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RETURN TO ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONS IN ARAB STATES: MAPPING THE DYNAMICS OF CONTROL, CO-OPTION, AND CONTENTION

A photograph of a minaret on a stone building, likely a mosque, with a clear blue sky in the background. The minaret has a spiral pattern of arches and a small dome at the top.

# Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-option, and Contention

Frederic Wehrey, editor

# Religious Governance in Syria Amid Territorial Fragmentation

Thomas Pierret, Laila Alrefaai

In Syria, disparate governing figures have different levels of involvement with and power over religious institutes. The friction resulting from this imbalance will shape the country's future.

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# Introduction

Until 2011, state management of Sunni Islam in Syria followed a combination of three main patterns. First, the Syrian state's approach embodied the interventionist and repressive policies that typify religious governance in the Middle East and North Africa at large. Second, Syrian religious governance reflected secularist orientations inherited from the first two decades of rule by the Arab Socialist Baath (Resurrection) Party, which came to power in Syria through a military coup in 1963. And third, this Syrian approach revealed an obsessive focus on the security threat from Sunni Islam, a denomination that encompassed around 80 percent of Syria's population. This is because, since 1963 (and especially since former president Hafez al-Assad took office in 1970), Syria's ruling military elite was drawn from the country's Alawite minority (a breakaway Shia sect whose members accounted for less than 10 percent of the country's population by 2011).<sup>1</sup>

For decades, the result was a strategy of indirect rule. Clerics operated under the strict monitoring of the *mukhabarat* (intelligence services), which supported compliant figures and suppressed unruly ones, but official religious institutions remained weak. The *Wizarat al-Awqaf* (Ministry of Religious Endowments) was tremendously understaffed, vocational Islamic education was mostly provided by private institutes of sharia, or Islamic law, and Islamic charities mushroomed in the first years of the twenty-first century. This weak state strategy was a deliberate choice: following the ruthless repression of the 1979–1982 Islamic insurgency, the regime decided it had to tolerate outlets for society's growing religiosity but that Sunni conservative elements, however subservient, were too unreliable to be incorporated into state institutions. Only at the end of President Bashar al-Assad's first decade in power—that is, on the eve of the 2011 uprising—did the regime start to change course.

The shift toward a strategy of institution-based direct rule occurred as a consequence of the regime's anxiety vis-a-vis the growing outspokenness of mainstream Sunni ulema, or religious scholars. Upon his 2007 appointment as minister of religious endowments, Mufti of Tartus Mohammad Abdul Sattar al-Sayyed proclaimed the “end of the era of anarchy,” a situation which, he claimed, had fostered the spread of religious extremism across society.<sup>2</sup> A recruitment drive was initiated in the ministry, a directorate was established to supervise female preachers (most notably those affiliated with the influential Qubaysiyat, an all-women apolitical movement for religious education), vocational Islamic education was partly nationalized, and formal state control over the funding of charitable associations was tightened. By 2009, al-Sayyed announced a forthcoming law on the reorganization of his ministry to replace the de facto obsolete legal framework that had been in place since 1961.<sup>3</sup>

The ensuing civil war and resulting territorial fragmentation of Syria induced radical transformations in the religious institutions of those regions that now escaped Damascus's authority. Opposition-held areas initially witnessed a situation of statelessness that favored decentralized, bottom-up initiatives such as the ulema leagues that formed the Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council in 2014. In parallel, insurgent groups established a myriad of religious-legal bodies and, in the case of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, more distinctly state-like religious bureaucracies such as the Department of Research and Fatwa.<sup>4</sup>

By 2020, three widely different models of religious governance survived outside regime-controlled areas. First, in the northwestern region of Idlib, the hardline Islamist faction now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, or Syria's Liberation Committee)—which was formerly an al-Qaeda affiliate known as Jabhat al-Nusra—was ruling through the formally civilian *Hukumat al-Inqadh al-Suriyya* (Syrian Salvation Government). Second, in the northern regions of Syria controlled by the Turkish army, religious institutions were affiliated with bodies that emerged from the revolutionary era, namely local councils and the Syrian Interim Government (the executive arm of the Syrian National Coalition, the largest opposition alliance, based in the Turkish city of Gaziantep). Such institutions are now operating under the supervision of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet).

