general of Imam Ali shrine because he did not have friendly relations with the Hakeem's office.<sup>65</sup> Saleem al-Hassani, a Shia commentator, argues that the Islamic endowments terrain in Najaf and Karbala is increasingly polarized between administrators loyal to Sistani and those connected to Hakeem.<sup>66</sup> This indicates that while their restructuring has further asserted the authority of Najaf's religious hierarchy in the Shia religious field, it did not stop internal rivalries. Indeed, these are likely to intensify as a result of the expansion of the social, political, and economic powers of the *'atabat*. At the same time, these rivalries, which are largely

contained by the supremacy and cautious leadership of Sistani, underline the role that the management of Islamic endowments is going to play in determining the positions of Shia senior clerics, especially following the eventual death of Sistani.

## CONCLUSION

Iraq moved after 2003 from a state policy of domination over the religious field to one granting religious actors and institutions more freedom from the state. MERA, the Baathi regime's main tool to control religious affairs, was replaced by confessional offices of endowments. This was seen as a step toward decentralization, democratization, and a more equitable distribution of religious commodities. However, this shift created new conflicts and rivalries. First, between the newly created OSHE and OSE after they inherited MERA's powers and some of its functions as they sought to identify what belonged to each one of them. Second, between the multiple religious and confessional players who recognized that gaining more authority in the management of religious sites and endowments would strengthen their positions vis-à-vis their rivals.

One can see these dynamics as part of a negotiation between the state and religious actors about sharing the management of the religious field. At the same time, given that the state is not a neutral body and its key decisions are made by political actors seeking to promote their interests and worldviews, these dynamics also reflected power struggles in which the weight of the state was often thrown behind forces that had more leverage over decisionmakers and legislators. Accordingly, the OSHE has been in a better position to advance its claims, given the support it has enjoyed from Shia Islamist parties that dominated the government and parliament after 2005.

The confessionalization of Islamic endowments was part of a broader process of sectarianization, which entailed the solidification of boundaries between the two confessions and the formation of religious centers in each sectarian group. This process managed to assert the position of the *marji'yya* as the highest authority in the Shia religious field, formalizing and legalizing its role in the administration of Shia endowments and shrines. This is likely to assert the "Iraqi-ness" of the *marji'yya* and Najaf as the center of the Shia religious hierarchy while significantly reshaping the structure of this hierarchy and the process of legitimizing the authority of the future grand marja'. In contrast, the new institutional arrangement for Sunni endowments has failed so far to overcome the fragmentation of authority in Sunnism. Evidently, the building of a Sunni authority similar to the Shia *marji'yya*, an objective propagated by some Sunni religious and political actors, is still far from being realized. The intra-Sunni rivalries are likely to continue and to revolve around ideological differences and patron-client networks, allowing the state to be a key arbiter in the restructuring of the Sunni religious field.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## NOTES

1. On the Baathi government's religious policy, see Samuel Helfont, *Compulsion in Religion: Saddam Hussein, Islam and, the Roots on Insurgencies in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
2. MERA contained a department dealing with endowments and another with the 'atabat (Shi'a holy shrines). In 1993, the Endowment Department gained more administrative and financial autonomy but remained under the supervision of the minister of endowments and religious affairs. There was also a department responsible for mosques, including for the selection of imams.
3. In my research at the Baath Party Archive at the Hoover Institution, I found regular correspondence between the provincial branches of the party and its central leadership (al-Qiyada al-Qutriyya), in which the branches reported on the imams' adherence to the government's and the party's instructions regarding the content of their sermons. Based on these reports, imams were placed into three categories: Baathi clerics (group A), good clerics (divided into group A and group B), and noncooperative (or bad clerics).
4. One of these cases was that of Aws al-Khafaji, who led the prayer in one of Nassiriyya's mosques and was one of Muhammed al-Sadr's followers. He followed his leader's instructions in delivering Friday sermons, refusing to praise Saddam Hussein (which was one of the government's instructions). He was arrested in 1998, which resulted in clashes between security forces and members of the Sadrism movement. Muhammed al-Sadr's escalation of his criticism of the government after this incident led to a series of events that ended with his assassination in 1999.
5. Abbas Khadhim, *Hawza Under Siege: A Study in the Baath Party Archive* (Boston University: Institute for Iraqi Studies, 2013).
6. This paper covers only Islamic endowments in the Arab part of Iraq and does not discuss the Kurdistan region, which has its own distinct form of management for religious affairs and endowments.
7. Order No. 2, issued by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in August 2003, which dissolved the entities that were militarily and ideologically essential to the Baathi regime, did not include MERA. Likely due to the sensitivity of the religious issue, the CPA preferred to let Iraqis deal with this subject.
8. For example, a group linked to Sheikh Muhammed al-Ya'qubi, a Shi'a cleric, occupied the large ar-Rahman mosque, which the Baathi government had built in al-Mansour, an upper-class neighborhood. Eventually, the mosque became the main headquarters of al-Ya'qubi and his political party, al-Fadila, in Baghdad. Similarly, in 2003 the newly formed Association of Muslim Scholars, a Sunni group, occupied the other large mosque of Um al-Ma'arik, renaming it Um al-Qura. This move was later contested by the OSE, which managed to reclaim its custody of it.
9. Author interview with an official at the OSE, Baghdad, February 9, 2019.
10. Hussaniyya is a congregation hall in which rituals of commemoration of Shi'a imams are practiced and is also used for prayer and for holding mourning gatherings.
11. The Office of Shi'i Endowment, <http://www.al-awqaf.net/webpages/dewan/anjazat/n2.htm> (accessed February 20, 2019).
12. Author interview with Salim Salih Mahdi, a general director at the OSE, Baghdad, February 9, 2019.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Asharqalawsat, March 3, 2006, <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=351080&issueno=9957#.XFB8Cy3Mx0s>.
16. The verdict is available at <https://www.iraqfsc.iq/krarat/1/2012/62.pdf> (accessed February 21, 2019).
17. Author interview with Taha az-Zaidi, member of the Sunni Jurisprudential Congregation, Baghdad, February 8, 2019. A man from Samarra who is now living in Baghdad told me that he owns a building near the shrine but that since 2006 he has been denied access to it due to the security procedures enforced by the security forces and Shi'a militias in the area. The objective, he thinks, is to force him and other landowners to sell their buildings and lands to the OSHE and those allied with Shi'a groups for very low prices.
18. Al-Khulassa, "al-Istela'ala amlak al-waqf al-Sunni: harb wujud wa hawiyya, [The taking over Sunni endowments: the war of existence and identity]" June 2, 2016, <https://www.alkulasa.net/artical/1553/الاستيلاء-على-املاك-الوقف-السني-حرب-و> (accessed January 12, 2019).
19. Al-Khaleej Online, "Al-Iraq: Shakwa lil waqf al-Shi'i taqud al-Nujaifi ila as-sijn thalath sanawat" [a charge by OSHE leads Nujeifi to the prison for three years], January 26, 2018, <https://alkhaleejonline.net/%D8>
20. Yaqeen News Agency, "Al-Waqf al-Shi'i yas'a lil-saytara 'ala "iqarat al-waqf al-Sunni fi Ninewa" [OSHE takes over possessions of OSE in Nienwa], February 13, 2019, <https://yaqeen.net/reports/176808>.

21. Conversation with local residents, Baghdad, February 8-10, 2019.
22. An example is an endowment of about thirty buildings, donated a long time ago by a deceased woman from Samarra in al-Jumhuriyya Street and al-Shorja, the main commercial areas in central Baghdad. Given that the donor descended from Sunni-majority Samarra, the OSE considered the endowment a Sunni one, while the OSHE argued that the donor was of Alawi descent and likely to be Shi'a. According to an OSE official, the OSHE unilaterally decided to deal with these buildings as part of its own jurisdiction by contracting people who occupied them. Author Interview, Baghdad, February 9, 2018. The story was also told to the author by Abd al-Wahab al-Samara'i, a member of the Sunni Jurisprudential Congregation, February 8, 2018.
23. Hossam Khaiallah, "*Lijnat al-Fak wal-'zI wa Hurub al-Awqaf*" [The committee for separation and isolation], Iraq al-Qanun, March, 28, 2014, <http://www.qanon302.net/articles/2014/03/28/15350>.
24. The OSHE has been accused of illegally appropriating 247 plots and commercial sites. Al-Khulassa, "*al-Istela'ala amlak al-waqf al-Sunni*" [The taking over the possessions of the Sunni endowment]. <https://www.alkulasa.net/artical/1553/> /الاستيلاء-على-املاك-الوقف-السني-حرب-و
25. Conversations with Shi'a clerics, Najaf, 4-5 March 2018.
26. See, for example, this interview with Adnan al-Dulaimi in which he accused the Iraqi government of helping Shi'a militias control Sunni mosques. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYvEhhh3BsA> (accessed February 20, 2019).
27. Samara'i stated on this occasion that the "AMS was one of the causes of the murdering, destruction and displacement that inflicted our society." See Almoslim, "*as-Samara'i wal harb ala haiat ulama al-muslimeen: man al-mustafid*" [Samara'i and the war on the Association of Muslim Scholars: who is benefiting?], <http://almoslim.net/node/86002> (accessed February 19, 2019).
28. Iraqi Council of Representatives, "The law of the Office of Sunni Endowments, No.56, 2012," <http://arb.parliament.iq/archive/2012/07/26/القانون-ديوان-الوقف-السند/> (accessed on February 19, 2019).
29. Author Interview with a member of the IJC, Baghdad, February 9, 2019.
30. The Office of Sunni Endowment, "*al-Humaim utliq hamla kubra li i'adat al-naziheen*" [Humeim initiates a large campaign to return displaced people], October 4, 2016 <http://sunni-affairs.gov.iq/ar/-الحملة-كبرى-لإعادة-إلى-الدكتور-الهميم>.
31. The Office of Sunni Endowment, "*Dhimna al-Hamla al-wataniyya limunahadhat al-ghilow wal- tataruf wal-irhab*" [As part of the national campaign to fight bigotry, extremism and terrorism], November 11, 2016, <http://sunni-affairs.gov.iq/ar/ضمن-الحملة-الوطنية-الإسلامية-لمناهضة>.
32. Author interview, Baghdad, February 8, 2019.
33. According to sources working closely with the IJC, the OSE rejected a Turkish offer to renovate the mosque of al-Imam al-A'zam, where the IJC headquarters are. Their interpretation was that Humeim wants to impose his full control over the prominent mosque before allowing such renovation.
34. Author interview with Abdul Wahab al-Samara'i, member of the IJC, Baghdad, February 8, 2019.
35. Interview with Adnan al-Dulaimi, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYvEhhh3BsA> (accessed February 20, 2019).
36. See Dar al-Iftaa's description of its own history, <http://www.h-iftaa.com> (accessed February 19, 2019)
37. Author conversation with Ahmed Mahmoud at-Taha, head of the IJC, Baghdad, February 8, 2019.
38. Author interview with Hisham al-Hashimi, an expert on Sunni Salafi groups, Baghdad, February 9, 2019.
39. Author interview, Baghdad, February 9, 2019.
40. Author interview with an OSE official, February 9, 2019. See also Ar-Rawabit, "*Niza' tadhamuhu al-watha'iq: um at-tubuul*" [A dispute supported by documents: um at-tubbul], January 30, 2017, <http://rawabetcenter.com/archives/39899>.
41. For details, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Hashd Formations of Iraq: Interview with Harakat Ahrar al-Iraq," January 18, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/01/hashd-formations-of-iraq-interview-with-harakat>.
42. Al-Kawthar, "*Al-liwa' Qassim Suleimani yaltaqi mufti abl as-Sunna*" [General Qassim Suleimani meets the mufti], December 4, 2018, <http://www.alkawthartv.com/news/177239>.
43. Author interview with Hisham al-Hashimi, an expert on Sunni Salafi groups, Baghdad, February 9, 2019.
44. Among them were Ghandi Abdul-Karim and Nihru Abdul-Karim, the sons of the order's leader, Sheikh Muhammed Abdul-Karim al-Kasnazan. A third son, Malas, became the first minister of trade in Haider al-Abadi's government, before being forced to resign due to corruption charges.
45. RT, "ISIS jihadists demolish mosques, shrines in northern Iraq," July 5, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/170652-jihadists-destroy-mosques-iraq/>.
46. Author interview, Baghdad, February 9, 2019.

