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# **Autocracy, Iran and Religious Transformation in Syria**

**Line Khatib<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

The oversight and regulation of religion and religious leaders in Syria through both informal and formal cooptation and institutionalization is not new. Rather, it is part of the autocratic regime's familiar attempts to control the religious realm, especially the Sunni one, which is considered stubbornly autonomous and powerful and so a potential threat to the regime's monopoly on power. This is especially the case if/when religious leaders cooperate with other groups such as pro-democracy activists, since such cooperation could magnify each group's range, reach and impact. But the new political reality in Syria in the wake of the Syrian uprisings of 2011 and the ensuing Iranian interventions on the side of the Syrian regime has meant that there needed to be some kind of significant transformation, what in this paper is considered a rupture in the command structure, customary role,

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purpose, and ultimately in the legacy, heritage, and status of the Sunni religious establishment.

What this rupture appears to do is increase the power of the president-appointed Minister of Religious Endowments by bringing about an end in 2021 to the advisory role of the Grand Mufti (Islamic Jurist and religious guide), who was the highest Sunni spiritual leader in Syria for centuries and replacing it with a powerful multi-denominational supreme council (the Jurisprudence Scholarly Council, hereinafter the JSC) under the Ministry of Religious Endowments. This Council has been given legislative powers, a wider guardianship role, more binding prerogatives and an enforcement power, turning it into a body that removes the right of *iftaa* (emitting religious advice) from Syria's Sunni religious leaders, and that could, more importantly, elevate the status of its *fatwas* (non-binding religious edicts) into binding edicts and even law.

The dismantling of the role of the Grand Mufti and the creation of a powerful supreme council that includes other denominations certainly helps further fuse the boundaries between State and society and institutionalizes the Sunni religious establishment in ways that help insulate certain groups and reinforce the authoritarian powers of the regime and its ministry. But these institutional changes are far from being ordinary, they are an attempt to challenge certain assumptions that have defined the Syrian past and that have contributed to and shaped Syrians' collective memory and the ways they depict and project themselves into the future. Indeed, the inclusion of a large number of Shia representatives in the Council – they make up about one third of the Council, when Syria's Shia population is less than three percent<sup>2</sup> of the country's population – appears to be an attempt to dilute the identity and legacy, and feelings of historical entitlement of the majority Sunni population, to embed foreign forces, mostly linked to Iran, against renewed demands for democratization,

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<sup>2</sup> 15% if including Syria's Alawis who do not necessarily identify as Shia.

and to create alternative centers of authority and power that direct the country towards a new path.<sup>3</sup>

### **Religion, Manipulation, and Political Power**

Manipulation of religious activities and discourses is not a new phenomenon in Syria. Both the former president, Hafez al-Asad, and then his son and the present-president, Bashar al-Asad, consistently promoted a version of religiosity as well as supportive religious networks that would reproduce authoritarian norms and practices, and that would promote the political status quo. This has also been true of their co-opted and dependent shaykhs and muftis. And it has been done as part of a more general claim to be uniting Syrians in their many denominations. The point often made is that political Sunnism<sup>4</sup> is radical and violent and has no place in Syria, and that the secular – and autocratic-- order preserves an otherwise frail national unity and is thus here to stay.

On the ground, the reality is that the regime exploits the sectarianism it fosters to spread fear among Syria's many minorities and to reinforce its own position and dictatorial power.<sup>5</sup> Ways it does this include favoring certain minorities over others, granting visibility to a handful of chosen religious leaders, and accusing pro-democracy activists of playing sectarian politics and causing instability, as part of an attempt to undermine their plu-

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<sup>3</sup> Syria's population currently includes 74% of people who were born Sunni Muslim, with Alawi Muslims about 10%, other type of Shias including Twelver Shiism about 3%, Christians around 10% and Druze around 3%. See "Syria," *The CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/>

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note here that Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, Syria's Sunni political group par excellence, played the democratic game until the rise of the United Arab Republic and the onset of authoritarianism in Syria in the late 1950s.

<sup>5</sup> Line Khatib, "Syria, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar: the 'sectarianization' of the Syrian Conflict and undermining of democratization in the region," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 46:3 (2019), pp. 385-403.

realistic and democratic message. This strategy has been partially successful, especially since 2011, since it has sowed sectarian tensions between Syrians while also distracting citizens from the authoritarian nature of the regime and focusing their attention on the regime's role of smoothing over the sectarian frictions (that it fostered in the first place).