Finally, east of the Euphrates River, governance lies in the hands of actors who historically had little interest in religion—namely, local affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This left-wing Kurdish organization in Turkey has been waging an insurgency against the state since 1984, and its Syrian offshoots control the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

## Religious Governance in Regime-Held Areas

Once literally besieged in its own capital by rebel groups, the Assad regime subsequently reversed the situation with the military help of Iran and Russia from, respectively, 2013 and 2015 onward. As of this writing, it controls two-thirds of the country's territory, including all of its fourteen provincial capitals except for Idlib, Raqqa, and al-Hasakah.

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Rather than ushering in a new era in management of Islam by the Assad regime, the civil war buttressed the pre-existing process of expansion of the formal authority of the Ministry of Religious Endowments over the religious field. An additional step in the nationalization of Sunni Islam occurred only a few weeks into the 2011 uprising: on April 4, the country's three private Islamic colleges (the Kuffaro Academy, the Fath Institute, and the Shia-led school Ruqqaya Hawza) were turned into branches of a state-run Sham Institute for Islamic Sciences. This was a means of reinforcing state control over religious elites and rewarding the loyalist ulema in charge of the colleges by granting them long-sought official recognition for their graduates' diplomas. In 2017, moreover, the Sham Institute was elevated to the rank of a university.<sup>5</sup> The same year, state-designed curricula were formally imposed upon the remaining private, secondary-level sharia institutes.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, some of Syria's most respected ulema had left the country and established the pro-opposition Syrian Islamic Council in Istanbul, which deprived the regime of much of its religious legitimacy but also freed the regime from the figures best able to resist its embrace.

The pre-war ambition al-Sayyed harbored to design a comprehensive new legal framework for his ministry eventually came to fruition in October 2018 with the promulgation of Law 31/2018. Although some secularist commentators made the fantastical claim that the law would turn Syria into a Saudi-type religious state, its significance obviously lay elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to claims that the law provided for the expansion of the ministry's influence over other ministries, it actually bolstered the former's financial autonomy and reinforced its prerogatives, as well al-Sayyed's personal power, within the religious establishment.<sup>8</sup>

The main victim of al-Sayyed's empowerment was Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, whose position was weakened by Law 31/2018 in three ways. First, the length of tenure for a grand mufti was reduced from a lifetime appointment to a three-year term. Second, the grand mufti would now be nominated by the minister of religious endowments, whereas in the past holders of the post had

been elected by a council of senior scholars or, as happened with Hassoun in 2005, directly appointed by the president. And third, the grand mufti's (theoretical) supreme authority in matters of fatwa, or a legal opinion on a point of Islamic law, was turned into the mere vice-chairmanship of the newly established al-Majlis al-'Ilmi al-Fiqhi (Scholarly Council of Jurisprudence) presided over by the minister of religious endowments.<sup>9</sup>

The hostility al-Sayyed felt toward the Aleppo-born Hassoun seems to be rooted in a combination of (partly region-based) factionalism and, to a lesser extent, intellectual differences. The former had long been close to conservative Damascene ulema such as the late Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti (an eminent scholar and regime loyalist assassinated in 2013), who despised the grand mufti's quasi-secularist and ecumenical views, although the latter had endeared him to some pro-regime members of religious minorities.<sup>10</sup>

To pass Law 31/2018, al-Sayyed took advantage of the grand mufti's apparent fall from grace with the regime. In November 2018, Syria's Air Force Intelligence Directorate reportedly leaked a phone conversation in which the grand mufti was heard negotiating a ransom for the release of one of his relatives held hostage by a Druze militia in the governorate of Suwayda.<sup>11</sup> In the first half of 2020, Hassoun almost disappeared from state media coverage. The country's official news agency, the Syrian Arab News Agency, for instance, hardly ever mentioned him, and he was noticeably absent from public events such as an ulema visit to the mausoleum of Hafez al-Assad in the northwestern town of Qardaha for the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the late president's death.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, it was al-Sayyed and the Scholarly Council of Jurisprudence (which Hassoun failed to attend) that led the official Islamic response to the coronavirus pandemic, justifying the suspension of collective prayers on religious grounds and urging those who could afford it to support the needy allowing early payment of the Ramadan alms.<sup>13</sup>