47. BBC News, “*Maqal za’eem jund a;-sama’ fi ishtibakat al-Najaf*” [The leader of jund al-Sama’ was killed in Najaf clashes], January 29, 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/middle\\_east\\_news/newsid\\_6307000/6307349.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/middle_east_news/newsid_6307000/6307349.stm) (Accessed January 3, 2019).
48. See as an example this article published by a website owned by a SICI leader, Jalal Ad-Din al-Saghir, on September 11, 2009, <http://burathanews.com/arabic/articles/7525>.
49. A well-known case is the accusation that Shami exploited his position to purchase the military Bakr University and turn it into the University of Imam Sadiq, where he was main shareholder and president of the board. He denied this and said the university was owned by a philanthropic institution. Buratha News Agency, “*as-Shami yarud ‘la itibamat al-A’raji*” [Shami responds to A’raji’s accusations], April 21, 2011, <http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/122923>.
50. Marja’, which is often translated as “the source of emulation,” is a religious title given to Islamic scholars who obtained the credentials to exert *ijtihad*, that is, deducing Islamic rulings through rational methods. A scholar who obtained the faculty of *ijtihad* and hence became a *mujtahid* is referred to as a marja’ too because lay people are instructed to emulate him and follow his instructions and fatwas. The grand marja’ is a relatively modern institution and it is often given to the *mujtahid* with the largest number of emulators. Adnan Farhan Al Qassim, *Al-Ijtihad inda al-Shi’a al-imamiyya: adwar wa atwar* [Ijtihad and the Imami Shi’a: roles and stages] (Beirut: Dar al-Salam, 2008), 241-276; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1991), 40.
51. As was manifested in 2004 election of the Transitional Assembly and the 2005 election of the first Council of Representatives in which the Shi’a coalition used Sistani’s pictures to appeal to voters. For further details, see Babak Rahimi, “Ayatollah Sistani and the Democratization of the Post-Ba’athIraq,” United States Institute of Peace, June 2007, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr187.pdf>
52. After the end of their terms as secretaries general, the new position of legitimate custodian (*al-Mutawali al-Shar’i*) was created to keep them in charge of these ‘*atabat*, which some criticized as an illegal arrangement, as was communicated to me in conversations with legal experts and people knowledgeable about the subject.
53. The main company is named al-Kafeel, and it opened branches in several parts of Iraq, including al-A’zamiyya, a main Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad.
54. In a rare public manifestation of the competition and disagreements between the formal authority in the city and the ‘*atabat* administrations, the governor of Karbala, Akeel al-Turaihi, spoke about his reservations in a TV interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t76Wun5FpVI&t=1354s> (accessed February 20, 2019).
55. The main school that offers classes at the primary and secondary levels is called al-Kafeel. Recently, a new university called al-Warith, run by the administration of the Imam Hussein shrine, was opened in Karbala.
56. For more details on PMF factions, see Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future,” Carnegie Middle East Center, April, 2017, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC\\_63\\_Mansour\\_PMF\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_63_Mansour_PMF_Final_Web.pdf); Adel al-Gabouri, “The Role of Popular Mobilization Forces in the Iraqi Political Process,” Fikra, October 1, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-role-of-the-popular-mobilization-forces-in-the-iraqi-political-process>;
57. Authors interviews with residents.
58. This point was confirmed to me by an adviser of the government who works on budgetary matters. Despite a common positive perception, some people also point to favoritism and nepotism in the way the shrines and their resources are administered.
59. Not-for-attribution conversation with a legal adviser of the Iraqi government, Baghdad, February 2017.
60. Harith Hasan, “The ‘Formal’ Marja’: Shi’i Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq,” *British Journal for Middle East Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2018.1429988.
61. Ibid.
62. Not-for-attribution, interview with an associate of Sistani, 2016.
63. Al-Waqa’ Al-Iraqiyya, “The Law of the Bureau of Shi’i Endowments, No. 57, 2012.”
64. The other three are Sistani, Muhammed Isaak al-Fayyadh (an Afghan), and Basheer al-Najafi (a Pakistani).
65. Interview with the author, Baghdad, February 11, 2019.
66. Saleem al-Hassani, “*Mushkilat Marji’yyat al-Sistani ma’a al-Mu’amameen al-thalatha*” [The problems of Sistani’s marji’yya with the three Maraji’], Al-Badeel al-Iraqi, November 2, 2011, <http://www.albadeeliraq.com/ar/node/985>.



## THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

# CONTROL AND CONTAIN: MAURITANIA'S CLERICS AND THE STRATEGY AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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### INTRODUCTION

In early May 2018, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) issued a communiqué urging its followers to attack foreigners in countries across the Sahel, including Mauritania.<sup>1</sup> Nearly a year later, jihadists have not made good on this threat in Mauritania, underscoring how far the country has come from the wave of attacks it faced from 2005 to 2011.<sup>2</sup>

Since this violent period, Mauritania has proven remarkably resilient against jihadism, despite the presence of factors that breed extremism: deep social cleavages, corruption, authoritarianism, mounting economic despair, and the presence of nearby jihadi safe havens and foreign battlefields, most recently in Mali. According to government sources, Mauritania has weathered the storm partly due 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. The latter seems particularly important in the official narrative, according to which Mauritania's strong historical tradition of Islamic scholarship and learning serves to inoculate would-be radicals from the misguided ideas of jihadism. But this narrative obscures the deeper socioeconomic roots of radicalization.

Drawing from fieldwork in Mauritania and interviews with officials, clerics, and ex-jihadists, this paper surveys these roots of radicalization and assesses the durability of the regime's response, focusing in particular on the co-option of outspoken Salafi clerics with ties to the jihadists. Though the violent jihadi trend is not dominant among its Islamists, Mauritania has long produced a significant number of jihadists in regional militant groups, especially relative to its small population size. Mauritians continue to fight in jihadi organizations in the Sahel (particularly in Mali) and some have filled high-ranking positions, most notably in al-Qaeda—often as spiritual and legal figures.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, formerly imprisoned Mauritanian

Salafi scholars are given latitude to preach and speak on political matters—sometimes skirting the boundaries of militancy—provided they do not directly threaten the government. The government also allows its media outlets to publish statements by Saharan and Sahelian jihadi groups. Jihadi violence in Mauritania is thus circumscribed by firm state control and conventional military counterterrorism, leavened with tactical permissiveness toward jihadi media and “soft” measures such as clerical intercession with imprisoned jihadists.

The government has put forward this “Mauritanian model” of rehabilitation, societal resilience, and clerical co-option as a template that can be replicated elsewhere, hosting conferences to promote this idea. U.S. officials have sometimes echoed this line, praising Mauritania as an exemplar of “countering violent extremism.”<sup>4</sup> But such methods of dealing with violent jihadism—and Salafism writ large—are not necessarily replicable; rather, they are the products of calculated ambiguity and a political gamble, and are therefore unreliable.

The government’s triumphalist narrative is ultimately built on a shaky foundation, especially given Mauritania’s bleak socioeconomic picture, ongoing corruption, and existing societal tensions—afflictions that violent extremists have exploited in the past.

## THE SOCIOPOLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

A vast desert country with a small population of just over 3 million, Mauritania is beset by a dizzying array of socioeconomic problems and by an authoritarianism that have made it vulnerable to instability and jihadi violence. Literacy hovers at just above 50 percent.<sup>5</sup> Despite the presence of abundant resources—iron ore, natural gas, and fish stocks, to list a few—it currently ranks 157 out of 188 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index.<sup>6</sup> Politically, Mauritania has long experienced repressive conditions, persecution of journalists, and military interference. There have been six coups since 1978. Freedom House describes the country as “not free” and ranks it near the bottom on scores of civil and political rights.<sup>7</sup> International observers and domestic critics see the country’s presidential elections—the latest of which is due this year—as little more than a facade to perpetuate the rule of a narrow clique of military and commercial elites. Corruption among these elites is endemic; Transparency International ranks Mauritania 127 out of 180 countries for perceptions of public sector corruption.<sup>8</sup>

Mauritania is also defined by strict ethno-linguistic and racial stratification. The main divide, which affects political and economic life, is between an elite, former slave-owning caste, the *bidane*—Arab-Berbers, also known as “white moors”—and the *haratine*—former slaves and their descendants (known as “black moors”), who only gained their freedom with the official abolition of slavery in 1981. Slavery is an issue and a history that remains deeply contentious in Mauritania today, with some *haratine* activists and outside rights organizations charging that its practice still persists.<sup>9</sup> These two groups comprise 70 percent of the population; the remaining 30 percent consist of Afro-Mauritanian ethnicities hailing from the south.<sup>10</sup> Relations among these groups are fraught due to disparities in social class and to ethno-linguistic tensions, as well as long-standing bitterness due to a purge of black military officers in 1987, intercommunal violence on both sides of the border with Senegal in 1989, and subsequent state crackdowns targeting black Mauritians. Successive governments led by serving or former military officers have only

worsened the cleavages by concentrating wealth among business networks of elite *bidane*, perpetuating corruption, and keeping the education system decrepit.<sup>11</sup>

At its core, Mauritania's domestic jihadi violence can be seen as a reaction against worsening domestic factors: demographic fissures, socioeconomic misery, corruption, and the policies of successive military regimes that have closed the political space for Islamist currents and free expression. Ideologically, however, militant jihadism has drawn on long-standing Islamic traditions in the country,<sup>12</sup> and especially aspects of the literalist, conservative variant known as Salafism. While Salafism in Mauritania stretches back centuries, its modern manifestation received a boost from the influx of Saudi and Gulf funding beginning in the 1960s as well as the increased travel of students to the Gulf, a process that had actually begun decades earlier during the colonial era.<sup>13</sup> Yet these influences have been molded by Mauritania's local sociopolitical context and endogenous Islamic practices.<sup>14</sup> In particular, Salafism and its militant expression has been shaped and to an extent tempered by Mauritania's heritage of Islamic learning and scholarship. Religious knowledge has historically been accorded a high social status.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the country has a strong tradition of Maliki jurisprudence, stemming back to the period of the Al Murabit (Almoravid), a Berber dynasty that ruled the western Maghreb and Andalusia in the eleventh century.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the centuries, Maliki juridical traditions were perpetuated by Mauritania's *zwaya* caste, a *bidane* tribal network described by one scholar as a "pre-modern occupational group" with Berber roots that saw itself as the guarantor of religious and mystical knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

But perhaps the most unique and influential religious institutions in contemporary Mauritania—with important implications for its counterterrorism strategy—are the Islamic schools known as *mahadir* (singular *mahdara*), which are often described in the press as "desert seminaries."<sup>18</sup> Originating in the nomadism of the desert, and reportedly dating back to the time of the Al Murabit dynasty, they provide free Islamic instruction to males and females, starting at age six or seven and continuing through their twenties.<sup>19</sup> The instruction includes the Quran, the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), as well as Arabic grammar, logic, arithmetic, rhetoric, and literature.<sup>20</sup>

Understudied and the subject of many ill-founded assumptions, the *mahadir* also attracted foreign students from across the Islamic world, some of whom were drawn by an idealized vision of desert austerity that comported well with their picture of Islam during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.<sup>21</sup> The *mahadir* thus served as important forum for the commingling of different Islamic currents, including figures that would become high-ranking members in al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups, many of them from Algeria and Libya.<sup>22</sup> This prompted a heavy government effort from 2005 to 2010 to regulate and oversee the *mahadir*, including the registration and tracking of students and vetting of curricula—what one former minister of Islamic affairs called "control and containment."<sup>23</sup>

## THE RISE OF ISLAMIST DISSENT

The modern jihadi challenge in Mauritania developed against this backdrop of Islamic tradition and more modern demographic, economic, and political changes, including growing authoritarianism and the rise of political Islam. In the 1970s, rapid urbanization driven by severe drought conditions in rural areas resulted in the skyrocketing growth in the share of city dwellers, from 8 percent in 1965 to 25 percent in

1975. The dislocation created by this shift allowed new opportunities for empowering ideologies to challenge entrenched hierarchies, especially among the new arrivals to urban areas who lacked social capital.

Initially, leftist groups had some success among these populations but by the late 1970s Islamist movements had started to supplant them. The rise of the latter was facilitated by an influx of Gulf funding of mosques, charities, and institutes starting in the late 1960s, as well as a concerted Arabization and Islamization program by the country's successive military rulers.<sup>24</sup> By the mid-1980s several Islamist movements had taken root in the country, the strongest of which were the Muslim Brotherhood, the Tablighi Jama'at, Sufi currents, and the Salafists, who became increasingly active in politics and nonviolent activism, particularly against corruption and on behalf of the marginalized *haratine*.<sup>25</sup> But very quickly these movements ran up against the state.

Mauritania's rulers, many of them either military officers or former ones, have approached Islamists with a mix of co-option, regulation, and repression to shore up their sagging legitimacy ever since the establishment of the country as an Islamic Republic in 1960.<sup>26</sup> The reign of Colonel Maaouya Ould Taya is particularly important here, especially in the context of jihadi violence. From 1984 (when he seized power in a coup) until 2005, his rule was marked by seesaw relations with Islamists and Salafists, with a cycle of endorsement, arrests, and pardons, which may have contributed to further radicalization. Under pressure from the international community to democratize, Taya announced the implementation of a multiparty electoral system in 1991. But the opening proved illusory. As Islamists and in particular Salafists became increasingly active, more restrictions followed.<sup>27</sup>

In 1991, Taya tightened the state's control over clerics with the creation of an oversight body called the High Islamic Council.<sup>28</sup> In 1992, he refused to recognize the efforts of Islamists to form the *Umma* political party on the grounds that the country was already an Islamic republic.<sup>29</sup> In 1994, after Mauritania's first municipal elections, in which Islamists and other oppositionists won 17 of 208 districts, the government took even harsher measures, arresting scores and banning several Islamic associations and clubs.<sup>30</sup> A popular cleric named Sidi Yahya was briefly placed under house arrest while other clerics endured far worse, including deportation, imprisonment, alleged torture, and release only after confessions on state television.<sup>31</sup>

Yet the Islamists were not cowed; many simply shifted to educational and charitable activities, or shifted their organizations underground.<sup>32</sup> Others fled abroad only to return with an even stronger resolve against the government.<sup>33</sup> A minority resorted to violence; in 1995, Mauritania saw the establishment of its first jihadi group, Ansar Allah al-Murabitun.<sup>34</sup>

### The Jihadi Challenge

The Salafi jihadi challenge that started under the Taya regime and rattled Mauritania from 2005 to 2011 was sparked by the country's worsening domestic situation and fueled by regional developments. But it also traced its lineage back to a confluence of local and global events decades prior. In the 1980s, young Mauritians went to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, connecting to global jihadi networks in the process; at least five Mauritians would ascend to the upper ranks of al-Qaeda. This generation can be considered the progenitors of the most recent cohort of jihadists and its most famous representative is

Mahfouz Ould al-Walid, hereafter referred to by his *nom de guerre*, Abu Hafs al-Mauritani.<sup>35</sup> His motivations and his journey in and out of jihad carry lessons for understanding the trajectories of more contemporary jihadists.