### **The Ba'th Regime and Sunni Islam: Necessary Adaptations over time**

The regime's containment measures for dealing with the "majority problem" or the "Sunni problem" have had to be adapted over the years to reflect the changing political context and the different phases of the Asads' autocratic rule. In the early 1970s, the idea was to "mute secularism" in order to accommodate the "religious class" (to use Hanna Batatu's term). Then in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Syrians witnessed a confrontation between the regime and Syria's and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as a pro-democracy movement. The regime opted for repression and a militarized response. The religious class's attempts to work with other political groups, such as the communists and the liberals at the time, aggravated the regime's anxiety and thus contributed to provoking a stronger response.<sup>6</sup> Following this repressive phase, the Hafez al-Asad regime moved towards a mix of selective accommodation and co-optation--by offering material benefits and political concessions--and some institutionalization of religious actors' relationships with and links to the regime, in an attempt to heighten the role of certain groups at the expense of others, and to "supervise" and control certain elements of the Sunni religious message and activities. The regime also gradually orchestrated a hollowing out of the religious discourse and culture propagated to Syrian students and younger Syrians overall. In other words, state regulation of religious affairs, and more specifically for this chapter, of Sunni religious affairs, has frequently changed based on the shifting

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<sup>6</sup> See Line Khatib, *Quest for Democracy: Liberalism in the Modern Arab World* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 81-101

conditions on the ground and the all-consuming political necessity of maintaining power.<sup>7</sup>

This meddling in religious affairs was intensified under Bashar al-Asad, whose neo-liberal policies were destroying the welfare services that the Ba’thist State had been providing for decades. The dismantling of Syria’s welfare system is important to mention here because it entailed outsourcing of some of these services to religious groups and charities. This reliance on religious groups helped in turn to formalize their relationship with the State and to further assimilate and coopt them, and was done in parallel to other measures claimed by the regime to be “modernizing” and “renewing” of religiosity and the religious discourse overall (*tajdid al-khitab al-dini*).

In this new post-populist phase, religious discourse and activities, authoritarianism, and nationalism became increasingly conflated, with Sunni Islam’s role championed by the regime and in turn becoming an important source of political legitimation for it. The “renewal” campaigns were meant to promote more individualized and more importantly for this paper politically acquiescent versions of Islam, as part of an attempt to further instrumentalize and transform society in a manner that would not only discourage political activism against the regime, but also encourage a “spirituality” that unconditionally endorses the political leadership no matter what it does and what ideas and policies it puts forth.<sup>8</sup> The logic behind the championing of a renewal

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, government contracts were given to religious civil society groups to ensure ongoing provision of certain services previously provided by the State in the 2000s. For more on this, see Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); and Laura Ruiz de Elvira Carrascal, *State/Charities relation in Syria: between reinforcement, control and coercion. Civil Society and the State in Syria: The Outsourcing of Social Responsibility*, (St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria: Lynne Rienner Publishers, August 2012).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the question of state and control of religious activism, see Ani Sarkissian, *The Varieties of Religious Repression Why Governments Restrict Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ani Sarkissian, “Religious Regulation and the Muslim Democracy Gap,” *Politics and Religion* 5 (2012): 501–527; Elina Schleutker, “Co-Optation and Repression of

discourse is that because Sunnis are an absolute majority in Syria, they must either be under regime supervision and control with their leaders co-opted and politically quiescent, or they are to be considered radicals and thus vilified and repressed. The result of the regime's measures, whether under Hafez al-Asad or Bashar, is that most religious groups became politically acquiescent in an attempt to maintain their religious status and influence over their own communities.

The regime's manipulation and control over the religious realm, even what might be termed its "religionization" of Syria in the sense of increasing the salience of religion as a public identity and as a basis for defining interactions with society and with the State, was effective until 2011 and the Syrian uprising. At that point, many members of Islamic groups such as the Zayd and the Midan groups<sup>9</sup>, as well as religious leaders such as Shaykhs Sariya al-Rifai and Muhammad Ratib al-Nabulsi (to name a few<sup>10</sup> from amongst the hitherto politically quiescent shaykhs), joined the popular collective action against the regime. In so doing, they became a serious threat, especially as they had significant organizational and management capacity.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, a number of mosques opened their doors to the protestors and were turned

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Religion in Authoritarian Regimes," *Politics and Religion* 14, no. 2 (2021), pp. 209–40.

<sup>9</sup> Laila Rifai, "The Sunni Religious Establishment of Damascus: When Unification Creates Division," *Carnegie Middle East Center* (July 2020), [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rifai-Syrian\\_Religious\\_Reorganization.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rifai-Syrian_Religious_Reorganization.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> See Anas Sweid, "Profiles of Syrian Sunni Clerics in the Uprising," *Diwan* (March 25, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> As Harout Akdedian notes, religious entities have proven to have a tremendous capacity to meet social demands. During the war, post-2011, these groups were able to "tak[e] on responsibilities such as education and the distribution of resources, humanitarian aid, and other things. In this sense, religious networks in government- and opposition-held areas alike played an instrumental role in local power structures and in countering the politics of death, starvation, and attrition in the broader context of the Syrian war." See Michael Young, "Gaining its Religion," *Carnegie Middle East Center* (May 2019), <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79117>

