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More Religious, Yet Still Secular?
The Shifting Relationship Between the Secular and the Religious in Syria

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It is often assumed that the Islamic revival in the Middle East over the past 20 years means the end of secularism in the region. Yet the palpable religious revival over that time period in a secular country like Syria and the concomitant weakening of its existing secular culture do not necessarily entail the disappearance of secularism. Indeed, one outcome of the authoritarian upgrading that the Syrian regime undertook over the two decades preceding the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011 was the promotion of religion in a way that accommodates the secular vision – and, one might add, the authoritarian nature – of the state.¹ Arguably then, Syrian secularism is no longer the hard line, uncompromising ideology that the Ba’th party intellectuals once promoted, but rather a more complex ideology that is transforming Syrian society and pulling it in many directions that cannot simply be categorized as ‘religious’ or ‘secular’.

According to Charles Taylor, ‘secularity’ is marked by an ideational transformation in which religion and belief in God are seen as one view among many.² This paper bases its arguments on Taylor’s definition of secularity and on the idea that secularism and religiosity are intertwined conceptually and historically. Thus, it aims to show the ways in which the secular emerges in the midst of the religious and how the entanglement of religiosity and secularity produce fluctuating notions of secularism and religiosity. The enquiry suggests that there has been an attempt to relativize religious knowledge in present-day Syria, by portraying it as one reality or view among many other points of view that are also plausible. In doing so, the paper answers the question ‘is there a decline in secularism, or is there, rather, a reformulation of the secular/religious distinction?’ by arguing for the latter point of view. The paper more broadly attempts to make sense of the complex and tangled history of secularism in Syria as a means of better understanding the country’s secular culture and especially some of the transformations that it has gone through.³

¹ Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 2013; Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba’thist Secularism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011. Pierret argues that, although the Syrian state has not interfered with the religious discourse, it has worked to limit its political implications. In *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, the argument made is that the state has indeed carefully manipulated the re-Islamization of Syrian society by providing an opportune organizational space to those Islamic ulama who endorse the political regime.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, 2007, p 3.

³ Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan van Antwerpen, ‘Introduction,’ in Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan van Antwerpen, eds. *Rethinking Secularism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 6.

What emerges is that secularism remains vibrant though is changing as the country witnesses the reformulation of Sunni religious discourse. Religion becomes an instrument of secular power. Thus, while the country is undoubtedly Islamizing⁴, an important part of this Islamization tends to be accepting of other viewpoints and embraces the normative ideal of the separation of church and state. The paper concludes that, when and if the Bashar al-Asad regime eventually falls and if *eventually* a democratic transition follows, Syrians might still opt for a secular political order based upon this new understanding of secularism. This claim is even more important to investigate today given the overwhelmingly radical face of the Syrian revolution, and that much of the news on Syria reports mainly on extremist Islamists⁵ such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The following sections argue that in the last 100 years, distinct modalities of secular nationalism arose and shaped Syrian society and political culture.⁶ The paper also shows why and how Syrian secularism transformed over time. It is argued that the secularism promoted by the state changed from a version accommodating of religious nationalism and religiosity to one that – in the 1950s and 1960s – hoped to ‘modernize’ society in ways that posited secularism against religiosity.⁷ This was the high point of Ba’thist secularism. More recently, it has changed again primarily as a result of a re-evaluation and re-valuing of the understanding of religion that informed the previous secular model. In this newest version, religiosity regains its meaningful place within society but a new facet of the religious that essentially perpetuates secularism is promoted. This last section maintains that the Syrian state has been successful at influencing the religious discourse by promoting shaykhs that have served its political agenda and socio-political vision, including the need to separate religion and the state. This claim is in line with the analysis of other researchers on the Syrian Islamic movement: For example, Thomas Pierret argues that although the Syrian state has not interfered in the religious

⁴ Meaning that it is witnessing the increase of overt Islamic religiosity. This paper examines the Syrian context up until the Syrian Revolution of March 2011.

⁵ ‘Islamists’ here indicates groups or individuals who anoint themselves ‘Islamic’ and who claim to act in the name of Islam in order to capture the state and impose their beliefs from above.

⁶ This history draws mainly on chapters 2, 3 and 4 in *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*.

⁷ Although it recognized religion as a historically significant heritage.

discourse, it has worked to limit its political implications.⁸ In the book *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, the argument made is that the state has indeed carefully manipulated the re-Islamization of Syrian society by providing a significant organizational space to those Islamic ulama who endorse the current political apparatus.⁹

Throughout the paper I attempt to present Syrian secularism and to organize it around Charles Taylor's concept of secularity. Thus the paper addresses two main issues and serves two main purposes: 1) It presents Syria's secular history up until the Syrian revolution and 2) it casts new light on the secular/religious distinction as well as the relationship between the two within the Syrian context.¹⁰

Methodologically, the historical and analytical narratives I present aim to emphasize the state-sanctioned Sunni discourse. My focus is on the Sunni discourse because of the demographic importance of the Sunni community in Syria – indeed, current reports estimate that between 71% and 74% of Syrians are Sunni. This discourse is advanced by what I call the 'official' Sunni ulama, that is, those ulama endorsed by the regime or working on behalf of the Syrian Ministry of Religious Endowments. It is important to note here that the distinction between official and non-official ulama is not easy to make given that all religious leaders are theoretically employees of the Ministry. And yet in my fieldwork in Syria, people perceived different shaykhs differently, with some being seen as closer to the agenda of the Ministry than others and therefore more 'official'. For my purposes, it is the proximity and perceived proximity to the official discourse that makes a shaykh more official.¹¹

⁸ Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*.

⁹ Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*.