Born in southwest Mauritania into the Idab-Lihsen, a *zwaya* tribe famous for its religious scholarship, al-Mauritani received a traditional *mahdara* education and graduated from the Saudi-funded Advanced Institute for Islamic Study and Research in Nouakchott.<sup>36</sup> Renowned as a poet, he traveled to Sudan and Afghanistan where he became a judicial and religious adviser to Osama bin Laden before breaking with al-Qaeda before the 2001 attacks on the United States. The United States suspected al-Mauritani of some type of involvement in planning the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and on the USS *Cole* in Yemen in 2000—an accusation that he denies.<sup>37</sup> After a period of detention in Iran, he returned to Mauritania in 2012 where he was imprisoned and then released.<sup>38</sup>

The turn of the millennium saw a new surge of jihadi mobilization. Just as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had mobilized al-Mauritani and others before, young Mauritians were now incensed by the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the suffering of Muslims in Palestine and Chechnya. Those who were unable to travel and fight in these struggles turned their rage on the regime. At the same time, new jihadi battlefields opened in the Sahel and Sahara. The spillover of Algeria's civil war spawned the creation of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, GSPC), which was later rebranded as AQIM.<sup>39</sup> The Taya regime's association with the Western-led war on terror after September 11 provided powerful fodder for militants to mobilize against it. Commenting on this dynamic, one Salafi cleric formerly connected to the jihadists spoke bitterly about the regime's counter-terror "marketplace," arguing that it actually increased the radicalism it sought to diminish. "The person who fights terrorism creates terrorism," he noted.<sup>40</sup>

The latter phase of Taya's rule provided the spark for attacks by jihadists. In April 2003, he undertook the most severe crackdown since 1994, detaining thirty-five Muslim clerics, judges, and other figures. Among them was Mohamed El Hacem Ould Dedew, an immensely popular cleric, who had attracted a following among Mauritanian youth since the turn of the millennium, partly through his criticism of the country's foreign policy, such as its alignment with American counterterrorism and its burgeoning ties with Israel.<sup>41</sup>

Mosques, schools, and institutes outside of state control were shuttered and the minister for Islamic affairs at the time famously threatened to "turn the mosques into bakeries"—a crude boast that would become a lightning rod for jihadists who accused the Taya regime of heresy and hypocrisy.<sup>42</sup> In the years that followed, coup attempts (in June 2003 and August 2004) gave further pretext for the government to go after Islamists, even though there is no evidence they were connected.<sup>43</sup> The alleged torture of those detained was cited later by young jihadists as part of the motivation for the wave of violence that followed.<sup>44</sup>

That wave started in June 2005 when over 150 GSPC fighters stormed a military base in the country's northeast, killing fifteen Mauritanian soldiers. In a statement, the GSPC decried the regime's association with the war on terror. Coincidentally, perhaps, the attack happened two days before the U.S.-led Flintlock exercise was supposed to take place in which 400 U.S. Special Forces troops trained alongside soldiers from Sahelian countries, including Mauritania.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the GSPC stated that the attack was also "to avenge our brothers imprisoned by the miscreant regime in Nouakchott."<sup>46</sup>

Over the next six years, Mauritania was rattled by fourteen attacks on its soil, conducted by Mauritanian GSPC and AQIM cells, as well as cross-border attacks by those same groups operating out of northern Mali. The terrorists struck foreign targets—embassies, aid workers, and tourists—as well as the regime’s security forces.<sup>47</sup> The scale and ferocity of the violence was unprecedented in the country, prompting a flurry of introspection and reflection among local and foreign observers.

### Who Are the Jihadists?

Profiles of Mauritanian jihadists—imprisoned suspects as well as those confirmed killed at home and abroad—come from government sources and must necessarily be treated with caution. Still, ethnic and socioeconomic patterns can be discerned. According to one widely cited case, out of seventy arrested persons (included those accused of violence and their supporters), *bidane* accounted for nearly 75 percent while *haratine* and Afro-Mauritanians made up 17 percent and 9 percent respectively.<sup>48</sup> Economically, the majority of them were from middle- or lower-income backgrounds, and most were under the age of thirty.<sup>49</sup> Other common experiences seemed to link their lives: underemployment and delinquency, service or attempted service in the army, followed by a conversion to Salafism in a mosque and then recruitment and training for jihad, usually in northern Mali, Algeria, or, less frequently, remote parts of Mauritania.<sup>50</sup> Many passed through a *mahdara*, though, as mentioned above, officials and scholars deny that this was the direct source of radicalization or recruitment.<sup>51</sup> Even so, the presence of jihadists from Libya, Algeria, and Mali in these schools spurred a concerted government effort to monitor foreign attendance starting in 2005.<sup>52</sup>

Another data set provided by a Mauritanian scholar connected to the rehabilitation effort comprises twenty-one deceased Mauritanian jihadists, four of whom died in the country and the rest outside it. Here too the vast majority of them were young, usually between seventeen and twenty-one years old, and overwhelmingly *bidane* (only four were *haratine*).<sup>53</sup> One of them, a twenty-two year old member of the *haratine* named Abu Ubayda al-Basri, who attacked the French embassy in 2009 in Mauritania’s first suicide bombing, seems to have embodied many of the common traits among jihadists, especially the alienation born of urbanization.<sup>54</sup> Having moved to Nouakchott from the desert town of Dar El-Barka, his working-class parents raised him in the hardscrabble neighborhood of Basra. He was the fourth of eight children and his upbringing was not especially pious, according to his mother. Though he avoided petty criminality, his early life was marked by successive failures: two failed attempts at his baccalaureate and a rejection from the gendarmerie in 2008.<sup>55</sup> That same year, he left home, apparently to attend a jihadi training camp in Algeria or northern Mali, based on a subsequent video released by AQIM.<sup>56</sup>

The story of al-Basri’s underachievement and the troubled family lives and criminality of other suspects have given officials a useful diagnosis of the root causes of jihadism. They often add that jihadi violence was enabled by a faulty or “incorrect” understanding of Islamic texts.<sup>57</sup> To be sure, these psychological, socioeconomic, and educational dimensions exist. But what is clear from the pronouncements of several prominent jihadists is that their use of violence is also politically motivated and directed against real and well-articulated grievances, such as Mauritania’s relations with the West, authoritarianism, torture, and corruption.

Nowhere is this political dimension more apparent than in the worldview of a pivotal cell leader in Mauritania’s AQIM network, Khadim Ould Semane. A thirty-something former used-car dealer, he received

part of his education at a Sufi school in Senegal before drifting back to Nouakchott. He reportedly led a bohemian lifestyle that included frequenting nightclubs before his “awakening” and attendance at radical mosques. Angered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he went to northern Mali and, at some point, was reportedly directed by the AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar to set up clandestine cells in Mauritania.<sup>58</sup> Swept up in Taya’s arrests of jihadists in 2005, Ould Semane escaped from prison in 2006 only to be captured again in 2008.<sup>59</sup> In a 2006 interview, he listed his motivations, which included the corrupting threat of foreign influence on the oneness of God (*tawhid*), the pervasive role of U.S. and Israeli intelligence, the need to liberate Muslim lands from unbelievers, and especially the torture of Mauritanian clerics.<sup>60</sup> Discrimination by the regime toward citizens of the country’s south also featured heavily in these accusations of torture.<sup>61</sup> (Ironically, many of the clerics cited by Ould Semane were later deployed against him during a government-sponsored program of re-indoctrination and rehabilitation.)

## THE GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE: BLENDING CRACKDOWN AND DIALOGUE

Mauritania’s government confronted the jihadi challenge through a number of “hard” counterterrorism measures that included arrests, raids, the creation of new military and intelligence capabilities, strengthened border control, and increased cooperation with both the United States and regional neighbors.<sup>62</sup>

But it also took the fight into the realm of theology and doctrine to dissuade imprisoned jihadists (a vague and broad category that included those who committed violent acts, supported them, or sympathized with them) of the legitimacy of violence against the state—what one former minister of Islamic affairs calls “a war of ideas.”<sup>63</sup> In pursuing this “soft” counterterrorism approach, the state mobilized its religious bureaucracy into lengthy sessions of dialogue, debate, and re-indoctrination with the jihadists combined with programs to help them reintegrate into society through the intercession of family members and jobs training.<sup>64</sup>

The central figure enlisted by the regime was the popular cleric Mohamed El Hacem Ould Dedew. His overtures had a particular effect on Ould Semane, who had attended Dedew’s mosque and had reportedly served as his bodyguard.<sup>65</sup> But more important was an ideological affinity. Dedew’s criticism of the government, especially its corruption and its alignment with the West in the war on terror, paralleled the grievances of Ould Semane and other jihadists.<sup>66</sup> His repeated incarceration added to his credibility.

In 2009, Dedew, in conjunction with other Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated Tawasoul party, reportedly proposed the government’s initiative to the prisoners, who by this time numbered roughly seventy.<sup>67</sup> What followed at first were exchanges in the local press before face-to-face dialogue took place in prison in January 2010. Besides Dedew, a broad swath of clerics participated over successive rounds, including pro-government figures such as Ahmedou Ould Lemrabott Ould Habibou Rahman, the imam of the Grand Mosque in Nouakchott, and Hamdan Ould al-Tah, the secretary general of the League of Mauritanian Ulama.<sup>68</sup>

So did clerical figures with closer connections to the jihadists: Abu Hafs al-Mauritani and Ahmed Mazid Ould Abdel Haq, an important Salafi scholar with jihadi leanings. A student of the venerated Salafi cleric Buddah Ould al-Busayri, Ould Abdel Haq taught at the Institute for Islamic Studies and Research where

one of his students was al-Mauritani. Like al-Mauritani, Ould Abdel Haq was drawn to bin Laden; in the late 1990s he went to Khartoum where he tutored bin Laden's sons in Arabic until the al-Qaeda leader fled to Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>69</sup> He was imprisoned by the regime from 2005 until 2007 on the basis of collaboration with AQIM. Ould Abdel Haq reportedly attributes his delayed release, after other Islamists had been freed, to the regime's desire to use Salafi prisoners as a form of barter with the West.<sup>70</sup>

As the government's first dialogue efforts with the jihadists started in 2010, Ould Abdel Haq criticized the initial composition of the clerical committees as too broad in outlook, since they comprised Sufis, Malikis, Muslim Brotherhood adherents, and Salafists. But more importantly, he argued, they included former government officials who were notorious for their crackdown on Islamists.<sup>71</sup> After a presidential pardon in 2010 when thirty-five prisoners were released, Ould Abdel Haq and others successfully advocated in 2012 a different approach for the hardcore detainees: a three-person committee comprised of himself, Dedew, and Mohamed al-Mokhtar Ould M'Ballah, a cleric who was a presidential counselor and also trusted by the detainees.<sup>72</sup>

In the sessions that followed over the next seventeen days, Ould Abdel Haq and others deployed a variety of approaches in their dialogue with the jihadists. They started with a recognition that, even in the latter stages of the dialogue, those who were imprisoned had not necessarily committed violent acts. "The security campaign swept up a lot of people," he said. Among the central ideas deployed by the cleric in the dialogue was the Islamic scriptural precedent of "security" or "a guarantee" (*al-'aman*) for foreign and non-Islamic guests inside Mauritania—categorized as "protected persons" (*al-mustāmin*). "If an infidel fights us kill him," he said he told the detainees, "if he enters the country peacefully with a visa you can't kill him."<sup>73</sup> In addition, Ould Abdel Haq told them it was lawful to call for *sharia* in the country but not to use violence to do so. To bolster these arguments, he not only drew from the Quran and *hadith* but also more contemporary thinkers, some of them former jihadi ideologues. Among the latter, he cited the towering Syrian ideologue Abd-al Mun'im Mustafa Halima (also known as Abu Basir al-Tartusi) whose condemnation of al-Qaeda's suicide bombings in London marked a major salvo in jihadi juridical debates about killing civilians.<sup>74</sup> Specifically, al-Tartusi deployed the concept of a "covenant" (*ahd*) of security between Muslims residing in non-Muslim countries and non-Muslims residing in Muslim states.<sup>75</sup>

These themes were repeated by a senior Salafi cleric who joined latter rounds of dialogue following his release from prison. In an interview, he acknowledged the jihadists' frustration at corruption and their desire to be ruled by Islamic law. "Muslims want to be governed by their religion; this is not extremism," he said.<sup>76</sup> Despite this, he told the imprisoned jihadists that it was impermissible to use force to demand Islamic law and that the government, for all of its imperfections, presented the opportunity to call for Islamic law.<sup>77</sup>

Were the dialogues successful? When thirty-five prisoners were amnestied in 2010, government architects of the program and supportive clerics answered a resounding yes.<sup>78</sup> The very prospect of dialogue split the prisoners into two groups, one that welcomed the intercession and another, more hostile and recalcitrant group led by Ould Semane.<sup>79</sup> Semane was especially defiant; in one of the sessions he wore a white T-shirt upon which he had drawn a grenade, an assault rifle, and the words "al-Qaeda."<sup>80</sup> He wrote letters to Dedew and Ould Abdel Haq accusing them of betraying the Salafi creed and marshaled an array of clerics—mostly from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Jordan—to refute their arguments for moderation and peaceful activism.<sup>81</sup>

Beyond some of the jihadists' obstinacy, several other caveats apply to the Mauritanian model of dialogue. First, the regime was circumspect from the beginning about those it considered redeemable. The criteria for choosing those to be released was often opaque, at least according to the dialogue's clerical participants. At the conclusion of their initial sessions, Dedew and his clerics recommended freeing those who had not participated in violence and lighter sentences for the rest. He was reportedly shocked when lengthy prison terms and death sentences were handed down instead.<sup>82</sup> Though the sentences have not been carried out as of this writing, they nevertheless show that the "soft" approach was always accompanied by punitive measures including incarceration and, reportedly, torture.<sup>83</sup>

Second, the reintegration of ex-prisoners has reportedly been uneven. According to local media, the government provided micro-funds to each of the pardoned detainees to start their own income-producing projects such as the selling of phone credit and buying, fixing, and selling cars.<sup>84</sup> Yet, according to a released prisoner and to a cleric who participated in the dialogue and maintains contact with former prisoners, the government has not kept its promises of providing sustainable jobs for the young men.<sup>85</sup> Among those still imprisoned, rights activists allege that the government is denying them access to census documentation, which effectively cuts off their children's access to certain schooling and overseas medical care.<sup>86</sup> Echoing this, in an extensive interview in 2015, the cleric Ould Abdel Haq said that parts of the prison dialogue had failed, listing a lack of follow-up by the government as one of several deficiencies. Even so, he acknowledged that the dialogue had helped stem recruitment into the jihadists' ranks.<sup>87</sup>

For nearly a decade, Mauritania has not witnessed a major terrorist attack on its soil—a remarkable turnaround, given the spate of violence that shook the country from 2005 to 2011. But questions remain about the durability of the peace, as well as its price. Most famously, a document dated March 2010 that was recovered from Osama bin Laden's compound during the 2011 raid by U.S. Special Operations Forces hints at a quid pro quo deal between AQIM and the Mauritanian government. In return for the freeing of its imprisoned members and paying a fee to militants, AQIM would agree to cease attacks on Mauritanian soil.<sup>88</sup> The 2015 liberation of Sidi Mohamed Ould Mohamed Ould Boumama, former spokesperson for a branch of AQIM in Mali called Ansar Dine, baffled many observers.<sup>89</sup> Yet the government and figures close to al-Qaeda denied any such agreement; at any rate, many of the AQIM prisoners, like Ould Semane, have not been released.<sup>90</sup>

What seems more likely is that government has pursued a policy of calculated ambiguity in its foreign and domestic policy that serves as a pressure release and insulates itself from jihadi critiques. In this, it responded to the 2013 French-led military intervention in northern Mali against a coalition of Tuareg separatists and Ansar Dine. Dubbed Operation Serval, the campaign proved to be a major source of societal debate and clerical opposition in Mauritania.<sup>91</sup> As it unfolded, thirty-nine Mauritanian clerics issued a fatwa condemning the intervention as a neocolonialist campaign and exhorting citizens—but not the government directly—to stand in solidarity with their fellow Muslims in Mali. Beyond this statement, several voices added to the chorus of condemnation, including the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Tawasoul party and the cleric Dedew.<sup>92</sup>

The government responded in a hands-off manner to the French intervention. Though it had intervened in Mali in 2010 and 2011 to pursue AQIM, it did not elect to join Operation Serval in 2013. Instead, it focused on fortifying the 2,237-kilometer-long border with Mali, a policy of defensive containment akin

to that pursued by Algeria.<sup>93</sup> Whether or not this was tied to domestic pressure from the clerics is unclear; at the very least, it was one factor of many that influenced the government's calculus. And the government's resulting reticence on Mali cannot be ruled out as one of the reasons for the lack of AQIM attacks on Mauritanian soil. In an interview last year, an influential Mauritanian cleric close to the jihadists cited this as one of the reasons. "The Mauritians didn't attack Mali," he said, "but Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso did, so they got attacked."<sup>94</sup> In addition, the draw of Mali as a battlefield diverted youths who might otherwise direct their ire against the regime—though many of them were reportedly drawn to Mali by cross-border tribal ties as much as by religious ideology.<sup>95</sup>

Aside from this foreign policy ambivalence, the Mauritanian government has allowed the country's media organizations to serve as conduits for jihadi messaging. These outlets have provided platforms for regional jihadi groups to post statements and communiqués, while at the same time offering exclusive reportage and insights that are valuable for counterterrorism researchers.<sup>96</sup> Much of this may reflect pure expediency and opportunism on the part of Sahelian jihadi organizations: some of their spokespersons are Mauritanian. And the news agencies themselves put forward this access as proof of their independence and their diligence in reporting jihadism.<sup>97</sup> Even so, the permissiveness suggests that some degree of buy-in from the Mauritanian government is probably also at play.