into safe spaces for anti-regime and pro-democracy activism.<sup>12</sup> It would quickly become clear to the regime that the Sunni religious sector of society continued to have a broad and powerful sense of entitlement and independence despite the regime's work against it, and should be dealt with swiftly and radically. The need to put a halt to the sense of entitlement by provoking a rupture was heightened by the fact that accommodation and co-optation were deemed no longer viable in light of the Iranian intervention in Syria in 2013. This is because very few Syrian citizens, including committed pro-regime Sunnis, were willing to accept let alone advocate strong Iranian influence and Iran's sustained presence in the country. In other words, the regime's reliance on Iranian backup in order to stay in power, and the Iranians' increasing presence and meddling in Syrian affairs since 2013, has meant that there is a need to provoke an institutional and a symbolic rupture in Sunni religious affairs and status, one that could only take place within the current context of political flux and war. The aim of this rupture, as will be shown hereinafter, is to not only restrict and tame the behavior of the average Sunni citizen, but also to help change the country's religious and cultural identity and social fabric once and for all.

It is against this backdrop that one should understand the regime's most recent efforts to orchestrate a transformation in the operations and symbolic legitimacy as well as command structure and enforcement power of the Sunni religious establishment within the Syrian State.

### **Why is this rupture taking place? The Uprising and the Sunni Problem**

The regime's legitimacy crisis became clear in March 2011, when protests challenging the authority of the repressive State erupted in Dera and Damascus. It is important to note here that the rebel-

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, the Rifai Mosque in Damascus became one of the main locations for protest in the capital during the uprising.

lion was not a Sunni rebellion, but a rebellion for rights and freedoms that brought together a multitude of aggrieved and disenfranchised citizens from every denomination and affiliation in Syria.<sup>13</sup> The Sunnis (whether religious or agnostic or atheist) just happened to be the majority of the country's population, as stated earlier.<sup>14</sup> When united in their grievances, especially in urban areas, the citizens represented a formidable force against a corrupt and authoritarian leadership that had relied on effective sectarianization and a divisive strategy to remain in power. When working from within the emboldened pro-democracy movement, that brought together religious minded Sunnis with other societal elements, which many did throughout the uprising, citizens turned into an existential threat that was increasingly difficult to contain.<sup>15</sup>

One of the first things these protestors and activists did, was assert that Sunnis, Alawis, and Christians, were united in their struggle against dictatorship, thus expanding their reach. The movement coordinated with some traditional religious leaders and groups and made use of mosques in order to take advantage of large gatherings to start protests and sit ins, from which they took to the streets. The movement was gaining ground with followers from all denominations, including those of a number of prominent Sunni Ulama (religious scholars), which caused the regime to feel the full crisis of its control.

The regime's first reaction to what its leaders experienced as an unexpected uprising, as well as to the outspokenness of the independent Ulama, was to seek to contain and control the religious sphere albeit with more aggression and directness. And so, in April 2011, all of the country's private Islamic colleges, including the Kufaro Academy, the Fath Institute, and the Shia-led Sayyida

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<sup>13</sup> Anyone who is outside the regime's circle of power is disenfranchised and bears the brunt of State repression.

<sup>14</sup> The point is that Sunni Syrians are not a problem because of their religiosity, but simply because they are the majority.

<sup>15</sup> It is easier to dismiss citizens when they work with Islamist groups than with pro-democracy groups.



Ruqqayya school, were absorbed by the State-run Sham Institute for Islamic Studies.<sup>16</sup> The idea was to centralize, reorganize, and revamp these centers' methods of outreach, and to unify their messages in order to bolster the regime's narrative.

But opposition to the regime was not only intensifying, it was also spreading, with dozens of cities across Syria protesting and demanding the departure of Bashar al-Asad. By July 2012, armed rebels, mainly the Free Syrian Army (FSA), were pushing to "liberate" Damascus from the regime.<sup>17</sup> In 2013, the regime, which was effectively losing ground, received more direct help from Iranian and Iranian-backed forces such as the Lebanese Hizbullah to support it in battle. By 2014, Iran increased its military support, providing advisors from the Quds elite Force and other members of the Islamic Republic Guard Corps (IRGC), as well as providing intelligence, logistics, technical support and training, in addition to delivering military supplies from Russia.<sup>18</sup> It is in that same year that the Syrian Ministry of Education decreed that Iran's Twelver Shiism would be taught alongside Sunni Islam at all educational levels in the country. Also, a public Shia school was given permission to open in the city of Jabla.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See decree 48 at <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=5567&cat=4452&&>. See also the organizational structure of the Ministry of Endowments, <https://mow.gov.sy/ar/الهيكل-التنظيمي-لوزارة>; Laila Rifai, "Syria's Regime Has Given the Fatah Islamic Institute Influence, but at What Cost?" *Carnegie Middle East Center* (December 13, 2018), <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/12/13/syria-s-regime-has-given-fatah-islamic-institute-influence-but-at-what-cost-pub-77949>.