¹⁰ For a complicating account of secularism examined in terms of its opposition to Islam and giving consideration to its imperial implications, see Asad, Talal et al., *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech (The Townsend Papers in the Humanities No. 2)*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009.

¹¹ This study might be criticized for being teleological, because of its focus on the discourse and political motives of the principal Damascene shaykhs, and yet this narrative is important to write down given the paucity of secondary materials available on Syrian secularism and the official ulama.

SYRIAN SECULARISM: EARLY TRAJECTORY

Like many other nation-states that were emerging in the late 19th to early 20th century, Syria experienced a strong growth in nationalism and in nationalist movements. Some of these sought to modernize the socio-economic and political order in ways that accommodated a more conservative outlook, often by recognizing the cultural significance of the country's past and the wish to maintain it, while others looked upon progress as essentially a break with past practices and ideas.¹² Generally speaking, both of these major currents within the early nationalist movements imagined the nation as secular.¹³ Seen from the perspective of Hegel's philosophy of history, the Syrian intelligentsia had agreed that religious systems belonged to a past moment in the development of the human spirit. They began to look at their future in a new way.

Accordingly, the Syrian secular model of the early 20th century was initially committed to a strict separation of church and state and the confinement of religion to the private space. Historically, the model has some of its roots in the late 19th century Ottoman policies that sought to 'modernize' the political, judicial and educational systems in the Ottoman provinces. The fall of the Ottoman Empire did not halt this process.¹⁴ Indeed, it appears that many¹⁵ within the nascent Syrian state were tired of the old theocratic Ottoman Caliphate and its claim to

¹² Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, London: faber and faber, 1991, pp. 299-349; Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: the Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

¹³ Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, pp. 299-349. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1789-1939*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983. This is notwithstanding that Islamic tendencies would remain present.

¹⁴ See for instance the 1876 Constitution. For a history of the early 20th century in English that touches upon questions of secularism, liberalism and nationalism, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1789-1939*; James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998; Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights and Paternal Privilege in French Syria and Lebanon*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001; Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: the Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*.

¹⁵ Not only the political and intellectual elites, but also the nascent educated lower and middle urban and rural strata of society. Syrian secularists at the time included intellectuals such as Shibli Shumayyil (1850-1917), Faris Nimr (1856-1951), Farah Antun (1874-1922), Salam Musa (1887-1958) and Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1855-1902). These intellectuals laid the foundations of secular thought in the Arab world.

represent the highest Islamic authority both legally and spiritually.¹⁶ Secularist intellectuals at the time – such as Shibli Shumayyil (1850-1917), Faris Nimr (1856-1951), Farah Antun (1874-1922), and Abd al-Rahman Kawakibi (1855-1902) – also started paying close attention to the Western European and American models of governance.¹⁷ Furthermore, at that time Syria's shaykhs were often associated in the popular *imaginaire* with the traditional notable class and were therefore perceived as defenders of a bygone socio-economic order and more broadly of the status quo.¹⁸ These factors were strong contributors to the view among the newly ascendant educated lower and middle urban and rural strata of society that secular socio-political models were the more promising ones. The desire to have a secular system could also be linked to the fact that many Syrians had to learn about the French model and its history during the French mandate over Syria (1920-1946).¹⁹ Furthermore, the particular Syrian circumstances of myriad historical and ideological shifts as well as cultural changes, coupled with a highly diverse religious and ethnic landscape, might themselves have contributed to creating a shared sense that it was unreasonable to assign one religious identity to the overall Syrian political culture and to enshrine it in the nation's constitutions.²⁰

All of these factors underline that the secular system that emerged in the post decolonization period accommodated the public's desire for political and social change as well as the need for unity within an emerging, highly diverse nation. Thus despite the fact that the model was informed by other systems such as the French (as will be further discussed below), the rise of a secular political culture can be considered an organic product of the country's particular history and collective experience as well as of its leading elites and intellectuals. This meant that Syria's politically active citizens generally accepted (see below) their country becoming a secular nation-state in the early 20th century, with a neutral public sphere and

¹⁶ Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, pp. 306-307 and pp. 346-347.

¹⁷ For more on Arab and Syrian intellectuals, see Binbing Wu, *Secularism and Secularization in the Arab World*, *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007.

¹⁸ Raymond Hinnebusch, 'State and Islamism in Syria,' in Abdul Salam Sidahmed and A. Ehteshami, eds, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996.

¹⁹ See Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: the Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

²⁰ Syria is an ideologically, ethnically and religiously diverse society. In terms of ethnicities, the country is Arab, Kurdish, Armenian, and other. In terms of religion, Syrians are Sunni Muslim, Alawite and Druze, as well as Christian (with various denominations). The country also includes small Jewish communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli and Aleppo. See the CIA World Factbook at www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/goes/sy.html

without an official religion. This stance was enshrined in the Constitution of 1920 (for instance, article 14 of the constitution guaranteed freedom of religion and belief as long as these did not infringe on the practice of other faiths).²¹ This ‘accepted’ breach with the past was demonstrated a number of times in free parliamentary elections in the late 1940s and 1950s during which Syrian voters opted for secular parties at the expense of the Muslim Brothers.²² The Syrian nation-state has not had an official religion since.