The government has created space for some outspoken clerics to continue speaking and preaching, provided they do not cross certain redlines such as calling for violence against it. For example, the cleric Mohamed Salem Ould Mohamed Lemine, also known as al-Majlissi,<sup>98</sup> has been able to keep expounding his hardline views on democracy, specifically U.S. efforts to subvert Islam through projects such as "Democratic Islam,"<sup>99</sup> and his critique of neocolonialism.<sup>100</sup> He has also criticized the pro-government imam of Nouakchott's Grand Mosque.<sup>101</sup> In 2015, he was briefly arrested on the suspicion of supporting the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Though he was released, he continues his role as a provocateur.

Abu Hafis al-Mauritani, in particular, is given a degree of latitude. He has spoken favorably of jihad against foreign occupation but criticized the jihadists' attempts to topple Muslim governments and has condemned the Islamic State. With regard to Mauritania's politics, he presents himself as a principled, loyal oppositionist. For example, in early 2018 he criticized the government's invitation to the grand imam of Egypt's al-Azhar Mosque to attend a counterextremism conference in Nouakchott.<sup>102</sup>

Such figures are allowed some stridency but within the boundaries proscribed and enforced by the government. Government supporters of this mix of coercion and co-option have argued that it has defanged the ideology of the violent jihadists, leaving them without a spiritual guide. "The jihadists don't have a head," said one of them.<sup>103</sup>

Even so, the question then becomes how much of the clerics' moderation is temporary and tactical. The case of the prominent cleric Mohamed Ould Ahmed Zarouq (known as al-Sha'ir or "the Poet"), whose imprisonment was cited by Khadim Ould Semane in 2006 as one of Zarouq's grievances against the government, is illustrative. In 2009, he wrote a letter renouncing militancy against Muslim governments, but only because it was impractical and the jihadists had no chance of winning. Toward the other exclusionary and extremist aspects of jihadi ideology, particularly his endorsement of *takfir* (the excommunication of Muslims), he never relented.<sup>104</sup>

## CONCLUSION: LOOMING RISKS

Jihadi violence in Mauritania has peaked and appears to have been contained through a mix of coercion and co-optation. Meanwhile, Salafi impulses toward political activism and party politics appear to have been stifled as well; the Salafi cleric Ahmed Mazid Ould Abdel Haq told an interviewer that Salafists do not have the financial or human capital to establish a party.<sup>105</sup> Thus, Salafism in the country seems to be confined to two poles, each centered on nonviolent preaching and media: a pro-government strain embodied in the figure of the imam of the Grand Mosque, Ahmedou Ould Lemrabott Ould Habibou Rahman, and a more activist and critical one embodied by Abu Hafs al-Mauritani and al-Majlissi that is provocative but still respects the regime's redlines.

Yet the government's triumphalism should be treated with care. Mauritania remains mired in corruption and poverty. Peripheral and border areas, the sites of much jihadi activity, desperately need development.<sup>106</sup> The recent discovery of offshore gas on the border with Senegal has brought an attendant influx of foreign direct investment, raising hopes for economic improvement.<sup>107</sup> Yet some Mauritanian observers privately wonder whether the money will reach the public, given the government's corruption and nontransparency.<sup>108</sup> And, perversely, the windfall could be new fodder for the jihadists' critique of the government: AQIM may try to portray the investments as infringements on the country's sovereignty.

Added to this is the growing authoritarianism and clampdown on free speech by the regime of President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who won the election in 2009 and again in 2014.<sup>109</sup> In January 2019, He seemed dispel rumors that he would seek a third term by endorsing the candidacy of one of his longtime loyalists, Defense Minister Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, for the presidential elections due later this year. Observers of Mauritania saw this as a skillful move to perpetuate the grip on power of the president's coterie of elites drawn from the Union for the Republic Party—as well as the tradition of military influence over politics.<sup>110</sup> In the run-up to the election, Ould Abdel Aziz has also cracked down on Islamists. In September 2018, for example, he closed the Center for Training Islamic Scholars run by Dedew, accusing it of promoting radicalism: in a speech before a military parade, he resorted to common tropes about safeguarding a “correct” Islam against the distortions of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>111</sup> The future imprisonment of venerated clerics like Dedew and the prolonged closure of political space for Islamists could inspire a new cadre of Mauritanian militants, repeating a cycle of the past.

All of this suggests that the specter of violent jihadism has not disappeared. To be sure, Mauritania is not a base for a base for the Islamic State, despite alarmist predictions, and the percentage of young Mauritians joining jihadi groups abroad has dwindled in the last several years.<sup>112</sup> But jihadi groups continue to exploit the unregulated media and use the country's territory as a thoroughfare and logistical base.<sup>113</sup> A resurgent AQIM in Mali and Burkina Faso remains a potent threat, given its May 2018 communiqué urging attacks on foreigners in the Sahel. Moreover, Mauritania's longtime reticence about sustained, extraterritorial military operations, which may have insulated it from jihadi attacks, is changing. Specifically, it has recently raised its regional profile in the G5 Sahel—a regional security and counterterrorism coalition of five Sahelian countries that has struggled with organization and resources.<sup>114</sup> In tandem with future cross-border operations, this growing prominence could give Mauritania-focused jihadists a new propaganda boon.<sup>115</sup>

At the moment, however, it remains unclear whether and how militants will act in Mauritania—and whether they will jeopardize the supposed deal that still exists in the country. The post-2011 lull in violence may not last indefinitely.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## NOTES

1. The Arabic text of the statement is posted here: <https://www.max-security.com/security-blog/aqim-statement-threatening-western-companies-in-area-from-libya-to-mauritania-africa-mena-alert>.
2. Geoff D. Porter, “The Renewed Jihadi Terror Threat to Mauritania,” Combatting Terrorism Center (West Point) *Sentinel* 11, no. 7 (August 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/renewed-jihadi-terror-threat-mauritania>
3. Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim, “Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania,” Sahel Research Group Working Paper, no. 3 (August 2014), 17.
4. For a useful critique, see Chris Simpson, “Debunking Mauritania’s Islamist Militancy Mythology,” *New Humanitarian*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2016/08/23/debunking-mauritania%E2%80%99s-islamist-militancy-mythology>.
5. CIA World Factbook, 2018, [https://theodora.com/wfbcurrent/mauritania/mauritania\\_people.html](https://theodora.com/wfbcurrent/mauritania/mauritania_people.html)
6. “Human Development Report, 2016,” United Nations Development Program, 2016, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2016\\_human\\_development\\_report.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2016_human_development_report.pdf).
7. “Freedom in the World 2018,” Freedom House, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/mauritania>.
8. “Corruption Perceptions Index, 2018,” Transparency International, 2018, <https://www.transparency.org/country/MRT#>
9. See, for example, “Mauritania Country Report, 2019,” Human Rights Watch, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/mauritania>.
10. These include the Halpulaar, the Bambara, the Soninké, and the Wolof. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie*, [Preaching in the desert: political Islam and social change in Mauritania] (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 160.
11. Ibrahim, “Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania,” 10.
12. The argument that jihadism or revolutionary violence is a wholly “foreign” import resulting from Gulf ideology is convincingly rebutted by Philip D. Curtin, who traces a tradition of religiously sanctioned Mauritanian militancy against unjust rulers to the 1600s. See Philip D. Curtin, “Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Inter-Relations in Mauritania and Senegal,” *Journal of African History* 12, no. 1 (January 197): 11–24.
13. Specifically, French colonialism helped facilitate the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and other Mauritanian contacts with the Gulf.

14. In contrast to common assumptions, Mauritanian scholars have been active influencers in the development of global Salafism, even in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, rather than being passive consumers of a “Saudi import.” To be sure, Saudi influence is present: the Grand Mosque in the capital is colloquially known as the “Saudi Mosque” in reference to its funding. But the exchange is more bi-directional than is commonly assumed, as evidenced by the Mauritanian scholar Muhammad al-Amin al-Shinqiti’s travel to Saudi Arabia and his subsequent incorporation into the Islamic University of Madina and the kingdom’s senior clerical body, the Hay’at al-Kibar al-‘Ulama. See Michael Farquhar and Alex Thurston, “How Mauritania exports religion to Saudi Arabia—And not just the other way around,” Brookings Institution, December 13, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/12/13/how-mauritania-exports-religion-to-saudi-arabia-and-not-just-the-other-way-around/>.
15. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, “The Paradoxical Metamorphosis of Islamic Activism in Mauritania,” (in English) *Cahiers d’études africaines*, no. 206–207 (2012/2): 4.
16. Chouki El Hamel, “The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society From the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29, fasc. 1 (February, 1999): 62–87.
17. Elemine Ould Mohamed Baba Moustapha, “Negotiating Islamic Revival: Religiosity in Nouakchott City,” *Islamic Africa* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 46. The scholarly *zwaya* coexisted uneasily with and often struggled against a political and warrior caste, the Banu Hassan, who claimed Arab lineage. Modernity and urbanization has diluted the distinction between the two—but not completely. The *zwaya* continue to fill the ranks of the civil service and merchant class.
18. El Hamel, “The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society from the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century,” 72.
19. Tarek Ladjal and Benaouda Bensaid, “Desert-Based Muslim Religious Education: Mahdara as a Model,” *Religious Education* 112, no. 5, (May 2012): 529–41.
20. Ould Ahmed Salem, “Islam in Mauritania Between Political Expansion and Globalization: Elites, Institutions, Knowledge, and Networks,” in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, eds. Benjamin F. Soares and Rene Otayek (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 37.
21. Author interview with Libyan graduates of a Mauritanian *mahdara*, Tripoli, Libya, December 5, 2017. In 2012, the Mauritanian government estimated that one-quarter of *mahdara* students came from abroad. See Meimouna Saleck, “The Foreign Students of the Mahadhra in Mauritania Courted by Jihadists,” *Dune Voices*, March 12, 2015. [http://media-diversity.org/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3052:the-foreign-students-of-the-mahadhra-in-mauritania-courted-by-jihadists&catid=15:mdi-news&Itemid=33](http://media-diversity.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3052:the-foreign-students-of-the-mahadhra-in-mauritania-courted-by-jihadists&catid=15:mdi-news&Itemid=33)
22. Prominent Libyan Islamic Fighting Group members who passed through Mauritanian *mahadir* include Abu Yahya al-Libi and ‘Atiyatullah ‘Abd al-Rahman.
23. Author interview with a former minister of Islamic affairs now working on counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018. The government also promoted the establishment of *mahadir* in urban areas, ostensibly for greater oversight.
24. The reign of Colonel Mohamed Haidalla from 1980 until 1984 was particularly important for the growth of Islam in social and political life. In 1980, for example, he made sharia the country’s sole source of legislation.
25. In the mid-1980s, disparate Mauritanian Islamist currents formed an umbrella grouping called the Haraka Siyasiya Islamiya fi Muritanya (the Islamic Political Movement in Mauritania) quickly established itself as an opposition force to the reign of Haidalla. In this, it was aided by the teachings of a charismatic cleric named Mohamed Ould Sidi Yahya. See Ould Ahmed Salem, “The Paradoxical Metamorphosis of Islamic Activism,” 6. On Salafi activism on behalf of the *haratine*, see Sebastian Elischer “Governing the Faithful: State Management of Salafi Activity in the Francophone Sahel,” *Comparative Politics* 51, no. 2 (January 2019): 210.
26. Constant Hames, “Le Rôle de l’Islam dans la Société Mauritanienne contemporaine” [The role of Islam in contemporary Mauritanian society], *Politique africaine*, no. 55 (October 1994), 46–51.
27. Regional developments, especially the growing assertiveness of Islamists in Algeria reportedly played a role in Taya’s turn to repression. Elischer, “Governing the Faithful,” 210.
28. Cédric Jourde, “Politique des récits de l’islamisme en Mauritanie. Entre ‘marée montante’ et ‘islamisme kalachnikov’,” [Politics of Islamist Narratives in Mauritanie. Between ‘Rising Tide’ and ‘Kalashnikov Islamism’], *Politique africaine* 2, no. 114 (2009): 67–86, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-africaine-2009-2-page-67.htm#>.
29. On Yahya’s arrest, see the 1994 report by Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/184000/afr380031994en.pdf>.