<sup>17</sup> Damien McElroy, "Assad's brother-in-law and top Syrian officials killed in Damascus suicide bomb," *The Daily Telegraph* (January 12, 2012), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9408321/Assads-brother-in-law-and-top-Syrian-officials-killed-in-Damascus-suicide-bomb.html>

<sup>18</sup> Iran boosts military support to Syria's Asad," *Reuters* (February 21, 2014), <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2014/02/21/Iran-boosts-military-support-to-bloster-Syria-s-Assad>

<sup>19</sup> Hossam al-Saad and Talal al-Mustafa, "Muasasat al-Nufuz al-Irani fi Suriya wa al-Asalib al-Mutaba'a fi al-Tashyi' ," *Harmoon Center* (April 29,

### **How is the rupture Taking Place? `New Discourse, New Control Structures**

Already, Asad and his ministers started speaking of the importance of creating a “religious nationalism” that relies on a commitment to the prophet Muhammad, which opens up the space for the inclusion of other Islamic denominations than Sunnism. This is an important transformation. No longer is “Arab” (often equated with Sunni in Syria) nationalism and secular nationalism (relied on or at least paid lip service to for so long in autocratic Syria to ensure a sense of patriotic homogeneity) called upon to construct regime legitimacy and create the required sense of obedience among Syrians. “Modern times” require a “modern approach,” explains Bashar al-Asad in one of his speeches, an approach that offers a “comprehensive reference to all Islamic faiths.”<sup>20</sup> And yet not all Syrians are Muslim, and thus it appears that the messaging is more concerned with diluting the religious differences within Islam than uniting all Syrians, which secular nationalism was intended to do.

The year 2014 also witnessed efforts to impose more direct control and thereby to dominate all aspects of the Sunni discourse going forward. Thus, the Ministry of Endowments propagated an encyclopedia meant to become part of the religious curriculum called *fiqh al-azma* (the Jurisprudence of crisis), which was intended to amend 14 centuries of interpretations of the Islamic faith<sup>21</sup> not in the way that some modernizing and ecumenical shaykhs have conceptualized religious change in Syria, but in a way that would align with the regime’s interests in its time of crisis. It seeks to “moderate” students of religion in the way that the regime defines “moderation”. It quotes passages from Bashar

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2018), <https://www.harmoon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Iranian-influence-institutions-in-Syria-1.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> “From the Speech of the President, may God protect him, at the periodic meeting of the Ministry of Endowments,” (Dec 7, 2020),

<https://mow.gov.sy/ar/node/164>

<sup>21</sup> Alif Lam Mim, “Fiqh al-azma,” *Al-Mayadeen TV*, [https://www.almayadeen.net/amp/episodes/655425/\\_فقہ-الأزمة](https://www.almayadeen.net/amp/episodes/655425/_فقہ-الأزمة)

al-Asad's speeches that promote the idea that "religious moderation" entails a separation of faith from political activism against the State, and that shuns political Islam, and further that the current "crisis" in Syria is due to a moral deficit and to the misguided and radical interpretation of religion —essentially absolving dictatorship of culpability. It says that peace will finally come to Syrians when the protestors and the political opposition embrace the right kind of religiosity, meaning the brand of religiosity that the regime endorses and helps to propagate.<sup>22</sup> The regime sought to ensure the successful propagation of this religious message by creating new partnerships between the Ministry of Religious Endowments, the Ministry of Education,<sup>23</sup> and the Revolutionary Youth Union and the National Union of Syrian Students, both of which are known for including members from the intelligence services and for their surveillance activities.<sup>24</sup>

In 2015, the regime's efforts to dominate the Sunni religious establishment expanded to include women, who became a focal point in the regime's efforts to "rectify" religious discourse and secure their allegiance. In a meeting with women preachers, Asad said that the religious institution's role is vital to help overcome the consequences of the Syrian crisis, by cooperating with families and educational institutions so as to ensure the proper upbringing of future generations.<sup>25</sup> Thus, a women's "preaching

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<sup>22</sup> Rahaf al-Doughli, "Asad Remakes the Syrian Faith to Suit the Regime's Needs," *New Lines Magazine* (June 27, 2022), <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/assad-remakes-syrian-faith-to-suit-the-regimes-needs/>

<sup>23</sup> See for instance <https://mow.gov.sy/ar/lqaan-tsharkyaan-byn-wzarty-altrbyt-walawqaf-lmwjhy-wmdrsy-mady-altrbyt-aldynyt-alaslmyt>