In terms of secular political models, Syrian secularism up to the early 1960s can be considered to be part of the ‘separatist’ pole, thus adhering to a separation of church and state, and maybe closer to French *laïcité*²³ and to the Turkish model (itself based on the French one) than to the ‘established official religion’ pole²⁴ in which mention of God or of religion by state officials is acceptable.²⁵ It was also closer to the French and Turkish models because it wanted religion to be limited to the private sphere, with the separation of church and state meaning mainly the freedom of the state from religion. Yet the converse was not true, as can be seen for example in the fact that the political apparatus continued the Ottoman regime’s practice of organizing Syrian Islamic as well as Christian Awqaf (religious endowments) through the Ministry of Awqaf, at one point even secularizing some of the laws that religious endowments were supposed to adhere to based on Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Moreover while the distribution of the endowments and who they ought to benefit are normally matters to be determined by the donor under Sharia Law (Islamic Law), the state decreed that religious benefactors would not have a say in how the Ministry of Religious Endowments would distribute endowment money.²⁶ State control over religion was made even more emphatic in

²¹ See: Edward W.F. Webb, ‘‘Turkey’s France, Syria’s France: la laïcité in two Ottoman successor states’ *Conference on Migration, Religion and Secularism – a comparative approach (Europe and North America)* Paris, June 17-18, 2005 available at histoire-sociale.univ-paris1.fr/Collo/Migrations/Webb.pdf

²² George Jabbour, *al-Fikr al-Siyasi al-Muaser fi Suriya, Beirut: al-Manara*, 1993.

²³ French *laïcité* is different from Anglo-Saxon secularism in that it would like religion to be limited to the private sphere. The Anglo-Saxon model does not deny religion a place within the public sphere.

²⁴ The state has an official religion but follows a secular system of rule.

²⁵ For more on the difference between *laïcité* and secularism, see Alfred Stepan, ‘The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democratic and Non-Democratic Regimes,’ in Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan Van Antwerpen, eds., *Rethinking Secularism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

²⁶ See decrees 76 and 128 of 11 June 1949, see also, Muhammad Sakhr, ‘Bahth shamel fi alwaqf fi suriya,’ available at: law-library.syriaforums.net/t1919-topic (last viewed 20 April 2013). For more on the history of Syria’s religious institutions, see Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*.

1949, when a decree placed all mosques, even privately funded ones, under government control and ownership.²⁷

The Syrian constitutions of 1950 and of 1953 both prescribed strict separation of church and state as stated in Article 3: 'Freedom of belief is guaranteed. The State respects all the heavenly religions and guarantees the free exercise of all forms of worship as long as they do not disturb the public order.' A number of prominent intellectuals and politicians, including Zaki al-Arsuzi, Antoon Sa'adeh, and Michel 'Aflaq,²⁸ pressed for a state as well as a public space free from 'superstitious' discourse and practices and focused on reason and secular morality, something that the Ba'thist state would actively pursue in the 1960s (as will be shown hereinafter).²⁹ Secularism as articulated in Syria thus reflected the liberal assumptions about the reason/religious binary, with religion belonging to the private sphere.

It is important to make the point here that even orthodox religious leaders who were opponents of secularization policies have had to reformulate their religiosity based on the reason/religious binary. Thus, they have acquiesced to this demand to focus on reason and logic. To some degree also it was the inevitable consequence of the democratization of rationalist education in the 20th century. The trend can be seen in the efforts by many Syrian ulama to downplay the mystical side of religion and promote a more worldly understanding of Islam.³⁰ Such efforts underscore a point made by Taylor, that one route towards secularity has been 'the repression of what came to be understood as 'magical' elements in religion...'.³¹ To take another example, Shaykh Usama al-Rifa'i explains that only through effort and education can one become a saint in this world. Here the concept of sainthood is 'modernized' in the sense that it loses its mystical aspect and transforms into a 'rational' mundane concept. Al-Rifa'i says that his father saw the saints of the past as models not because of their miracles, but

²⁷ Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*, p. 18. Though it is important to note that the state refrained from interfering at this phase in the religious discourse itself.

²⁸ One of the main inspirers of the Ba'th ideology, Zaki al-Arsuzi, was in favour of an atheist understanding of secularism. He often asserted in his writings that the *Jahiliya* (the pre-Islamic era) was the golden age of the Arab nation.

²⁹ More particularly reflected in the Constitution of 1 May 1969, which gave birth to the current 1973 Constitution.

³⁰ For more on this, see Itzhak Weisman, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus*, Leiden, Brill, 2000.

³¹ Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, p. 216.

because of their actions and efforts in this world.³² Teachers who follow Shaykh Al-Rifa'ī's ways have thus stopped teaching Naqshbandiyya litanies to their followers because these litanies were no longer 'suited to the ideological perils of the modern world, which required a focus on the rational dimensions of knowledge.'³³

Finally, it is important to underline once again that the Syrian model was shaped organically. Thus while the country's secularist intellectuals were pushing for a shift towards the French model of *laïcité*, those parliamentarians who came from a more religious background or who were part of the conservative oligarchy were more reluctant to exclude religion from Syria's political culture and public sphere. In the 1940s and 1950s, it seems that both groups made compromises such that no one point of view came to dominate completely. For instance, although Syria's constitutions from the early 1930s on were secular in the sense that they did not prescribe any religious body of customs in the country and imposed no official religion, they still accepted Muslim law as the main source of jurisprudence. Religion also continued to set the tone for the Personal Status Law (which mainly affected women and children). All of this meant that the Syrian model continued to be based upon a soft interpretation of *laïcité* up until the Ba'ṯhi revolution of 1963, one that did not encourage or discourage the public from piety and indeed was neutral in recognizing belief.

BA'ṬHIST SECULARISM: HARD-LINE SECULARISM

The Syrian doctrine vis-à-vis secularism has been both theoretically and officially that of the Ba'ṯh political party since that party took power in 1963.³⁴ The Ba'ṯh party aimed from its birth in the early 1940s to 'modernize' Syrian society in ways that recognized the merits of secular citizenship as an ideal and that sought, theoretically, to make all citizens equal under a sovereign state. This has meant challenging and often cutting off the traditional oligarchy and the traditional patrimonial class from political power.