30. Ould Ahmed Salem, "Paradoxical Metamorphosis," 6–7.
31. Ibid.
32. Francesco Cavatorta and Raquel Ojeda Garcia, "Islamism in Mauritania and the Narrative of Political Moderation," *Journal of Modern North African Studies* 55, no. 2 (May 2017): 313.
33. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, "Islamic Radicalisation in Mauritania," in *Islamist Radicalisation in North Africa: Politics and Process*, ed. George Joffe (London: Routledge, 2012), 185.
34. Elischer, "Governing the Faithful," 210.
35. For a list, see: Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 146–49. For background on Abu Hafis al-Mauritani, see this Al Jazeera interview: <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2012/10/23/11-سبتمبر-هجمات-الموريتاني-حفص-أبو-حفص>.
36. Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018. Also see Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 147. On the Idab-Lihsen, see Moustapha, 77.
37. See National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (2004), 130. [http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report\\_Ch4.pdf](http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report_Ch4.pdf).
38. Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018.
39. Hamed El-Said, *New Approaches to Countering Terrorism: Designing and Evaluating Counter Radicalization and De-Radicalization Programs* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 118.
40. Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 25, 2018.
41. For background on Dedew, see Alex Thurston, "Shaykh Muhammad al-Hasan al-Dedew (b. 1963), a Salafi Scholar in Contemporary Mauritania," University of Cape Town, Center for Contemporary Islam, February 10, 2009, [http://www.cci.uct.ac.za/usr/cci/publications/aria/download\\_issues/2012/Alex%20Thurston](http://www.cci.uct.ac.za/usr/cci/publications/aria/download_issues/2012/Alex%20Thurston).
42. According to interlocutors, this was broadcast on Radio Mauritanie. Author interview in Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 2018. See also Thurston, "Shaykh Muhammad al-Hasan al-Dedew," 189.
43. Ibid.
44. Author interview with a former detainee, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018. For the scope of the torture allegations see "Mauritania: Torture at the Heart of the State," Amnesty International, December 3, 2008, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/52000/afr380092008en.pdf>.
45. Hacem Ould Lebatt, "Généalogie d'Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique," *Les Cahiers de la Revue Défense Nationale* (May 2011): 28, <https://en.calameo.com/read/000558115c614e762cfb0>.
46. Ould Ahmed Salem, "Paradoxical Metamorphosis," 13.
47. Among the more prominent attacks were the 2007 killing four French tourists near Aleg, a 2008 assault on the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott, the 2009 assassination of American aid worker Christopher Leggett in Nouakchott, the 2009 suicide bombing of the French embassy, and a 2010 suicide bombing against a Mauritanian military outpost at Nema. For a list see Ibrahim, "Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania," 13.
48. See Ibrahim, "Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania," 14 and Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 13–14.
49. Ibrahim, "Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania," 14.
50. Ould Ahmed Salem, "Paradoxical Metamorphosis," 17.
51. Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 161.
52. Author Interview with Mauritanian scholar involved in counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.
53. Ibid.
54. This is a *nom de guerre*; Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem names him as Ahmed Ould Vih al-Barka. See Ould Ahmed Salem, "Paradoxical Metamorphosis," 17.
55. Author interview with a Mauritanian scholar involved in counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.
56. Ibid.
57. Author interview with a former minister of Islamic affairs now working on counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018.
58. See this biography <http://essirage.net/archive/index.php/news-and-reports/447-2010-10-18-22-11-44.html>.
59. Ould Ahmed Salem, "Paradoxical Metamorphosis," 16.
60. "Interview with Khadim Ould Semane," Al-Jazeera, July 15, 2006, <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2006/7/15/الخدم-ولد-السمان-الحركة-السلفية-الموريتانية>
61. Ibid.

62. Author interview with a U.S. government official involved with counterterrorism in Mauritania, Washington DC, January 31, 2019. See also, Porter.
63. Author interview with a former minister of Islamic affairs now working on counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018.
64. This “soft” approach was following a template that had been applied with uneven results in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Libya.
65. Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 18.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 173.
69. Author interview with a Mauritanian scholar of Islam, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.
70. Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric close to the jihadists, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. For a discussion, see Reuven Paz, “Islamic Legitimacy for the London Bombings,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Center for Special Studies, July 20, 2005, [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art\\_537/537E\\_1855722352.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_537/537E_1855722352.pdf).
75. See Abu Basir al-Tartusi, “Covenants and Security in Islam,” <http://www.en.altartosi.com/Covenants.htm> (no longer active)
76. Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric close to the jihadists, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018.
77. Ibid.
78. Author interview with former Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Islamic Affairs officials involved in the dialogue, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23–24, 2018.
79. “The First Session of Dialogue with the Salafis began with a Struggle for Leadership Among the Prisoners” (in Arabic), *Al-Anbaa*, January 18, 2010, <https://www.anbaa.info/?p=4068>.
80. Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 173.
81. Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 21.
82. Ibid., 23.
83. In recent years, according to the United Nations, torture is no longer “rampant” but still “occurs frequently.” See Amnesty International, “Mauritania, 2017/2018,” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/mauritania/report-mauritania/>
84. Sahara Media, “Pardoned Salafist Prisoners Benefit from Income-Generating Loans,” July 15, 2011, <https://www.saharamedias.net/%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%B1/>
85. Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018.
86. Ahmed Ould Sidi, “Children of Salafist Prisoners . . . Collective Punishment for Parents and Children” (in Arabic), *Al-Araby*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/investigations/2016/6/6/%D8%A3%D8%B7%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A2%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1>
87. “Ahmed Mezid: The majority of the Salafi trend opposed the establishment of a political party”, (Arabic) *Essirage*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.essirage.net/node/3490>.
88. See Mark Hosenball, “Al Qaeda Leaders Made Plans for Peace Deal With Mauritania: Documents,” Reuters, March 1, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-binladen-mauritania-idUSKCN0W356G>.
89. Joe Bavier, “Mauritania Frees Wanted Senior Malian Islamist Insurgent,” Reuters, August 6, 2015, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mauritania-mali-insurgency/mauritania-frees-senior-malian-islamist-insurgent-idUKKCN0QB1M120150806>.
90. Author interview with former Mauritanian officials in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 2018.
91. See Alex Thurston, “A Mauritanian Fatwa against the French-Led Military Intervention in Mali,” *Al-Maydan*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.themaydan.com/2017/01/mauritanian-fatwa-french-led-military-intervention-mali/>.

92. "La Mauritanie affectée par la crise malienne," [Mauritania affected by the Malian crisis], Xinhua, January 24, 2013, <http://french.peopledaily.com.cn/96852/8105195.html>; Al-Mokhtar Ould Mohammad, "Mauritanian Consensus Against France Intervention in Mali," Al-Akhbar English, January 18, 2013, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/14695>.
93. "La Mauritanie affectée par la crise malienne," [Mauritania affected by the Malian crisis], Xinhua, January 24, 2013, <http://french.peopledaily.com.cn/96852/8105195.html>.
94. Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018.
95. One Salafi cleric told the author, "Mali is good for us; the people with extremist ideas go there instead of staying here." Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric close to the jihadists, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018. See also Ibrahim, "Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania," 23.
96. These include the Nouakchott News Agency (ANI), al-Akhbar, and Sahara Media. See, Laurent Prieur, "Mauritania media opens window on Saharan Islamist world," Reuters, February 13, 2013, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mali-rebels-mauritania/mauritania-media-opens-window-on-saharan-islamist-world-idUKBRE91C0XB20130213>.
97. Porter.
98. A major intellectual force behind Mauritanian jihadism, al-Majlissi was arrested for involvement in Mauritania's first AQIM cells. For representative writings on jihad, see [http://www.ilmway.com/site/maqdis/MS\\_2318.html](http://www.ilmway.com/site/maqdis/MS_2318.html) and on *takfir* see <http://www.alwahabiyah.com/file/Occation/vijename/T-K12-ar.pdf>. For the background of his arrest and the accusation of affiliation with AQIM, see <http://www.elwatan.info/node/2179>.
99. Al-Majlissi's critique refers to a well-known study by the U.S.-based RAND Corporation think tank arguing for the promotion of "civil democratic Islam" as a counterterrorism strategy. See Cheryl Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2004), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1716.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1716.html). The RAND concept became a lightning rod for criticism among Islamists and especially jihadists who saw it as a neocolonialist project. See al-Majlissi, "Democratic Islam Is an American Alternative," [http://www.ilmway.com/site/maqdis/MS\\_16887.html](http://www.ilmway.com/site/maqdis/MS_16887.html).
100. See al-Majlissi, "Independence and the Loss of Identity" (in Arabic), *Mauritania al-Yawm*, November 30, 2014, <http://rimtoday.net/?q=node/2599>.
101. Ould Ahmed Salem, "Paradoxical Metamorphosis," 19–20.
102. "Abu Hafs al-Mauritani: No Welcome to the Sheikh of al-Azhar" (in Arabic), Mauritania News, March 15, 2018, <https://maurinews.info/opinions/18308/>.
103. Author interview with a Mauritania scholar involved in counter-radicalization, March 23, 2018.
104. Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 168.
105. "Ahmed Mezid: The Majority of the Salafi Trend Opposed the Establishment of a Political Party" (in Arabic), *Essirage*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.essirage.net/node/3490>.
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109. Interview with Noel Foster, "Mauritania's Weak Opposition Could Make Abdel Aziz President for Life," *World Politics Review*, May 31, 2016, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/18929/mauritania-s-weak-opposition-could-make-abdel-aziz-president-for-life>.
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111. "Fermeture d'un centre islamique jugé 'extrémiste' en Mauritanie," [Closure of an Islamic center considered 'extremist' in Mauritania], Voice of America Afrique, September 25, 2018 <https://al-ain.com/article/mauritania-military-parade-independence-terrorism>. Abu Hafs al-Mauritani was reportedly involved in mediating and pushing for the center to be re-opened. Cheikhany Sidi, "Abu Hafs al-Mauritani Mediates to Resolve the Crisis of the 'Islamists'," (Arabic) Sahara Media, October 3, 2018. <https://www.saharamedias.net/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%B5-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84/>.

112. For a good discussion of the extent of the ISIS threat, see Alex Thurston, “Is Mauritania Really A New ISIS Front,” IPI Global Observatory, July 2, 2015, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/07/mauritania-isis-al-qaeda-terrorism/>.
113. Author interview with a former jihadist detainee, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.
114. Formed in 2014, the G5 Sahel consists of Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. A Mauritanian general from its military intelligence recently took over command of the joint force. Pascal Airault, “Le général Hanena Ould Sidi à la tête de la force du G5: la Mauritanie reprend en main la sécurité sahélienne,” [General Hanena Ould Sidi at the head of the G5 force: Mauritania takes over Sahelian security], *L’Opinion*, July 13, 2018, [https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/general-hanena-ould-sidi-a-tete-force-g5-mauritanie-reprend-en-main-156652?utm\\_source=twitter](https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/general-hanena-ould-sidi-a-tete-force-g5-mauritanie-reprend-en-main-156652?utm_source=twitter).
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## THEME 4: THRIVING IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

# THE SHIFTING FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN ALGERIA

DALIA GHANEM

## INTRODUCTION

Starting in February 2019, thousands and later millions of Algerians took to the streets to voice their displeasure with their ailing eighty-two-year-old president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who sought to run for what would have been a fifth term. After weeks of peaceful and orderly mass protests, the long-standing president resigned in April 2019, before a new election could be held. As this new “battle of Algiers” continues to unfold, some Algerian and European observers have warned that Islamists will try to infiltrate the movement.<sup>1</sup> Their fear is that Islamists may seek to recreate the conditions that prevailed in the 1990s when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) exploited the country’s 1989 democratic opening to call for the establishment of an Islamic state; jihadi violence erupted after the military interrupted the electoral process in 1991, and the country descended into a decade-long civil war (1991–2001).

Such reignited fears overlook the sociopolitical changes that Algeria has gone through since the civil war ended, particularly the legacy of the conflict, the trauma it generated, and the transformation that the country’s Islamist movement has undergone since then. The Islamists have had virtually no role in the historic mobilization that has been shaking the Algerian regime for the past two months. The country’s Islamist parties joined the popular movement only belatedly, and by the second week of the demonstrations, citizens on social media were calling for vigilance against the “hijacking” of the movement especially by Islamists.<sup>2</sup> Algerian society is deeply marked by the violence that the FIS left in its wake in the 1990s. Today, as one protester put it, “we are vaccinated against the FIS and its excesses.”<sup>3</sup>

In the wake of the civil war, the Algerian government has succeeded in neutralizing the more extremist jihadi manifestations of political Islam by combining a soft and a hard approach. The authorities have paired a strong military presence on the ground to fight armed groups with conciliatory measures aimed at disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating former extremists into society.

While the government has achieved progress, it would be an exaggeration to say that political Islam in Algeria is no more. Undoubtedly, thousands of former jihadists have been rehabilitated, jihadi activity has fallen markedly, and the number of fatalities from terrorist attacks has steadily declined, but the risk of jihadi violence has not fully abated.<sup>4</sup> Attacks by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and their affiliates are not beyond the realm of possibility.<sup>5</sup> Most Algerians condemn the violence of these jihadi groups and do not support them, but as long as the country is plagued by political exclusion, economic marginalization and social disparities, oppression, and occasional bouts of violence, there will be at least some people who wrongheadedly yield to the temptation to embrace jihadism.<sup>6</sup>

The influence of Algeria's Islamist politicians has also waned, as ordinary citizens have shown their hostility toward the representatives of moderate political Islam. During the recent protests, for instance, Abdallah Djaballah, a longtime prominent Islamist leader who now heads the Justice and Development Front (FJD), was driven away by demonstrators who shouted "dégage" (which means "get out").<sup>7</sup> Abderrezak Makri, who leads Algeria's first major Islamist party, the Movement for Society and Peace (MSP), was similarly marginalized and received with general public indifference.<sup>8</sup> The lack of popularity of these two leading figures of moderate political Islam indicates the Islamist parties' lack of credibility, legitimacy, and public support.

In a sense, by letting Islamist parties enter parliamentary politics and even participate in government coalitions, the Algerian authorities have succeeded in defusing moderate embodiments of political Islam. On one level, the participatory approach that moderate Islamists have followed in Algeria since 1995 has sustained them and allowed them to professionalize their cadres. But this political participation has allowed the regime to co-opt these Islamists, robbing these moderates of their legitimacy in the eyes of the public and hindering their capacity to mobilize voters.<sup>9</sup> Many citizens see these Islamists as being as corrupt as the regime's old guard. Few Algerians today believe the image of religious purity that the Islamists have tried to display nor in the spiritual utopia that they have promised. As such, mainstream Islamist parties are unlikely to regain their credibility in the near future or have any considerable role in the popular movement that forced Bouteflika from office. Instead, these co-opted parties are likely to keep accepting the rules of the game to have a place in the transition being supervised by the Algerian military.