<sup>24</sup> al-Doughli, "Asad Remakes Syrian Faith," <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/assad-remakes-syrian-faith-to-suit-the-regimes-needs/>

<sup>25</sup> Jana al-Issa, Hussam al-Mahmoud, and Saleh Malas, "Religious institution in Syria: Al-Assad's old-new target," *Enab Baladi* (December 5, 2021), <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/12/religious-institution-in-syria-al-assads-old-new-target/>

department” was launched (*al-Da’wa al-Nisa’iyah*)<sup>26</sup>, aimed at institutionalizing these efforts. Just like their male counterparts, these *‘alimat* (feminine for ulama, scholars) were expected to lend support to the regime, to repeat Bashar al-Asad’s messages, and to advance and disseminate the regime’s communications and priorities via the Ministry of Religious Endowments.

In 2018, the regime-provoked rupture in religious affairs and political culture had a watershed moment, with the stipulation of Presidential Decree number 16, later transformed into Law 31 following a few nominal changes requested by members of Syria’s People’s Assembly. Law 31 expanded the presence and prerogatives of the Ministry of Religious Endowments. For instance, Law 31 tasks the Ministry of Endowments with supervising, managing, and even “investigating” religious organizations and workers when deemed necessary (Article 19). Indeed, some of the prerogatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MoSAL) are now undertaken by the Ministry of Endowments. Articles 2 and 8 expand the channels of the Ministry’s supervision of religious affairs by giving it the right to intervene in any intellectual or media product, program or publication that deals with the subject of religion. Previously the Ministry used to have power only over religious publications.<sup>27</sup> What this means is that anyone writing or producing a work that touches upon “religious themes” has now to potentially answer to the Endowments Ministry and its assessment of the work.

Law 31 also gives the Minister of Endowments the power to nominate the Grand Mufti of the Republic.<sup>28</sup> As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the Grand Mufti is regarded as a na-

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<sup>26</sup> Al-Doughli, “Asad Remakes Syrian Faith,” <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/assad-remakes-syrian-faith-to-suit-the-regimes-needs/>

<sup>27</sup> Nour Abdel Nour, “Qanun al-Awqaf al-Jadid...Sam fi ‘Asal al-Dimucratiya,” *Enab Baladi* (October 14, 2018), <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/257335#ixzz7qsc2qbFP>

<sup>28</sup> Previously, the Grand Mufti was selected by a council of senior scholars who were initially elected and later directly appointed by the President of the Republic.

tional symbolic figure and as the most senior spiritual representative in Syria. Despite lacking enforcement authority, he issues fatwas to provide guidance to the Sunni community and the broader Syrian nation. Historically, the Mufti has defined priorities and articulated the nation's guiding principles, even after the establishment of modern Syria as a secular republic. While the Grand Mufti traditionally served for life, according to Law 31, the appointment is now limited to three years, with the possibility for renewal. The rupture with the ways of the past is clear as the Mufti is transformed into a mere civil servant with no symbolic authority or special status, one who is to be routinely rotated and replaced subject to the Minister's discretion.

Law 31 also formed a new council, *al-Majlis al-'ilmi al-Fiqhi* (the Scholarly Jurisprudence Council, or SJC) within the Ministry of Endowments, which was initially called *al-Majlis al-Fiqhi al-A'la* (The Supreme Jurisprudence Council). The SJC is claimed to be a positive change by its creators within the regime since it purportedly aims to achieve integration between the sects, and produce jurisprudence that respects reason and that is in harmony with the "reality of the day".<sup>29</sup> Law 31 tasks the SJC with monitoring all *fatwas* issued in the country and with preventing the spread of views associated with the Muslim Brotherhood or "Salafist" and "Wahabi" activity.<sup>30</sup> The Law thus provides the SJC with the power to define what religious discourse is appropriate and acceptable at the national level, but it doesn't stop there; it also provides the SJC with the authority to fine or penalize individuals who propagate "extremist" thought or deviate from ap-

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<sup>29</sup> Sinan Hassan, "al-Majlis al-'Ilmi al-Fiqhi Yutleq al-'Amal bi-Fiqh al-Waqe' wa al-Qadaya al-Mu'asira," *Sahifat al-Baath* (20 November 2019), <http://newspaper.albaathmedia.sy/2019/11/20/-المجلس-العلمي-الفتوي-يطلق-العمل-ب-الافتاء-ب-مقتضى-الواقع-والقضايا-المعاصرة/>; Azzam al-Kassir, "Formalizing Regime Control Over Syrian Religious Affairs," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sada* (blog) (November 14, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77712>.