Like most other Syrian political parties of the period, especially the revolutionary ones such as the Syrian Socialist National Party and the Communists, the Ba'ṯh party was hard-line in its secularism. This meant that although the Ba'ṯh recognized the role of Islam as well as

³² Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*, p.122.

³³ Ibid, p. 126

³⁴ See Raymond A. Hinnebusch, 'Class and State in Ba'ṯhist Syria,' in Richard T. Antun and Donald Quataert, eds, *Syria: Society, Culture, and Polity*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 32; Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996, pp.15-16.

that of Christianity both culturally and historically, it nonetheless argued that an emancipation of the Arab citizen required a strict disentanglement of church and state and an imposition of a secular order that would promote a culture of rationality and equality under positivist modernizing laws. Thus Article 5 of the Ba'ath Party Constitution pressed for popular sovereignty, and asserted that the people alone, not religion, are the source of political authority.³⁵ Article 15 of the Party Constitution explains that, 'The Pan-Arab National link³⁶ is the only link that exists in the Arab State and assures harmony among the citizens and their fusion in one crucible of one Nation and combats all kinds of denominational, sectarian, tribal, ethnic and regional fanaticism.'³⁷

During the Ba'ath's Sixth National Congress in 1963, at a time when the party was rising to power, a document outlining its '*Muntalaqat*' or Starting Points was presented. The text announced a revolutionary social and educational transformation of Syria along rigorously 'scientific' and 'socialist lines'.³⁸ This pointed the way away from the status quo of Syrian secularism being limited to freedom of the state from religion, and toward a much more radical secularism that would involve challenging the religious discourse and excising it from both state and society if possible, as well as allowing the state to access, organize and steer the religious sphere more aggressively in the interim. Thus the *Muntalaqat* text could be said to have initiated a radicalization of the Syrian secular model. Indeed, the Sixth National Congress of the Ba'ath party called for the radical social transformation of Syrian society through the removal of religion as a subject of study in the nation's schools as well as the secularization of the Syrian Personal Status Law. These moves would increasingly secularize the social order –

³⁵ For the Constitution of the Ba'ath party, see <http://www.baath-party.org/eng/constitution.htm>. Articles 3, 5, 15, 17, 18, 20 and 44 of the Ba'ath Party Constitution stressed the need for a 'new Arab generation' that adopts 'scientific thought' free from 'superstitions and reactionary tradition.'

³⁶ In the case of Ba'athi ideology, Pan-Arabism is not understood as an ethnic affiliation, but rather as being based on language and historical heritage.

³⁷ Webb tells us, 'This compares to Article 28, part 2 of 1950, which says education must aim to produce a generation 'strong in body and thought, believing in God..' as well as 'seized of the Arab heritage..' and '..imbued with the spirit of solidarity and brotherhood among all citizens.' Webb, "'Turkey's France, Syria's France: la laïcité in two Ottoman successor states' (online).

³⁸ See *Ba'd al-Muntalaqat a-Nadhariya li-Hizb al-Ba'ath al-'Arabi al-Ishtiraki: Aqaraha al-Mu'tamar al-Qawmi al-Sades* [Some of the Theoretical Starting Points of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party: Adopted by the Sixth National Congress], Damascus: Ministry of Information, n.d.).

in contradistinction to the political order – as well as discourage younger generations from religiosity.³⁹

Similarly, the Ba’th party’s 1969 Constitution – which later gave birth to the 1973 Constitution – was written in such a way as to transform Syria’s secular heritage from one that neutrally recognized belief to one that refrained from any mention of faith. Thus the constitution replaced the terms ‘religion’ and ‘morality’ with ‘science,’ while the term ‘humanity’ supplanted God.⁴⁰

In the mid-1960s, the new leadership of the by then governing Ba’th was also interested in taking control of and shaping the religious discourse within the country. This meant having the right to appoint and dismiss religious leaders (who had been elected by their peers before the Ba’th took power), as well as control religious state officials who had previously been neutral.⁴¹ As a result, there were large-scale dismissals of religious figures who had challenged the ideas and actions of the Ba’th regime. This included the dismissal of Grand Mufti Abu Yusr ‘Abidin, with Ba’th-backed Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro chosen to replace him rather than the popular Shaykh Hasan Habanaka in 1964.⁴² Furthermore, to ensure that the Ba’thist transformation was carried out effectively, soft-line party members were dismissed from their posts within the army and the government in 1966.⁴³

These various moves and the new secular culture imposed from above clearly demonstrated the aggressive secularism that the Ba’th political leaders had in mind for Syria.⁴⁴ For the conservative and the pious, it was also a clear indication that something needed to be

³⁹ Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, p. 77; Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria*, p. 113; Raymond A. Hinnebusch, ‘The Islamic Movement in Syria: Sectarian Conflict and Urban Rebellion in an Authoritarian-Populist Regime,’ in Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, ed., *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, New York, N.Y.: Praeger, 1982, p. 159.

⁴⁰ See Webb, ‘‘Turkey’s France, Syria’s France: la laïcité in two Ottoman successor states’ p. 22.

⁴¹ Annabelle Böttcher, *Official Sunni and Shi’i Islam in Syria*, Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 2002, p. 8.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Hinnebusch, ‘The Islamic Movement in Syria: Sectarian Conflict and Urban Rebellion in an Authoritarian-Populist Regime,’ p. 159.

⁴⁴ Some analysts refer to this later iteration of the Ba’th party as the neo-Ba’th, to signal the significant change in the party’s ideological foundations over the course of the early to mid-1960s. For clarity’s sake, and especially given that the party continued to officially be known as the Ba’th, this article will continue to call it the Ba’th party.

done to stop the regime from normalizing their secular version. Thus as early as the mid-1960s, a number of mass protests erupted in Syria. Most of these were led by the Muslim Brothers.