While the moderate Islamist politicians have been co-opted and do not constitute a real challenge to the regime, other more grassroots manifestations of political Islam such as Dawa Salafiya are taking root in society. Dawa Salafiya is sometimes identified as a form of quietist Salafism, as the movement does not engage in overt political action and does not aim to overthrow the government. Despite this reputation for apoliticism, many Dawa members have strong political views and comment prolifically on political events. So although members of the Dawa Salafiya do not directly engage in political activities, the movement's shuyukh contribute to discourse on national and international politics.<sup>10</sup> As aptly put by scholar Jacob Olidort, "The silence of the quietists is the space in which one hears the political voice of Salafi activists. . . . Their political actions are quiet, but their political voice is loud."<sup>11</sup>

While Dawa Salafiya eschews formal participation in politics, it is now the mainstream Islamist societal movement in Algeria, and its influence is growing. Algerians are renovating Islamist politics from the ground up. While the country's Islamists grasp that founding an Islamic caliphate in Algeria is a bridge too far, they are still not willing to renounce the goal of Islamizing society at large or to embrace

a pluralistic public square. As of April 2019, the Algerian government has not entirely neutralized the challenge of political Islam, and the state acknowledges that Islamists will remain a part of the country's sociopolitical scene for the foreseeable future.

That being said, understanding how the Algerian government has dealt with political Islam in the past provides an important window for trying to grasp how the regime and the country's various Islamist groups are likely to navigate the uncertain political terrain ahead.

## THE BIRTH OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN ALGERIA

Algeria's brand of political Islam can be traced back to the 1920s and the reformist movement headed by several ulema (scholars) such as Abdelhamid Ben Badis. The ulema called for Algerians to return to the sources of Islam by purifying the faith from the supposedly corrupting influence of marabouts (Muslim holy men) and mystical beliefs and by pushing for Arabization. In 1931, these ulema formed the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema (AOMA), a religious organization that predated the country's bid for independence. The association called for the purification of Islam and sought to restore genuine Islamic culture for the Algerian people.

### The Early Years

Algeria gained independence in 1962, and a year later former militants from the AOMA like Abdullatif Soltani and nationalist reformists like el Hachemi Tidjani established an association called el Qiyam el Islamiyah (Islamic Values). The organization, commonly called el Qiyam for short, built on the thoughts of the leading theorist of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, and defended Islamic values in Algeria by advocating the Islamization of public life.

To thwart Islamists that were bitter about the nature of the newly independent state, which was far from the Islamic republic they had envisioned, the Algerian regime tried to give itself an air of religious legitimacy. To do so, the country's leaders established the concept of Islamic socialism, a notion that reconciled Islamic principles with the government's official modernist and secularist discourse. With appeals to the masses (via populist socialism) and the ummah, or the community of Muslim believers, (via traditional Islam), Algeria's first president, Ahmed Ben Bella, and his successor, Houari Boumédiène, tried to bring together modernism and traditionalism.

Yet many Islamists disapproved of this approach. El Qiyam published a pamphlet stating that "any regime, any leader who does not rely on Islam, is declared illegal and dangerous. A communist party, a secular party, a socialist-Marxist party, a nationalist party cannot exist in the land of Islam."<sup>12</sup> The Algerian government eventually banned el Qiyam in 1966 after the group sent then Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser a telegram urging him to postpone Qutb's execution. Still, el Qiyam had an important impact on the Islamist movement in Algeria, where the association was a gateway for radical Islamism. It laid the groundwork for what followed in the 1980s and 1990s. During that period, the Islamists successfully pressured the state to allow the country's religious conservatives to promote an Arabization agenda and wield considerable influence over the country's schools and the state bureaucracy, and its

members positioned themselves as arbiters of morality over Algerian society. As a result, the Islamists took advantage of the democratization of Algeria's educational system and the government's Arabization policy to further spread their ideology.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these Islamists were very active in universities and mosques as they mobilized students to challenge the regime and encouraged violent political activism.

To counter these inroads that the Islamist groups were making and to burnish its claim of religious legitimacy, the regime imposed and intensified Arabization measures, encouraged the construction of new mosques, held regular seminars on Islamic studies, established Islamic institutes, and published a journal called *Asala* (authenticity). The regime also gave specific religious figures a great deal of freedom in terms of theological interpretation on the condition that they avoided any criticism of the regime and helped teach Algerians that socialism was only a contemporary variant of Islamic social justice.

The regime sought such cover hoping that this would make it more difficult for the Islamists to oppose its rule, but in reality, the Islamists contested the state's religious legitimacy again and again. The government's co-existence with the Islamists repeatedly devolved into confrontation first in the mid-1970s, again in the early 1980s, and finally throughout the 1990s when the struggle reached its climax during the civil war with violent Islamist jihadists.

### From Ballots to Bullets

During this period, Algeria's heterogeneous Islamist movement was composed of several factions or schools of thought.<sup>14</sup> Despite the Islamist movement's amorphous nature and internal differences, all of its factions agreed on one general strategy: preaching and proselytizing in mosques and universities. Their ideas spread over the course of the 1980s, and political Islam gained newfound momentum. With a firm foothold on campuses nationwide, the Islamist movement gained more followers among the country's first postindependence generation, who had been disappointed by the educational system and disheartened by the lack of professional opportunities. The Islamists' discourse convinced many members of this first postindependence generation that the Western model of modernization envisioned by the Algerian state was a failure. Their vision of political Islam offered an alternative system that extolled the country's Arab and Islamic values; offered citizens a heightened consciousness of this identity; and claimed to furnish solutions that would lead to a better way of life, social justice, and a redistribution of political power and economic wealth.

Although these various segments of the movement disagreed on many matters, their leaders and partisans came together in 1989 to create the FIS. The FIS gave political Islam in Algeria a more formal organizational structure for the first time, and the group went on to serve as the government's main antagonist in the country's lengthy civil war. The FIS opposed the country's leaders, whom it perceived as *mustabid* (despots) and *taghut* (those who rebel against God or who are idolatrous) presiding over what it deemed to be an impious democracy that was irreligious because it stemmed from neither the traditions of the Sunna nor sharia.<sup>15</sup>

Yet it was that same supposedly impious democracy that the FIS used to try to gain power. In the local elections of June 1990, the FIS drew 54.3 percent of the votes for the Popular Communal Assemblies and

secured 57.4 percent of the votes for the Popular Wilaya Assemblies.<sup>16</sup> In the first round of the December 1991 national legislative elections, the FIS obtained 188 out of 231 contested seats in the People's National Assembly; the remaining 199 of the assembly's 430 total seats were supposed to be decided in a second round election slated for mid-January 1992 that was never held.<sup>17</sup> The military called off the second wave of voting days before ballots were to be cast and took full control of the country. The FIS was banned, and thousands of its sympathizers were jailed. Divisions arose with the ranks of the FIS between those who remained committed in principle to peaceful elections and those who called for violent opposition to the state.

Those who advocated using force against the government did not wait for the electoral process to be interrupted before they unleashed violence. They instigated a deadly attack on Guemmar in November 1991 (before the election's first round the following month) that was led by an Algerian veteran of the war in Afghanistan. The interruption of the electoral process and the ensuing indiscriminate violence by the security forces triggered further violence. This violent streak reinforced the radical wing of the Islamist movement's deeply held conviction that the only possible strategy was the use of force and that a peaceful political approach had proven to be a vain endeavor.

As a result, jihadi groups mushroomed around the country, the most prominent one being the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The FIS aligned itself with the GIA's call for jihad as the only viable way to establish an Islamic state, and it created a military force called the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS). But the FIS/AIS duo failed from a military standpoint because it neglected to contain the GIA's extreme violence against civilians and its own members. The pairing also failed on political grounds, as it proved unable to unify Algeria's Islamists and get its organizational ban lifted.<sup>18</sup> After a decade of fighting, the Algerian state finally overcame its jihadi foes and reasserted its hold on power.

## MIXING HARD AND SOFT APPROACHES TO COMBAT JIHADISM

That victory proved to be hard-won. The indiscriminate violence inflicted by the security forces was counterproductive and prompted many Algerian youth to become radicalized and turn to violence, joining jihadi groups in search of protection, respect, or revenge. Individuals who had long felt ignored and marginalized by the authorities joined and supported groups like the GIA. As a result, entire villages and towns fell under the sway of the GIA, which strictly applied sharia principles and administered their local affairs amid the governance breakdown that accompanied the war.

But public support for the GIA eventually decreased and abated when the group's violence became indiscriminate and targeted people who once had offered it moral and material support. Eventually, many Algerian citizens turned to the authorities to ask for help and were armed by the state to protect themselves. When these islands of resistance began appearing in jihadist-held parts of the country, the Algerian authorities shifted their strategy. While they multiplied the military and counterterrorism operations on the ground and continued hounding jihadi groups—pursuing them as far as the country's borders with Tunisia—the authorities also invested in development assistance to tackle violent radicalization at its roots and offered jihadists a way out by implementing a reconciliation policy to demobilize, disarm, and reintegrate former fighters who were willing to renounce violence.

## The Security-Led Approach

Early on in the war from 1992 to 1995, the Algerian authorities were nearly overwhelmed by the scale of the violence and the strength of the opposing armed groups, especially the GIA. Many analysts at the time predicted that the regime would fall and that the Islamists would rise to power. Instead, the country's security apparatus headed by the People's National Army (PNA) proved to be highly capable, cohesive, and effective. As Theda Skocpol has explained, a state can remain reasonably stable, invulnerable to a revolt by the masses even after having undergone significant delegitimization, if its repressive apparatus remains cohesive and serviceable.<sup>19</sup>

The authorities employed a security-led approach in the first years of the conflict (between 1992 and 1995). By rescheduling the repayment of its external debt in 1995, the Algerian authorities were able to reallocate some funds for modernizing the army. The state sought to modernize Algeria's military forces and provide them with advanced technology, and the government also strove to professionalize the country's customs personnel and the police.

Although some young people joined armed jihadi groups during this time, many also joined the PNA, especially those from small and medium towns located in the interior of the country.<sup>20</sup> The army offered recruits great professional opportunities with good benefits as well as the possibility to leave their little towns for a better life, participate in the fight against terrorism, and protect their country, as depicted in PNA public relations campaigns that helped greatly enhance its image.

The PNA conducted sweeps and air strikes in rural areas (such as Douar Béni Zermane, Douar Béni Aref, and Attaba), as well as in mountainous places (like Mount Zbarbar and Mount Chr ea). Police forces were mobilized in urban areas, and the Gendarmerie Nationale (a national rural police force) carried out operations in both urban and rural zones. The air force, the gendarmerie, the police, and special forces personnel actively assisted the army on large-scale operations like the Battle of A n Defla. During that operation in March 1995, the army reportedly killed approximately 800 jihadists in the cities of Oran and Arzew as well as the Djurdjura Mountains.<sup>21</sup> Over time, Algeria's security forces significantly reduced the strength of the jihadi armed groups and recovered important stocks of weapons. Captured jihadists were crucial for helping the state and its supporters gather intelligence and foil further attacks.

The Algerian state also created auxiliary forces that helped turn the tide in the conflict. In 1994, the state created a series of militias (with an estimated 200,000 members) to operate in the most remote parts of the country.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the time period of conscription was extended to eighteen months. Approximately 15,000 reservists were called into service in May 1995 for twelve months to help keep the country secure.<sup>23</sup> They aided the government in fighting armed groups, protecting citizens, and preventing the reestablishment of armed groups in liberated areas, which allowed people to return home. These forces greatly helped weaken the armed jihadi groups, which lost more than 6,000 fighters between 1994 and 1996.<sup>24</sup>

## Preventing Violent Extremism

Understanding that a security-led approach would not be enough to fight jihadism and to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the public, the Algerian regime took advantage of the rescheduling of the country's

debt to invest in development, unlocking nearly \$20 billion.<sup>25</sup> The government initiated a raft of economic reforms, including structural adjustment measures through price liberalization, the partial liberalization of the country's protectionist economy to allow more foreign trade, and the encouragement of foreign investment. These reforms helped the government secure the private and international partners it needed to maintain itself both financially and militarily, since these measures furnished funds that could be used to modernize its military forces as well as its repressive security apparatus.

International aid and these reforms in 1995 allowed the regime to bolster social welfare programs for housing, employment, healthcare, and infrastructure. That same year, the government increased the funding allocated for housing credits from \$10 million to \$15 million and set aside \$2.2 billion for food and medicine as well as \$2.2 billion for capital goods.<sup>26</sup> By better meeting the needs of the population, the regime began calming social tensions and curbing the expansion of violent jihadi extremism by countering it at its roots.

Administrative changes within the country's state-level governments followed. Fearing that Islamists had penetrated the political system—as many provincial governors (or *wali*) had close relationships with armed groups—and wishing to reestablish a monopoly on the country's governing structures, the state dismissed many officials who had worked in customs or public administration. Newly appointed *wali* were charged with implementing a national policy designed to help unemployed young people secure jobs. Government officials encouraged the military and a variety of state-owned enterprises to recruit more young graduates, as roughly 150,000 jobs materialized between 1994 and 1996.<sup>27</sup> Over that same time period, local committees were set up to study potential investment projects, and a government agency for promoting and monitoring investment registered 900 new projects involving local entrepreneurs that created between 70,000 and 100,000 additional jobs.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to these efforts to bolster employment, the government tackled the country's major housing problems by announcing the construction of a substantial number of new residential units in May 1995.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the state instituted a policy to provide limited funds and other forms of support to help citizens return home after fleeing for security reasons. Between 1993 and 1997, the number of Algerian internally displaced persons (IDPs) reached 1.5 million, many of whom settled mainly on the outskirts of major urban centers. To help these Algerians return to their homes and redress the unequal distribution of inhabitants, the government undertook a national redevelopment policy. But a mere 170,000 of the IDPs went back home while 1.3 million continued to live on the fringes of the cities where they had resettled.<sup>30</sup> Still, these various measures helped begin restoring public confidence in the state and curtailing the recruitment of violent jihadi extremists.