<sup>30</sup> "2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria," *Office of International Religious Freedom* (June 2, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>

proved discourses.<sup>31</sup> According to the Minister of Religious Endowments, Muhammad Abdul Sattar, the SJC “aims to...take the hand of the people... to confront the ideology of the enemies of the nation, the Zionists, the takfiri extremists, *the followers of political Islam* [Italics mine] and the brothers of demons who have so far spread sedition to tear the nation apart”<sup>32</sup> by weakening it and diverting it from its goals...and to establish the “jurisprudence of reality” which can find appropriate solutions to today’s problems.<sup>33</sup> And yet the Council is not really intended to be a moderating, uniting, or democratic force. Instead, the SJC provokes rupture by turning a traditionally Sunni-governed religious establishment, the Endowments, into a non-Sunni governed body, and more importantly into a State institution with State agenda and prerogatives. This effectively grants it the power to enforce and impose the desires and interpretations of political leaders onto the community of believers, thereby effectively curbing the impact of, if not entirely restricting, independent religious thought.<sup>34</sup> These changes allow the regime to move from an informal to a more structured, bureaucratized and ulti-

<sup>31</sup> Hassan, “al-Majlis al-‘Ilmi al-Fiqhi,”

<http://newspaper.albaathmedia.sy/2019/11/20/-المجلس-العلمي-الفقهي-يطلق-العمل-يافقه-ا>

<sup>32</sup> The text in Arabic,

إن اجتماع اللجنة التحضيرية يهدف إلى ترسيخ مفاهيم الوحدة الوطنية والأخذ بيد أبناء الوطن على اختلافهم وتنوعهم لمواجهة فكر أعداء الأمة الصهاينة والمتطرفين التكفيريين وأتباع الإسلام السياسي وإخوان الشياطين الذين مالبتوا ببثون الفتن لتمزيق الأمة وتشثيت قوتها بعيداً عن أهدافها، وتأكيداً على الجمع بين العقل والنقل في فهم النصوص القرآنية والسنة الشريفة فهماً يناسب الواقع وحاجات الناس المعاصرة، ويؤكد صلاحية التشريع الإسلامي لكل زمان ومكان، ولتأسيس فقه الواقع، الذي يجد الحلول المناسبة لمشكلات الناس على الصعد المختلفة، وترسيخ فقه المواطنة والحوار ونشره في المجتمع عبر الوسائل المتنوعة ليكون عامل قوة، ويعزز الانتماء للوطن وقيمه التاريخية والحضارية، محذراً من تسطيح العقل في فهم القرآن، داعياً إلى بناء المستقبل الفكري للأمة، والاستفادة من التراث الفقهي والمخزون العلمي لعلمائنا السابقين، وتقديم الإسهامات الجديدة التي تنهض بالواقع، وتتجاوز أخطاء الماضي ومشكلاته.

<sup>33</sup> Hassan, “al-majlis al-‘ilmi”.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Dr Muhammad Habash, (20 October 2022).

mately systematic form of control of Syria's Muslims. The extent to which these adjustments will impact the teachings of religious leaders and the views of followers remains uncertain. However, what is evident is the conferral of binding authority upon the SJC, in contrast to the nominal influence of the Grand Mufti, ensuring a centralized and hierarchical regulation of religious discourse and practices.

The SJC's power is also not just notional. The Council has been given significant economic power to undertake its work as it is tasked with the control, management, use, and investment of the Endowment's real estate, which "occupy the most expensive real estate sites in the 'heart' of major Syrian cities."<sup>35</sup> In Damascus, the endowment covers about half of the city area and is valued at billions of liras, while in Aleppo city it reaches to around 5,000 properties.<sup>36</sup> This endows SJC members with substantial funds and control over numerous investments and development projects within the country.

The institutional rupture was completed in November 2021 with executive decree 28, which cancelled the historical position of Mufti of the Republic in its entirety. The decree also strengthens the role of the SJC and reinforces its powers by tasking it with "[i]ssuing fatwas...based on Islamic jurisprudence *in all of its doctrines* [Italics mine], and laying the foundations, standards and mechanisms necessary to organize and control [these fatwas]."<sup>37</sup> The result is that the function of *iftaa* is officially no longer Sunni at all. These changes effectively dilute the extant Sunni *Shami* (Levantine) culture and *fiqh* as Syrians have known it.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Awni al-Kaki, "Ilgha' ahl al-Sunna fi Suriya...Limaslahat man?", *Asas Media* (December 3, 2021), <https://www.asasmedia.com/news/390985>

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Hiba Muhammad, "Ilghaa' Maham al-Iftaa' fi-Suriya," *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (November 16, 2021), <https://www.alquds.co.uk/إلغاء-مقام-الإفتاء-في-سوريا-الخطوة-الأ>