THE START OF THE UNRAVELLING OF HARD-LINE SECULARISM

By the late 1960s, the credibility of the new Ba'ṯhi regime was weakening due to the rapidity and aggressive methods of its social and political transformations. The authoritarian nature of the regime was especially alarming in light of Syrians' previous experience with years of parliamentary representation and a democratic political environment in the 1940s and 1950s.

Hafez al-Asad, Syria's defense minister in the late 1960s, felt that a new, more pragmatic and compromising policy was needed in order to placate the men of religion and to pacify the hitherto-hostile urban bourgeoisie and Damascene merchants, many of whom were either in alliance with, or part of, Syria's 'religious class'.⁴⁵ Thus Asad's Corrective Movement (*al-Haraka al-Tashihiya*)⁴⁶ proposed to reduce the scale and pace of the country's social transformation.⁴⁷ This effectively shifted the Ba'ṯh away from its emphasis on revolutionary, aggressive secularism, though Asad continued to assert support for a secular order.⁴⁸

Importantly for this paper, after rising to power in 1970, Asad refrained from a secular rhetoric that undermined religious morality. Part of the reason for this is because it became clear that for the regime to remain in power, it would not be possible to entirely dismiss the old oligarchy of powerful businessmen as well as Sunni religious leaders who had ruled Syrian political life for centuries. This realization led to a clause being added to the new 1973 Constitution stating that the president of Syria must be a Muslim.

During the early 1980s, with militants within the Muslim Brethren continuing to ever more vigorously challenge his authoritarian rule, Asad initiated an important shift towards a secular model that understood secularism as the co-existence and cohabitation of different sects

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 161.

⁴⁶ In the two years prior to the coup, the Ba'ṯh had witnessed a power split which divided Ba'ṯhists between Salah Jadid, who controlled the party, and Hafez al-Asad, who controlled the army. The army won. Tabitha Petran, *Syria*, New York: Praeger, 1972, pp. 239-49.

⁴⁷ Basel Salloukh, 'Organizing Politics in the Arab World: State-Society Relations and Foreign Policy Choices in Jordan and Syria,' McGill University: PhD Thesis, 2000, p. 248.

⁴⁸ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 94.

and religions.⁴⁹ This *de facto* reformulation followed an upsurge in restrictions on religious activity in the late 1970s that revealed the regime's uncertainty about how to deal with the religious opposition. A realization that the regime's religious policies should aim to accommodate Syria's conservative class led to a gradual retreat by the state. This time around, the *de facto* reformulation was done not via Syria's secular intellectuals but rather via religious leaders who were willing to work with and under the authoritarian regime.⁵⁰ It is at this point that the entanglement of secularity and religiosity began. The new religious movement quickly permeated throughout the country's religious establishment, leading to the formal (i.e. undertaken by the state) opening up of religious institutions, as well as opening up of the official media – radio and television in particular – to regular programs promoting religiosity. State crony shaykhs such as Sa'īd Ramadan al-Buti⁵¹ and Ahmad Kuftaro⁵² soon became household names and galvanized the imagination of many youth and members of the middle class as a result of their media profile. At the same time, the regime halted its social and legal secularizing agenda.

These various moves meant that Syrian secularism went through yet another transformation, drawing closer to a secular model of religious recognition and co-habitation. Syrians were no longer told to shed their traditional ways. By the mid-1980s for example, the state no longer interfered on the issue of whether or not girls veiled in schools; and by the latter part of the decade, some men even grew their beards, something which they would not have likely dared to do before for fear of being mistaken for Muslim Brothers. At the same time, in stark opposition to the initial Ba'thi agenda, religious lessons were offered in private and public schools, while the secular/scientific/rationalist/modernizing discourse was replaced by a religious discourse in the public sphere, and imposition and interpretation of the Personal Status Law was left up to the religious leaders within every denomination. Overall, the state imposed

⁴⁹ Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, chapter 5. This could be because, as a member of a minority group (Alawi), Hafez al-Asad felt that championing hard-line secularism might be interpreted through a sectarian lens. Also, it could be argued that a focus on co-habitation of the different religious denominations might help consolidate a regime that is perceived by some in Syria as an Alawi regime.

⁵⁰ It is important to note here that while observers assert that the regime indirectly encouraged the re-Islamization of society, Syrian Shaykhs I talked to in 2009 tended to argue that the regime only worked at limiting the political implications of the Syrian Islamic movement.

⁵¹ Killed in April 2013 under questionable circumstances.

⁵² Died in 2004.

a secular model in which there was no official religion but all denominations were respected. Co-habitation, not rationalism, became the new trend.⁵³ But the story does not end here. The new state-sanctioned religious movement that practically supplanted Syria's Muslim Brothers made subtle and tacit claims about the political apparatus and the secular order. These new ideas became increasingly salient at the end of Hafez al-Asad's rule (possibly due to the increasingly pervasive influence of the media as a platform for the religious leaders) and especially during the rule of his son, Bashar al-Asad. It is thus in the late 1990s and the 2000s that we start seeing the fluctuation of secularism and religiosity as distinct ideologies, and increasingly, an intertwining between the two. The next section shows how the secular emerged in the midst of the religious in Bashar al-Asad's Syria.

ISLAMIC REVIVAL: A SECULAR ORDER HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT?