### Conciliatory Measures

The Algerian government first attempted to begin reconciling with its jihadi foes in 1995. Then president Liamine Zéroual unveiled a clemency law that urged jihadists to abandon violence and reintegrate into society under certain conditions. The Algerian military and the AIS conducted secret talks, and the AIS's national emir Madani Mezrag eventually announced a unilateral ceasefire in 1997, an important moment that marked the start of a long road to national recovery. It seems as though Mezrag calculated that it was crucial for the AIS to distance itself from the extreme violence of the GIA, but his decision to engage with the regime was also a question of survival. The AIS had been greatly weakened by a two-front struggle

against the state security forces as well as the GIA, which had started a purge against other FIS and AIS members in April 1995. At the same time, the GIA obstinately refused to entertain the possibility of talks with the government or a truce. Merzag's charismatic leadership, the centralized structure of the AIS, and the group's openness to pursuing talks with the government allowed him to open lines of communication with the regime. Meanwhile, the GIA's decentralized structure and the deaths of key leaders reduced its influence over the insurgents' decision of whether or not to pursue rapprochement with the government. In the end, approximately 7,000 fighters (including 800 GIA combatants) renounced violence and laid down their weapons right after the ceasefire.<sup>31</sup>

When former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika came to power (1999–2019), he effectively extended the clemency law by enacting the 1999 Civil Harmony Law, which garnered widespread support in a subsequent national referendum.<sup>32</sup> In theory, former jihadists were eligible for conditional amnesty if they had not been involved in particularly grievous offenses such as collective rape, massacre, or setting bombs in public spaces. For those who had committed such acts, the law allowed for reduced prison sentences. But in practice, things were less straightforward. Because of the sheer number of fighters and cases and the lack of evidence in many instances, it was highly difficult for the authorities to authenticate jihadists' claims of innocence. Virtually any former jihadists that yielded and denied committing such offenses were pardoned.<sup>33</sup> The government took this approach to spur jihadists that were still holding out to turn themselves in.

Six years later, the Algerian government enacted the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. Building on the earlier Civil Harmony Law, the charter indemnified state security personnel and government-friendly militias from responsibility for extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances during the war. FIS members were forbidden from engaging in any political activities, although the authorities enlisted some of the organization's leading figures such as Rabeh Kébir, Anwar Haddam, and Mustapha Kertali to endorse the reconciliation policy. Other former jihadists were given a platform on primetime television to talk about their motivations for joining jihadi groups and their decision to defect. This campaign helped raise public awareness about the dangers of violent extremism, gave the reconciliation policy an additional layer of legitimacy, and discouraged others from joining or remaining a part of the jihadi cause.<sup>34</sup>

To help former jihadists reintegrate into society, prevent recidivism, and fend off economic hardship, the authorities offered them substantial financial compensation. Social enterprises, state-owned enterprises, and private companies offered former fighters professional opportunities. These job-centered rehabilitation efforts were critical because they provided former jihadists with a sense of belonging, pride and dignity, and a restored conception of citizenship. In doing so, the Algerian authorities undercut the appeal of being recruited by jihadi groups.

### **Post-Civil War Jihadism in Algeria**

As a result of the Algerian government's soft and hard approaches, at least an estimated 15,000 former jihadists renounced violence.<sup>35</sup> Due to the state's successful efforts to crack down on jihadism and address its root causes, combined with public anger over the GIA's indiscriminate violence, the jihadi group's strength and influence plummeted, and it ceased to be a major actor on the Algerian jihadi scene. Some former GIA members resurfaced in 1997 to form an offshoot called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, a group that subsequently merged with local al-Qaeda affiliates in 2007 and rebranded itself as AQIM.

After the violence-plagued 1990s, Algeria's security outlook has been far more stable since. In 2017, Gallup ranked Algeria as the seventh-safest country in the world.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the risk of jihadi violence is not nonexistent, and even if AQIM does not constitute an existential threat as its predecessor did in the 1990s, sporadic, localized jihadi activity remains a nuisance. A source inside the Algerian army estimates that there are still between 500 to 1,000 jihadists operating in the country.<sup>37</sup> The population's support for jihadi groups in general and for AQIM, in particular, is weak as proven by the loss of AQIM's last bastion in the Berber hinterlands.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the losses of several jihadi leaders and assets have taken a toll. The Algerian security forces have continued to vigilantly pressure AQIM especially since the Arab Spring uprisings and what followed in the Sahel region when northern Mali fell into the hands of AQIM.

In Algeria itself, AQIM is highly mobile and works in small, detached cells, striking randomly and using suicide bombings to make its moves even more difficult to predict. While it is true that AQIM failed to pass on its dream of a caliphate to a new generation of Algerians, the group has continued to gain limited traction among some members of a generation that understand how heavily the government has curtailed their participation in national politics. This new generation of jihadists was raised in the heat of the civil war when the GIA had excommunicated virtually the entire Algerian population and was still launching massacres all over the Mitidja Plain and in the interior of the country. These jihadists are products of their violent environment, as many of them are children of killed or imprisoned jihadists. They tend to be attracted by the transnational jihadism AQIM claims to offer and the chance to fight in places like Libya, Mali, and Tunisia. The appeal of jihadi groups might be higher in southern Algeria where social discontent and the government's inability to translate financial wealth into inclusive growth has led to violent clashes and the radicalization of some youth.

In a nutshell, the Algerian government has largely succeeded in containing jihadism by deploying security forces on a massive scale, conducting continuous military operations, and backing a policy of national reconciliation, however imperfect it is. In the wake of Bouteflika's resignation, the country is going through a sensitive period and a key political transition. The succession issue remains open-ended. Nonetheless, this turmoil is temporary and the Algerian army, despite infighting, is poised to remain firmly in charge and will almost certainly continue to keep the threat of jihadi violence at bay.

## POSTCONFLICT ISLAMIST PARTIES

In the wake of the civil war, it was not just Algerian society that was reshaped but the country's political scene as well. The FIS's violent exit from the stage showed the limits of radical political Islam in the country. By the end of the 1990s, the FIS had been banned, its leadership had been overthrown, it was unable to control the violence its affiliates had unleashed, and it was kept from the negotiating table by its own military wing, the AIS. After all, it was Mezrag and not the leaders of the FIS (Ali Belhadj and Abbasi Madani) who convinced thousands of jihadists to lay down their weapons.

In a failed attempt to stage a comeback, some FIS figures decided to support the reconciliation process. They felt obligated to distance themselves and the party from the extremist violence of the jihadists. But the FIS was no longer the sociopolitical heavyweight that it had been in the early 1990s. Madani left Algeria for Qatar, where he lived until he passed away in April 2019, and Belhadj, once a charismatic orator,

became passé.<sup>39</sup> Nearly three decades after it was outlawed, the FIS still has not been rehabilitated, and its political prisoners remain in jail.<sup>40</sup>

### The Divided House of Algerian Islamists

Algeria's civil war reshaped the country's political arena and its Islamist movement. Islamist parties like the MSP and Ennahda have been participating in Algerian politics since the government managed to reinstate constitutional processes and organize presidential elections in 1995 amid the fighting. This participatory approach led eventually to a dead end after the war concluded. Postconflict Islamist parties in Algeria neglected to project a coherent vision for the country or a workable set of policies to challenge the status quo and solve the socioeconomic problems plaguing ordinary Algerians.

To distance themselves from the radical expression of political Islam represented by the FIS and the jihadists, moderate Islamist parties such as the Nahnah-led MSP—formerly known as Hamas—and the Ennahda Party adopted a participation-driven strategy. Since then, moderate Islamists have been co-opted by the government so effectively that they have largely embraced the rules of Algeria's insular, venal political system. Today, these parties are unable to mobilize voters and do not constitute real challengers to the military-supported regime. This failure to enact change is a product of both their inability to get over their differences and their opportunistic desire to preserve their clientelist relationships with the regime.

Internal disputes within the ranks of these co-opted Islamist parties sometimes have led certain factions to break off to form their own smaller Islamist parties.<sup>41</sup> These parties have been searching for unity since the end of the civil war and harried by the critical question of whether or not to work with the government.

The 2009 presidential elections are a case in point. When disagreements ensued with the ranks of the MSP, several members abandoned the party to form their own organizations. The leader of the MSP, Aboudjerra Soltani, backed Bouteflika and joined the governing coalition. Abdelmadjid Menasra, the MSP's second-ranked leader, and his followers refused to go along with this strategy. They accused Soltani of violating the party's core principles and of making significant concessions to the government without consulting with either the party's base or with its leaders. Soltani had indeed marginalized the party's cadres and ousted a group of forty figures from the party who had disagreed with him in 2008 during his bid for reelection as the head of the party.<sup>42</sup> Eventually Menasra left with hundreds of supporters and activists, including many national and local political figures, to create the Movement for Preaching and Change (MPC).

The MSP was further weakened by the defection of Amar Ghoul, another prominent member who had been minister of public works. Ghoul left in 2012 to establish his own party called the Rally of Algerian Hope (TAJ), which has a nationally minded Islamist platform; the new party successfully poached more than fifty parliamentarians and a few thousand local government officials.<sup>43</sup> These two significant events have left the MSP weakened and hemorrhaging support as it competes with the MPC and the TAJ for the same voters.

Algeria's other major Islamist party, Ennahda, similarly has been plagued by divisions and serves as another enlightening example of the Islamists' inability to unite. Ennahda, a party formerly known as the Movement of Islamic Nahda and which was inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, was shaken by a severe internal crisis in the 1990s between one of its leaders, Lahbib Adami, and one of the party's founders,

Abdallah Djaballah. Again, the dispute was over whether or not to work with the government. Adami called for dialogue with the state while Djaballah rejected this approach and sought to hold the government at arm's length. Adami eventually deposed Djaballah and rechristened the party as Ennahda.<sup>44</sup> Djaballah left and formed a separate Islamist party called el Islah (the Reform), from which he was again ousted and replaced by Djahid Younsi, who accused Djaballah of having archaic views and lacking a sense of structure and organization. Once more, Djaballah exited and created a third party in 2011 called the Front for Justice and Development (el Adala).

These disputes and offshoots have rendered Algeria's Islamist parties weak, discredited, and incapable of mobilizing supporters. They have witnessed several setbacks even during the Islamist wave of the Arab Spring that shook the wider region starting in late 2010. Indeed, even as Islamists were winning in neighboring countries like Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, Algerian Islamists were unable to capitalize on that success at home. To achieve the best results for Islamists in Algeria's May 2012 legislative elections, the MSP (which had been in a presidential alliance since 2004), Ennahda, and el Islah joined forces in the Green Algeria Alliance (AAV).

With neighboring peers like the Party for Justice and Development in Morocco and Ennahda in Tunisia turning in impressive performances, the AAV was convinced that it would secure a significant victory in Algeria; one of the party's leaders suggested before the votes were tallied that at least 120 of the available 462 legislative seats at stake could be won.<sup>45</sup> The results were disastrous for the Islamists, who secured only forty-eight seats, fewer than the fifty-two seats that the MSP had acquired alone in 2007.<sup>46</sup> A few months later in the November 2012 municipal elections, Islamists faced the worst electoral results since the advent of Algeria's multiparty system. The AAV, this time without the MSP, which had withdrawn from the bloc, secured an absolute majority in only ten out of 1,451 municipalities. The results of the 2017 elections were similarly disappointing for the Islamist camp.<sup>47</sup>

This electoral dysfunction has reigned over presidential politics too. The Islamists' last attempt to settle on a single presidential candidate was in 2009 when Younsi of el Islah ran and obtained a negligible share of the vote (less than 1.4 percent).<sup>48</sup> Before that, Djaballah ran a short-lived campaign in 1999. As a result of this track record, it seems safe to say that in the upcoming elections (originally slated for April 2019 but since postponed until July 4) the Islamists—who have been largely rejected by many of the protesters that ousted Bouteflika—are likely to fail again to rally behind a single standard bearer.<sup>49</sup>

### The Corroding Allure of Islamist Opportunism

The second reason for the declining influence of Islamist parties in Algerian politics is their tendency to focus on the regime rather than society. By fixating on preserving their relations with the state, these Islamist parties no longer pay attention to ordinary Algerians' needs and interests. Even as the leaders of these parties continue denouncing the state's methods, they have busied themselves with maintaining access to the corridors of power and securing benefits and privileges from state actors that many Algerians see as akin to the corruption the state has long been known for.<sup>50</sup>

The MSP is an instructive example. The party has been largely co-opted by the government since the 1990s. Even before the civil war ended, when the regime—having outlawed the FIS—needed a nonthreatening

yet legitimate actor to replace the radical FIS on the political stage. The MSP, as the leading Islamist party today, has a history of caring more about its relationship with the regime, its share of resources, and its political visibility than about advocating for political reforms. As a result of this co-optation, the party's popular appeal has been and remains weak, as does its ability to spur public engagement.<sup>51</sup>

Early on, the MSP's penchant for rapprochement was an attempt to denounce the armed violence of the 1990s and distance itself from the FIS's radical views. Its founder, Nahnah, advocated for what he called *el marhaliya* (gradualism), *el musharak* (participation), and *el itidal* (moderation).<sup>52</sup> Later, the MSP supported the state's decision to establish the National Transitional Council, which performed legislative functions in the absence of an elected parliament. As a result, several MSP cadres, the most prominent being Sheikh Mohamed Bouslimani, were killed by the GIA, which refused to accept any dialogue with what it viewed as the impious authorities.<sup>53</sup> In 1995, the MSP took part in the relaunch of the democratic process, and Nahnah finished in second place after the army's winning presidential candidate, Z eroual. In 1999, after he was disqualified for procedural reasons, Nahnah rallied behind the consensus candidate, Bouteflika, and supported the state's reconciliation policies despite weathering criticism from his own camp.

Thanks to this participation-driven strategy, the MSP has joined several government coalitions.<sup>54</sup> The regime has rewarded the MSP with ministerial positions and parliamentary seats, hefty salaries and tax write-offs, and (above all) the opportunity to benefit from the redistribution of oil revenues. These benefits have created bonds of loyalty between the MSP and the regime. The government's capacity to absorb new political actors allows it to strengthen itself and portray itself nationally and internationally as an open and inclusive regime that allows Islamists to take part in state affairs.<sup>55</sup>

But the MSP has paid a heavy price for this approach. While the party became an influential player on the Algerian political scene, the co-optation that sets the terms of its participation has disappointed its voters. Today, far from being the opposition force that pro-FIS voters and other would-be supporters once saw, many see the MSP as a tool of the regime. The party is technically part of the opposition, but it is neither a hard-liner nor a confrontational actor. Any occasional criticism it directs against the government is a continuous attempt to preserve its frail capacity to mobilize its base against the regime. It would be highly difficult for the MSP, which has been working with those in power since 1995, to renounce its privileges and benefits. The party is now tied so closely to the regime that the prospect of becoming a serious challenger or counterweight to the ruling authorities is virtually futile.