<sup>38</sup> "Wazir al-awqaf: tawsi' salahiyat al-majlis al-'ilmi al-fiqhi khutwa kabira jidan fi 'amaliyat al-islah al-dini," *Sahifat al-Baath* (30 November 2021), <http://newspaper.albaathmedia.sy/2021/11/30/وزير-الأوقاف-توسيع-صلاحيات-المجلس-الع>

The institutional and symbolic rupture that Law 31 and decree 28 represent is particularly clear when one looks at the composition of the SJC. The Council includes 44 members of all Islamic denominations, Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Alawi, and Druze, turning the traditional Sunni religious structure into a realm that is effectively outside of Sunni control for the first time since the Ayyubid dynasty. One might argue that this is not such a bad change if it really did promote a more “democratic” and inclusive discourse and if the council’s edicts remained informal suggestions to a pious community. Yet the SJC in practice seems to aim to emulate religious councils under other autocratic regimes that become intelligence bodies and so another arm of the all-controlling State.<sup>39</sup> The creation of heterogeneous, mixed, and loyal religious networks that are simply dependent on the Ministry facilitates control.<sup>40</sup>

Some observers have argued that these changes are a result of the Minister’s personal agenda rather than from a “grand strategy on the part of the regime.”<sup>41</sup> While this is possible, the changes are still in line with the overall strategy of the regime in that they are reinforcing its centralized and autocratic power in the country, and that they are in tandem with other institutional changes that bolster overall imported cultural change in Syria.

### **The Iranian Factor: cultural change enabled**

Forced and imported cultural change in Syria is palpable today due to the increasing presence and power of Iran and of Iranians in the country. Iran became worried at the start of the Syrian uprising that the protests and a possible regime change in Syria

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Dr Habash.

<sup>40</sup> Whether this will extend to their followers is yet to be seen, certainly the regime’s measures are supplementary steps towards limiting access to alternative viewpoints and interpretations of Islam, and further isolate Syrians from the rest of the world.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Young, “An excommunication in Damascus” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (November 19, 2021), <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/85816>



could lead to a change in the country's regional strategy and alliances including a possible shift away from Iran's orbit.<sup>42</sup> Its concern was that this would not only undermine Iranian plans in the region and its Axis of Resistance alliance<sup>43</sup> (given that it relies on operating from and across Syrian territory to realize its vision within the Arab region), but would also weaken Iranian leaders at home, who have used the Axis of Resistance to justify many policies at the domestic level and to co-opt political and military entrepreneurs. And so Iran got directly militarily involved when the Syrian regime asked for help in 2013, in an attempt to reverse the situation on the ground. The result is that while Iran's economic, religious and cultural presence as well as influence had already been felt in Syria prior to the 2011 uprising, it became palpably more significant post-2013.

This use of Iran-based and backed militias, including the Lebanese Hizbullah and Shia fighters from Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, to repress the Syrian protestors and the pro-democracy movement has resulted in Iranian control of significant territory within Syria. This territory has included parts of Damascus and towns on the Syria-Lebanon border, as well as areas in Southern Syria, in Aleppo, and near the Iraqi border. It also has multiple military bases in Aleppo, along the Iraqi border and in Southern Syria. Over time, Iran has recruited local Syrian Shiite fighters into militias ostensibly to guard Shiite shrines against anti-regime Syrians, and it has furthermore cemented relations with the higher echelons of the Syrian military apparatus, particularly the 4th Division headed by Bashar al-Asad's brother, Maher al-Asad.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Strategic alliance between Iran and Syria began in the early 1980s.

<sup>43</sup> Made up of Iran, Syria, Hizbullah, Pro-Iranian forces in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen, as well as Palestinian Islamists such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

<sup>44</sup> Anchal Vohra, "Iran is Trying to Convert Syria to Shiism," *Foreign Affairs* (March 15, 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/15/iran-syria-convert-shiism-war-assad/>

Iran has also invested heavily in promoting Iranian Shiism in Syria since 2013 with the permission of the regime, by opening *husayniyas* (congregation halls for Twelver Shiism religious ceremonies), by building schools and subsidizing students and their families, and by establishing cultural centers and holding seminars. The result is that more than 40 Shia schools have been opened in Syria over recent years as well as 10 institutions for Sharia studies that teach Jafari Jurisprudence (Twelver Shiism) and five Iranian universities. On the Syrian side, the Ministry of Education has concluded agreements with its Iranian counterpart that allow Iranian participation in the drawing up of the educational curriculum within Syria.<sup>45</sup>

Iranian leaders have also sought to increase the number of Shias in the country.<sup>46</sup> One way of doing so is by bringing the regular Alawi Syrian, who tends to be more secular than religious, closer to Twelver Shiism. Currently, Twelver Shiism is incorporated into school curricula alongside Sunnism, with monetary rewards offered to individuals attending Twelver Shia classes. Another strategy is to resettle Shia families from Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Iran in areas that have been abandoned by Syrians fleeing the war. This resettlement is facilitated by law 10, which was decreed in 2018 and which allows the regime to requisition land all over the country for “redevelopment.”<sup>47</sup> The idea overall is to increase the number of Shia within the country in an attempt “to claim power on their behalf,”<sup>48</sup> but also to influence regulations and institutions in such a way as to realign the country geopolitically and culturally once and for all.