The Syrian state pursued further de-Ba'athification of the socio-political order throughout the 1990s, and more visibly under the current president, Bashar al-Asad (who became president in June 2000). This was partly done through state accommodation of certain religious demands from below. Bashar al-Asad had indeed made it clear in his inaugural presidential address that it was important to recognize and to communicate with Islamists in order to avoid the radicalization of their discourse. The idea was that radicalism is less likely to prosper within an environment that recognizes the vital role of religion within society.

In this context, it would appear that secularism is being devalued, and thus strongly risks decreasing in influence and importance with no end point to that drop in sight. Yet upon closer examination, it becomes possible to argue that what was in fact eroding in Syria was one version of secularism, not the secular political culture itself. I argue that this is an instance of the secular – albeit a new understanding of secular – emerging in the midst of the religious. Moreover although Syrian secularism has changed yet again, it continues to be vibrant. And paradoxically, this vibrancy has been fanned by precisely those actors usually blamed for the de-secularization of the state: Islamic shaykhs serving as religious officials or who are

⁵³ Ahmad Kuftaro, Syria's Grand Mufti (1964-2004), wrote extensively on the co-habitation of the different Syrian religious groups, on diversity and on Christian-Muslim dialogue. His ideas were welcomed by the Ba'ath regime. In the late 1990s, a dialogue with secularism became also one of the shaykh's interests. Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun became Syria's Grand Mufti in 2005. He has also endorsed inter-faith dialogue and secularism, as will be shown hereinafter.

considered close allies of the Syrian regime.⁵⁴ To demonstrate this, focus is placed on the teachings and speeches by, as well as interviews with, a number of state-sanctioned shaykhs. Most important among these is the Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Hassoun, who is given priority because he acts as the leader of the Syrian Sunni official establishment and is the person who is responsible for sending out the message to Syrians overall.⁵⁵

It is consequently within the state-sanctioned religious discourse that one can detect the *new* secular political culture being propagated. This is possible because the new religious discourse is focused on ethical and spiritual change at the individual level.⁵⁶ Of course the new religious discourse is not endorsed by all state-sanctioned shaykhs, some of whom, such as the Rifa'i shaykhs and Shaykh al-Buti, are vehemently opposed to some aspects of the renewal project. Having said this, even the most conservative shaykhs have opted to focus on 'personal religion' or on generating spiritual change at the individual level. Islam is then a *hala* (state of mind) that the individual aims to achieve inwardly, demonstrating a step of disengagement from the physical world.⁵⁷ One shaykh explains, 'it is only when a person commits themselves to complete obedience to God that they will be able to cultivate the seeds of righteous politics and justice.'⁵⁸ Accordingly then, the inward commitment to personal faith promoted by the Syrian shaykhs highlights a secular trend within the religious discourse. This can be linked to Charles Taylor's explanation of Western secularity. He writes, 'a striking feature of the Western march toward secularity is that it has been interwoven from the start with this drive toward personal religion...the drive to personal religion has itself been part of the impetus toward different facets of secularization.'⁵⁹

⁵⁴ This section focuses on Sunni Islamic discourse because of the preponderance of Sunnis in the country and because Christian and Muslim minorities (such as the Catholics, the Alawis and the Druze) are assumed to prefer a secular order given their minority status within a majority Sunni country.

⁵⁵ Although it should be noted both here and more generally that the influence and impact of the official discourse on the public is yet to be researched and assessed. Relatedly, the impact of competing religious discourses such as that of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has not been examined.

⁵⁶ Whether Syria's official Islamic shaykhs and those close to the regime have advanced the new discourse due to their need to accommodate the authoritarian regime or due to genuine doctrinal shifts that have accompanied modernity is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵⁷ Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, pp. 146-148.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁵⁹ Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 216.

Other aspects of the Sunni discourse can also be read as being aimed at secularizing society. The Ministry of Religious Endowments and the private Islamic institutes which work closely with the Ministry (such as Ahmad Kuftaro's Abu al-Nour Foundation, also known as Ahmad Kuftaro's Foundation, and Muhammad Habash's Renewal Movement)⁶⁰ have advanced a religious discourse that stresses the importance of dialogue, co-existence and tolerance between citizens, between the different Muslim sects, and between Muslims and non-Muslims. This is done by emphasizing the religious and spiritual values shared by all human beings and by focusing on the common moral roots of all religious denominations.⁶¹ Islam is promoted as a religion of peace predicated on communication with and acceptance of the other. Indeed, Syria's Grand Mufti since 2005, Shaykh Ahmad Hassoun, has often asserted that he is Sunni in practice and Shiite in allegiance, with roots that are Salafi and a purity that is Sufi. This is the same sort of discourse that the previous Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Kuftaro, also once asserted.⁶²

In terms of coexistence with the non-Muslim denominations, Ahmad Kuftaro, Ahmad Hassoun, and Shaykh Muhammad Habash have promoted a culture that recognizes a set of universal spiritual values. Hassoun for instance asserts that, 'I see myself as the grand mufti of all 23 million Syrians, not just Muslims, but also Christians and even atheists.'⁶³ And he has sought to back up these assertions by leading a Christmas mass and a number of Christmas events.⁶⁴ In this context, secularism seems to have become a framework for religious pluralism and co-habitation, and Islam a religion that accepts to exist within that secular framework. Of course the shaykhs examined here are not considered autonomous from the state and one might argue that these types of statements reflect the regime's narrative and agenda; yet the shaykhs

⁶⁰ Habash was considered until the Syrian revolution a very close friend of the regime.

⁶¹ See Dr. Hassoun's lecture in Hama entitled 'Syria: an example for national unity' given at the Arab Cultural Center in Damascus, 28 June 2010.