Algeria's Islamist politicians are far removed from the heyday of leading charismatic figures like Belhadj and Madani in their prime, who were able to rally millions of citizens to their cause. Since then, unable to shed their disagreements and conflicts of interest, the country's Islamist parties have continually failed to unite and clearly formulate ambitious reforms that would improve the daily lives of Algerians. Instead, by replicating the dysfunctions and shortcomings of the regime, Islamist parties have found themselves discredited and bereft of enthusiastic support.

The 2019 demonstrations marked another missed opportunity for the Islamists. Because they waited until the tide had already turned against Bouteflika to voice support for the protesters, the Islamist politicians failed to win over the people. By joining the protest movement belatedly and opportunistically, Algeria's Islamist parties reinforced public perceptions that they put their own self-interest above the

public interest. In fact, when leading figures such as Djaballah, Makri, and Soltani took to the street, not a few people decried them as sycophants and lackeys of the regime.<sup>56</sup>

## GRASSROOTS POLITICAL ISLAM MAKES INROADS

The failure of mainstream political Islam and jihadism in Algeria, as well as the benevolence of the state, has offered a grassroots Salafi network the opportunity to grow and expand: the Dawa Salafiya. The movement tactically has repositioned itself in religious terms as an alternative to jihadi Salafism, and in political terms as an alternative to political Salafism. As such, followers of the Dawa Salafiya movement claim to be against jihadists who breed *fitna* (conflict) and against moderates who propagate *bidaa* (religious innovations).<sup>57</sup> They claim to maintain strict silence on political matters, which they leave to *Wali el Amr* (the Legal Guardian) to whom they pay unquestioning obedience.

The Algerian government has largely left the Dawa Salafiya alone because the movement's quietism allows the state to fulfill many important objectives: rallying support for its reconciliation policy, weakening the mainstream Islamist opposition, countering more violent and ultraorthodox forms of political Islam (including Salafi-jihadi ideologies), reinforcing its own authority, and broadening its support base by integrating (and keeping in check) the country's new Islamist bourgeoisie.

Since the protests against Bouteflika began in February 2019, the voices of the most famous leaders of the Dawa movement have remained silent. While it is true that there have been Islamist party leaders and imams in the streets supporting the movement, none of these figures have issued any declarations claiming to be representative of the Dawa movement writ large. At this stage, it is very hard to predict what the Dawa leaders will do. It is likely that they will continue to remain entirely silent in the transition phase to avoid upsetting the authorities and especially the military. The group's growing significance remains important.

### The Saudi Connection

It is commonly believed that the roots of Dawa Salafiya in Algeria go back to the reformist movement of Ben Badis and Mubarak El-Mili in the 1920s. But the movement in its current form dates back to the 1980s, when a group of Algerian scholars came back from Saudi Arabia after studying at the Islamic University of Madinah, a Salafi stronghold. The Dawa movement is Wahhabi-inspired. The Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia is the source of much of the Wahhabi thought that has flooded the Arab world in general and Algeria in particular. The Algerian shuyukh affiliated with the Dawa have been taught or influenced by Saudi scholars such as Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Ibn Bâz, Muhammad Nasir-ud-Dîn al-Albani, Ibn al Rahman al Uthaymeen, Saleh al-Fawzan, and Rabee al-Madkhali, who have strong links with the official religious institution Dar el Ifta in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi educational support has been a vital factor in the growth and expansion of the Dawa. Many Algerian students for whom established Salafi professors vouch are offered trips to Saudi Arabia supposedly to perform the pilgrimage while in reality they go to study Salafism. Sponsorship by a professor from the movement allows students to obtain a stipend and a certificate at the end of the course. After that, these newly minted graduates become authorities and can vouch for others to take the trip. Such sponsorship

arrangements and the power given by the Saudis can be removed at any time. To stay up to date on the needs of the Dawa Salafiya, the Saudi embassy in Algeria used to offer honorariums to Algerian students who wrote reports on the evolution of the community and its relationship to society.<sup>58</sup>

The educational materials offered by the Saudis have been an essential element in spreading the ideas of the Dawa. Most of the books coming from Saudi Arabia are either distributed for free or generate revenues that are reinvested in the movement. Algerian authorities have been trying to oversee the market of religious books, but their control is not absolute.<sup>59</sup> Every year, dozens of forbidden religious books, pamphlets, leaflets, and compact discs (mainly from Saudi Arabia) find their way into the country and end up on store shelves despite the government's interdiction efforts.<sup>60</sup> These books are easy to read and offer simple religious guidance without delving into ideological issues, making them accessible to and popular with various segments of Algerian society.<sup>61</sup>

Thanks to this Saudi backing, the Dawa movement has developed an extensive network of followers led by figures who actively preach from Algiers to the edges of the Algerian Sahara. For instance, Sheikh Mohamed Ferkous, who was appointed symbolically in a letter sent by Saudi Sheikh al-Madkhali as the official voice of Salafism in Algeria, is very active in Algiers and its suburbs.<sup>62</sup> Other notable figures include Sheikh Abdelmadjid Djemaa, Lazhar Snigra, and Azeddine Ramadhani.<sup>63</sup> Many of these shuyukh are accessible to all comers via social media and sometimes even freely share their phone numbers. Their fatwas are available online, and they offer guidance on several everyday matters and in several languages, including Arabic, French, and even English.

### The Dawa Movement and Re-Islamization in Algeria

For many ordinary Algerians, the Dawa movement offers an alternative solution to a long-brewing crisis of political representation.<sup>64</sup> Dawa Salafiya's quietist approach has attracted many members of the generation that grew up during the dark years of the civil war. Many Algerians have been charmed by the movement's calls to reject the Westernization of Algerian society without confronting the country's authorities. Dawa Salafiya speaks to a generation of Algerians who are disappointed with a political scene that has been monopolized by the FLN since 1962, disenchanted with radical Islamists and their track record of violent extremism during the civil war, and let down by moderate Islamist politicians, who have long been little more than tools for those in power.

Dawa provides its supporters with a network, a sense of hope, and above all a place in society. Through its extensive community and its moral code, the Dawa offers its followers a chance to overcome political exclusion, restore social bonds, and create a positive self-image. Dawa also attracts middle-class Algerians, many of whom are traditionally conservative and pious, and among whom social and cultural conservatism has generally resonated. The revolutionary jihadi approach is not a possibility for these populations as it threatens their social and economic status. The Dawa movement's subculture and social connections are a way for these individuals to symbolically oppose the state. Dawa provides a collective identity and source of solidarity that gives its followers meaning and the strength to resist modernism.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, in a country where the state suffers from poor governance, a burdensome bureaucracy, deep corruption, underdelivering institutions, and a lack of tangible public representation (even at the local

level), Dawa is an extensive network that can provide its followers with an alternative system of social organization modeled on a so-called ideal Islamic society. With their religious proselytism through an array of mediums and channels, Dawa has become the leading force of re-Islamization in Algerian society.<sup>66</sup> Its ideology has spread, its influence has grown, and its networks have expanded.

As a result, Dawa's organizational strength in certain areas is strong and vibrant. In Algiers, the Salafists are very active, and in places such as Hydra, Kouba, Bouzaréah, Birkhadem, Bordj el Kiffan, and Draria, they have managed to take over several mosques by lobbying and pushing out imams who are not followers of the movement. Certain mosques are well-known for being under Salafi control, such as Lazhar Mosque in Les Pins Maritimes, the mosque of Ain Naadja, and that of Bab Ezzouar in the city of Douzi.<sup>67</sup> Allegiance to the same mosque is the basis of relationships between followers of the movement. Oftentimes, friendships start in the mosque, in closed studying groups, or even online. The movement's members, according to its followers, help one another get married, find jobs, find housing, or locate suitable schools for their children.

Education is of paramount importance to the Dawa, which has adopted the teachings of Sheikh al-Albani centered on the concept of *al tasfiya was al tarbiya* (purification and education). Purification consists of removing all corrupted beliefs and ideas of polytheism that have entered the lives of Muslims as well as purifying the Sunna and the law from the various innovations that have contaminated it. The second step is the education of oneself and then the education of others.<sup>68</sup> It is with this understanding that the Dawa invests in Islamic schools and kindergartens to educate future generations about Salafism. Institutions such as the Saudi Arabian School in Algiers, Al Manahil and Les Jardins du Savoir in Draria, and Alouka in Bab Ezzouar are all Salafi schools that are highly regarded by members of the community.<sup>69</sup> In these institutions, coeducation between boys and girls is not allowed, the teaching of the Quran every morning is mandatory, and group prayer is compulsory for all pupils.

Similarly, some of the country's largest and most influential universities, such as the Émir Abdelkader University of Constantine and the Islamic Sciences Faculty of Kharouba, are under Dawa control. In Kharouba, the majority of students are followers of Dawa Salafiya and are taught by professors who do not follow the official curricula but instead teach according to their Salafi agenda. Both professors and students promote what they consider to be good Salafi behavior, dress, and discourse. Professors and students who fail to follow the path of Dawa are isolated and treated with caution or even dismissed.<sup>70</sup> Even the scientific council of the university has been infiltrated and is dominated by Salafists. The followers of the Dawa have a mass outreach apparatus through their proselytizing activities that goes beyond the university campus; many elders are well-known for organizing classes in their homes. Others play a role of guardians to the students by doing things like helping them get married, guiding them as they make major life decisions, and seeking to purify them from what they see as ruinous beliefs and all forms of corruption and disbelief. To this end, they prevent them from reading newspapers and magazines or even watching television.

Besides their spiritual endeavors, a majority of Dawa followers are involved in business and commercial networks. The aid and assistance granted by the government—in the framework of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation—have allowed some Algerians to develop commercial enterprises. Many of them speak fluent French, which facilitates their connections with other Salafists in France. The majority of these contacts are French individuals with Algerian origins who want to perform their *hijra* (migration to Islamic lands) and live in their native land.<sup>71</sup> The development of this network has helped the Algerian

Salafi business community import and export a variety of goods, including books, clothing, bedding, and furniture. The shuyukh of the Dawa regularly issues fatwas to help the followers in their business enterprises. Sheikh Ferkous, for instance, issued a fatwa permitting bribes for customs agents for the sake of a business; he explained that when obligated to do so, the person who gives the bribe escapes judgment because the sinner is not the giver but rather the receiver of the bribe.<sup>72</sup>

These various activities centered on the goals of purification and education should be taken seriously. Cognizant that neither the moderate Islamists nor the jihadists has been able to gain political traction or achieve progress toward establishing an Islamic government, the Dawa has followed a low-key tactical playbook. While these activities have helped the Dawa develop and expand on the ground, perhaps the most critical factor has been the camouflage that a quietist approach has furnished. Supporting and respecting incumbent political rulers is a strategic move for the Dawa. By doing so, they give the impression that they are Islamists who are not interested in the state and the politicization of Islam. Yet their quietism does not mean that they do not engage with political developments. Members of the Dawa influence political events indirectly while observing their ideological principle of refraining from direct political participation.

During the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, for example, the leaders of the Dawa movement called Algerians not to join the wave of protests against their leaders and condemned both Islamist parties and jihadists alike. Similarly, in 2014, Dawa leaders called Algerians to perform their civic duty and unite behind then president Bouteflika. But, despite this support for incumbent leaders, the Dawa movement does not hesitate to state, like the radical FIS in the 1990s, that democracy itself is *shirk* (the sin of practicing idolatry or polytheism). Sheikh Ferkous has explained that “strikes, sit-ins, and demonstrations, as well as all the methods inherent in democracy, are part of the habits of the disbelievers and the methods by which they behave with their governments.”<sup>73</sup> Yet he also repeatedly has called Algerian citizens not to rebel against their rulers, rulers that are the fruit of this same supposedly impious system. This is how Dawa Salafiya, despite considering democracy to be a manifestation of *shirk*, tries to remain in the good graces of the authorities to have latitude to advance its leading role in the re-Islamization of Algerian society.

Given the political implications of the Dawa’s ostensibly apolitical re-Islamization efforts, influential voices within the regime have raised concerns. Indeed, Minister of Religious Affairs Mohamed Aïssa has repeatedly noted the worrying rise of the Dawa Salafiya and the potential radicalism of its ideas. In 2015, for instance, some Dawa followers launched a poster campaign in the streets of the capital inciting Algerians not to celebrate the Mawlid Nabawi Sharif (the birth of the prophet). Aïssa denounced this campaign and called on Algerians to celebrate the holiday as usual.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, in March 2018, Aïssa denounced an excommunication fatwa launched by Sheikh Ferkous against the Ibadites, the Sufis, and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>75</sup> A few months later, in June 2018, worried about the rise of Salafi thought in the country’s mosques, Aïssa decided to freeze the renewal of “mosque committees” that the Dawa infiltrated to push for the appointment of their own imams.<sup>76</sup>

On the whole, the latest developments in Algeria seem to indicate that the Dawa will maintain its quietist, mostly nonconfrontational tactics. Since the protests against Bouteflika began in February 2019, the Dawa movement’s leaders have remained silent. Despite the large-scale demonstrations that pressed Bouteflika to step down, the leaders of the Dawa movement maintained their stance of not rebelling

against the regime and the political system. It is likely that the movement will continue to eschew politics and focus on its religious activities.

At the same time, the *Dawa Salafiya* is integrating political observations into its religious instructions, which shows that politics directly affects spiritual life on some level. The movement is controlling the religious observance and faith of millions of Algerians in the face of change. Through these activities and its quietist stance, the *Dawa* is, on the one hand, avoiding the wrath of the authorities and, on the other hand, is putting in place the foundations and the pillars for building an Islamic society according to its Salafi standards. As al-Albani once put it: “Build an Islamic State in your hearts, it shall be built for you on your lands.”<sup>77</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As Algeria’s post-Bouteflika leadership saga unfolds, the country’s military-backed leaders are likely to continue to overwhelmingly shape the terms and direction of the nation’s politics. Yet the country’s various Islamist communities still offer an important vantage point into the character of the society they are presiding over. Despite sporadic and highly localized jihadi violence, radical Islamism no longer represents a viable or desirable pathway for most Algerians. And while moderate Islamist parties will likely continue to be political actors in the transition, they will be hamstrung by the general public’s perception that they are lackeys of the regime. Meanwhile the *Dawa* will continue to exploit ostensibly nonpolitical corners of society in pursuit of a re-Islamization agenda that seeks to reshape Algerians’ social and religious identities and build solidarity on a foundation of everyday practices that have highly political implications.

In short, political Islam is not dead in Algeria and will continue to be an important feature of the country’s public life as the shifting lives of ordinary citizens play out amid an uncertain political terrain.

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