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<sup>45</sup> Rifai, “The Sunni Religious Establishment of Damascus: When Unification Creates Division,” [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rifai-Syrian\\_Religious\\_Reorganization.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rifai-Syrian_Religious_Reorganization.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> As stated earlier, only 2 to 3% of the population are Twelver Shia in Syria.

<sup>47</sup> More recently, in July 2020, an Iranian-Syrian agreement was signed to extend security cooperation between the two countries.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in “2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria,” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>

This cultural transformation can only be achieved by dismantling the position of Syria's Sunnis as a majority that has historically enjoyed special, almost sisterly relations with the other Arab states in the region, and by creating a support network and sub-culture that views Iran as a *de jure* religious authority and not just a *de facto* power in Syria. Certainly the Iranian project and the Syrian regime's survival would be more certain and secure if Syria's Sunni religious leaders who oppose the regime and Iran's authoritarian project in the region are not just weakened – as they clearly already are – but also if they are no longer the only symbolic leaders of the nation.<sup>49</sup> One thing that is clear is that the many institutional transformations carried out by the regime have effectively created alternative loci of religious power and have gnawed away at whatever symbolic authority the Sunni majority has left.<sup>50</sup> In this regard, the creation of the opposition-aligned Syrian Islamic Council and the League of Syrian Ulema in Istanbul in 2014 has not changed much in terms of the concrete situation on the ground within Syria for the Sunni religious establishment and the Sunni pious population of the country.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

The current Syrian regime has long seen the country's majority, which happens to be Sunni, as a “problem”, one that whether re-

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<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting here that Sunni religious leaders lost their political power long ago in modern Syria, but for some, their moral and traditional authority remained. Ed Blanche, “In Syria, Some See Iran as an Occupation Force,” *The Arab Weekly* (January 8, 2016),

<https://the arabweekly.com/syria-some-see-iran-occupation-force>

<sup>50</sup> The revolution has facilitated in many ways the regime's ability to carry out these transformations, with very little effective resistance. First, the uprising and the ensuing regime response saw the death of 350,000 to 550,000 Syrians and the displacement of about 13,000,000, mostly Sunni Syrians, See “2021 Report on International Religious Freedom,”

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>

<sup>51</sup> Jana al-Issa, Hassan Ibrahim and Saleh Malas, “Syrian Islamic Council confines itself to words, active role needed,” *Enab Baladi* (August 4, 2022), <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/08/syrian-islamic-council-confines-itself-to-words-active-role-needed/>

religious or not, politicized or not, is naturally less likely to benefit from and to support the regime's ruling coalition, and that is more likely to succeed in advancing its interests if it comes together and creates niches of resistance against the State. In dealing with this "problem", one of the regime's strategies – in addition to prohibiting any kind of independent political activity – has been to regulate the discourse and activities of spiritual and religious leaders. For instance, religious leaders were not allowed to address certain themes unless their sermons were approved by the security apparatus. With the onset of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the realization that the methods of co-optation and informal regulation did not work to create the desired culture of acquiescence, the regime moved to more directly control the religious establishment. It did so by orchestrating an institutional and a symbolic rupture in the role, prerogatives, and significance of the Sunni establishment, including abolishing Syria's highest Sunni position, that of the Mufti of the Republic. The idea is to create new institutions and roles as part of an attempt to embed new principles and values, as well as new centres of authority and power that support the new political and social reality of the autocratic order. It is aimed at transforming the social fabric and undermining the symbolic relevance of Sunnism in the country, while facilitating the creation of Shia religious institutions and entrenching Twelver Shiism. The decrees' scope and implications are clearly beyond simply the realm of Syrian domestic politics and appear to reinforce more than just the powers of the State, by also supporting a *de facto* political submission to the regime's Iranian patrons.

The cancellation of the position of the Mufti of the Republic in Syria is an especially major development, since the role of the Mufti in Syria is a symbolic one that comes with important honorary functions that have strong historical resonance and that are linked to a certain culture, a certain set of values, and a particular hierarchy. A Mufti is a Sunni leader who not only guides people in their thinking about their own piety in the present, but he connects them to the past, and projects and perpetuates a certain continuity. Syria having a Grand Mufti of the Republic says something important about Syrian identity. The abolition of his

role implies that more significant changes – not liberal democratic -- are ahead for Syria.