⁶² See Kuftaro's 'Mabadi' Fikriya,' available at: www.kuftaro.org. It is important to note here the difference between the two muftis. Jawad Qureshi tells us that Kuftaro functioned as a spiritual leader while Hassoun acts more like a spokesperson of the regime than a mufti. See Line Khatib, Raphael Lefevre and Jawad Qureshi, *State and Islam in Bathist Syria: Confrontation or Co-optation*, Fife, Scotland: the University of St Andrews Center for Syrian Studies, 2012, p.73.

⁶³ Interview with Der Spiegel, conducted by Eric Follath in Aleppo, 'Interview with Syrian Grand Mufti: Assad Could Step Down After Free Elections,' *Spiegel online* (08/11/2011), available at: www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-syrian-grand-mufti-assad-could-step-down-after-free-elections-a-796363-2.html (last viewed 10 April 2013)

⁶⁴ See the Grand Mufti leading a Christmas Mass at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtD3pkWL8Fo>

are not mere tools in the hands of the secular authorities either. Each has galvanized the pious in Damascus, continued to enjoy credibility and legitimacy, and has, at least until the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, demonstrated that he enjoys a vast following.⁶⁵

The new Islamic discourse has also tended to promote Islamic virtues that assert an individual's right to practice their religion as they see fit (notwithstanding the claim that it is up to shaykhs to interpret the holy texts based on their having a proper education in Islam). Religion in this sense is a social construct that can be understood in different and changing ways.⁶⁶ For instance, Shaykh Ahmad Hassoun writes, 'Do not teach people hatred and bitterness, your interpretations are not sacred.'⁶⁷ [author's translation] He has also more recently asserted that 'I am a man of dialogue... maybe an agnostic will convince me with better arguments one day, and I'll become a non-believer.'⁶⁸ Through these comments, the shaykh is teaching that the individual is the ultimate master of meaning and that secular qualities such as reason and logic may trump faith and belief. More broadly, as part of this movement, Hassoun is advancing a universalizing ecumenical approach to piety. The notions that one has the right to privately choose his or her set of beliefs and even to possibly change one's mind about adhering to Islam,⁶⁹ as well as that Islamic jurisdiction is a matter of human interpretation, arguably have the potential to secularize the larger socio-political culture. And so although belief in religion itself is not necessarily directly challenged, belief in the sacredness of a particular interpretation of the text is. Furthermore, a number of prominent shaykhs have increasingly asserted people's right to decide for themselves if they wish to adhere to one religion or not. Indeed, a number of Syria's shaykhs, including Salah al-Din Kuftaro and Dr Shaykha Lina al-Humsi (also from the Kuftaro foundation), and Professor Shaykh Mahmud 'Akkam (Aleppo University) have asserted that atheists are to be valued and respected the same way all human beings ought to be respected in Islam.⁷⁰ These shaykhs and shaykhas are not

⁶⁵ It seems impossible at the time of this writing to tell which shaykhs have lost their legitimacy and which ones remain persuasive to the public.

⁶⁶ From the Syrian Ministry of Endowments at www.syrianawkkaf.org/ministry/kalamat/mohadara-haol-mostalahae-aljehad-wa-altakfer/ (last viewed 10 April 2013)

⁶⁷ Speech delivered at the German Bundestag 1 November 2007, available at www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,2851007,00.html (recently restricted website, last visited in 2011)

⁶⁸ Eric Follath, 'Interview with Syrian Grand Mufti: Asad Could Step Down After Free Elections.'

⁶⁹ For more on this, see *Ishkaliyyat al-I' tiraf bi al-Akhar*, Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi, 2007.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

directly promoting secularism, but they are indirectly producing a popular culture in which belief in God is a choice. This draws near to Charles Taylor's definition of secularity, in which religion and belief in God are seen as one view among many.

A few shaykhs within the Syrian Sunni establishment have also tended to endorse the idea that it is necessary to separate the political from the religious.⁷¹ This is partly done through the assertion that the politicization of religion is a new, modern, misguided and misleading phenomenon.⁷² Sunni Salafis and Wahabis in particular are often criticized for blurring the borders between the state and the religious authorities. Thus the pious are told to accept their *de facto* rulers and work with them no matter how apparently un-Islamic or deplorable their actions might be. The argument goes that no one has the right to challenge the faith of another. If a political leader claims to be a believer in Islam (or any monotheistic religion within the Syrian context), then they ought to be taken on their word regardless of their actions.⁷³ Shaykhs have also made the distinction between jihad and *Qital* (battle), arguing that jihad as an Islamic concept is not to be used to justify struggle against the state.⁷⁴ Shaykh Muhammad Habash has even argued that current times dictate that political action be led by a [secular] national state, and war by a modern professional army.⁷⁵ Even Shaykh Sa'id al-Buti, who was a staunch critic of Western secular orders and who did not advocate the separation of politics and religion, asserted that men of religion should not get involved in party politics. He believed that shaykhs should advise discreetly, guiding state officials and infusing them with religious norms and values. But al-Buti often also asserted that the pious ought to work with their *de facto* rulers no matter how apparently un-Islamic their policies and actions. The borderline

⁷¹ See Hassoun's speech about secularism, available at www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,2851007,00.html; see also Muhammad Shahrur, *Tajfif Manabi' al-Irhab*, pp. 140-41. See also Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, p. 150.

⁷² Observation based on lectures delivered in al-Ummayad Mosque in Damascus.

⁷³ See *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, pp. 150-153. Lecture about the concepts of *jihad* and *takfir* (declaring a Muslim an unbeliever), available at www.syrianawkkaf.org/ministry/kalamat/mohadara-haol-mostalaha-aljehad-wa-altakfer/ (last viewed December 2011)

⁷⁴ Ibid. See for example the work of Sa'id al-Buti, *Jihad in Islam: how we understand it and how we apply it*, Damascus: n.d.; and a number of lectures given to the public at the Ummayad Mosque and at the Abu al-Nur foundation, for instance Ahmad Kuftaro, 'Tawdih li-Ma'ani al-Jihad,' (16 April, 2004) available at www.kuftaro.org (Last viewed May 2011)

⁷⁵ These statements were made before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. See Muhammad Habash's Renewal Program, available at: www.tajdeed.org. (Last viewed May 2011)

between what is and what is not a Muslim state is thus blurred and, more importantly, Muslim credentials are insignificant to the survival of those in power. In this sense, al-Buti was helping create the conditions for a secular political order.

In endorsing such principles, these shaykhs' discourse ventures beyond shielding the state from its challengers, by commanding the pious to separate the inward from the outward and the religious from the political. In so doing, it reformulates the religious/secular distinction. Indeed, the Grand Mufti has recently even more clearly expressed Muslim Syrians' commitment to a secular state. For instance, in one of his speeches delivered in November 2007 at the German Bundestag, Syria's Grand Mufti argued that, '*al-ilmaniya laysat did al-din wa ana Muslim ilmani*' (secularism is not against religion and I am a secularist Muslim).⁷⁶ This claim seems to blur the lines between the secular and the Islamic. In a way it does. But more importantly it goes beyond simply asserting that a secularism which does not reject religiosity is an acceptable model in Islam and makes the claim that Islam does not intervene in the organization of political life.⁷⁷ Similarly, at the Ecumenical Church Congress in Munich, Hassoun '...stunned German bishops with the proposal that the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) should remove the letter C from its name, for reasons of secularism.'⁷⁸ He also criticized Syrians who have identified with their primordial (religious) affiliations ahead of their civic ones when he noted that one should be a citizen first, and only afterwards a Muslim or a Christian: 'The words 'Sunni' or 'Christian' should be smaller than the word 'citizen'.⁷⁹ Indeed, Syria's grand Mufti has declared in a few interviews since 2008 that one ought to adopt an 'international outlook' in one's thought and a 'scientific approach' in one's speech, and that this is how he understands Islam and its relationship with secularism.⁸⁰

The implications of such statements and teachings should not be disregarded on the pretext that shaykhs who have acted as spokespeople for the Asad regime enjoy no credibility.

⁷⁶ Speech delivered in November 2007 at the German Bundestag, available at <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,2851007,00.html> (last viewed May 2011)

⁷⁷ 'Fi al-Mayadeen Program,' *Al-Mayadeen TV*, 15 February 2013.

⁷⁸ 'Interview with Syrian Grand Mufti: Assad Could Step Down After Free Elections,' *Spiegel online* (08/11/2011) available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-syrian-grand-mufti-assad-could-step-down-after-free-elections-a-796363.html>

⁷⁹ Nir Rosen, 'A Conversation with Grand Mufti Hassoun' *al-Jazeera.com* (03 October 2011), available at www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/10/201110312588957185.html

⁸⁰ 'Fi al-Mayadeen Program,' *Al-Mayadeen TV*, 15 February 2013.

Young generations of Syrians who have been born into this discourse and who associate these shaykhs with nationalism and patriotism buy into such religious sensibilities. Moreover these shaykhs are creating the space for such transformative religious sensibilities. And significantly, the revolution has not halted this discourse, in fact if anything it has reinforced it in the eyes of those young men and women who are constantly subjugated to the regime's discourse about the Islamic threat and Islamic radicalism.

CONCLUSION

Secularism in Syria has undergone a variety of shifts and changes over the decades. Most recently, the need for the Syrian authoritarian regime to consolidate its power within a changing political context has meant that the secular milieu has had to change as well. Indeed, the regime has, since the rise of Hafez al-Asad to power, helped create a close relationship between the state and the ulama. At the same time, the regime is secular and needs to maintain its secular nature in order to sustain its broad ruling coalition. Thus while in Egypt, the Mubarak regime made shaykhs issue fatwas to legitimize certain state policies, in Syria, shaykhs appear to reformulate religion in ways that can be perceived as secularizing.

This reformulation in turn has important possible consequences for a post-civil war Syria. More particularly, many are worried that the radical Islamist groups that are fighting in Syria such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS are representative of Sunni Syrians, and that this spells the end of the secular order and the rise of a radical Islamist society. But in fact, and despite the relatively young age of the religious discourse examined in the previous section, there is an unexamined possibility that the young, pious Sunnis who have been 'Islamized' by the country's official ulama do not endorse an Islamist regime, and might indeed be favorable to some type of a secular order.⁸¹ This is because, as has been demonstrated in this paper, the Islamization efforts of the official Islamic shaykhs over the past 20 or so years have produced new normative notions of religiosity, and have changed the content and the conditions of belief.

Thus although adherence to religion itself has not necessarily been challenged, belief in the sacredness of the interpretation of the text has. Such notions as spirituality, ethicality, and jihad have been revisited and no longer stand as fixed notions. More fundamentally, *Fiqh*

⁸¹ As stated earlier within this paper, this is not necessarily applicable to students of all private religious schools and institutions whose shaykhs might or might not abide by the Ministry of Endowments' curriculum.

(Islamic jurisprudence) has been advanced as human jurisprudence and thus as inclusive of multiple points of view. Overall, Islam has been presented as a flexible dogma, as one correct option among other correct options. All of this underlines the degree to which the secular/religious distinction has been formulated and reformulated in Syria multiple times in its recent history. It also points toward the possibility that Syrians might, in a post-civil war eventuality, embrace a vision of religiosity that is accepting of secularism and of the other overall.