The grand mufti's misfortunes may have been related to the outbreak of the simmering conflict between Assad and his cousin Rami Makhlof, who was once Syria's chief crony capitalist and who in 2020 angrily denounced the seizure of his assets in a series of video statements.<sup>14</sup> Hassoun's sons co-own a real estate company with a member of the Syrian parliament named Bilal al-Na'al, himself an associate of Makhlof by way of the Damascus Cham Holding Company. (Established in 2006, this firm was Syria's first holding company and is now in charge of constructing the luxurious housing development of Marota City in Damascus.)<sup>15</sup> Na'al is also the owner of Falcon, a private security company that contracted with the Makhlof-owned companies Syriatel and Cham Wings.<sup>16</sup>

The feud between al-Sayyed and Hassoun is also part of another divide that has shaped Syrian politics in recent years, namely, the Russia-Iran rivalry. The inclusion of the minister's son Abdullah into the Russian-and-Turkish-sponsored Syrian Constitutional Committee seemed to indicate that the minister is favored by Moscow.<sup>17</sup> Abdullah al-Sayyed claims to have the ear of Russia's Chechen Republic, which allegedly borrowed from the strategy he and his father have devised to reshape Islam in Syria.<sup>18</sup> The elder al-Sayyed is also said to be close to businessman Iyad Hassan, who partners with Russian investors in the Yalta real estate project in the Syrian port city of Tartus along the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>19</sup>

Hassoun, for his part, has continued to benefit from Iran's support, as evidenced by the fact that, while he was de facto banished from Syrian state media, he retained extensive access to Iranian-sponsored outlets. In May 2020, for instance, Alalam Syria TV granted him a thirty-minute interview.<sup>20</sup> Since the regime's recapture of eastern Aleppo in December 2016, Hassoun took advantage of his close ties with militias affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Aleppo's Local Defense Forces, both of which have become critical actors in the northern city's security landscape.<sup>21</sup>

This allowed Hassoun to fill the void left in 2012 by the exile of Suhaib al-Shami, his archrival who once reigned supreme over Aleppo's religious bureaucracy. Hassoun secured the appointment of



relatives and protégés to key religious positions in the city, including many of the mosque pulpits left vacant after the rebels' defeat.<sup>22</sup> He also reportedly emerged as a broker between the authorities and would-be returnees such as Sheikh Mahmoud al-Hout, a popular preacher and head of the Kiltawiyya sharia institute, who came back to Aleppo in 2019 after seven years of exile in Egypt.<sup>23</sup> In spite of rumors of his impending dismissal in the spring of 2020, Hassoun seems to have garnered enough support to return to favor, as illustrated by his presence alongside Assad during the celebration of the Mawlid (a minor holiday marking the birthday of the Prophet Muhammed) in October that year.<sup>24</sup>

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As for the minister, he has also worked to increase his influence in the patrimonial way that has become the hallmark of the Assad regime. The elder al-Sayyed, whose own father Abdul Sattar held the same position in the 1970s and whose brother Khayr al-Din served as the governor of Idlib, gave his son Abdullah a prominent role in the Ministry of Religious Endowments by appointing him as director of religious endowments in Tartus.<sup>25</sup>

Abdullah al-Sayyed has also been appointed head of al-Fariq al-Dini al-Shababi (the Youth Religious Team), a voluntary organization that the ministry set up in 2016 to mobilize junior male and female religious scholars between the ages of twenty-five and forty in the fight against “extremism” and the promotion of “moderate” religious discourse.<sup>26</sup> The team has held training sessions and conferences across the country while enjoying extensive access (including a dedicated weekly program) to the ministry's Nour al-Sham television channel.<sup>27</sup>

Besides al-Sayyed's own multivolume *tafsir* (the critical explanation or interpretation of scripture),<sup>28</sup> the backbone of the team's doctrine consists in the so-called *fiqh al-azma* (jurisprudence of crisis)—that is, refutations of the regime's religious nemeses, in particular Wahhabis; the Muslim Brotherhood; and any *takfiri* (someone who has accused others of apostacy), which is what the regime calls jihadis. One should not overstate the originality of this intellectual endeavor: what the Sayyeds aim to propagate is not some groundbreaking Islamic modernism but a neotraditionalist approach centered on what they consider an authentic—that is, politically subservient—understanding of *al-islam al-shami* (Syrian-Levantine Islam).<sup>29</sup>

Unlike other social groups such as peasants, workers, and students, men of religion had not been incorporated into Soviet-style popular organizations during the first decades of Baathist rule. This meant limited access to state resources and decisionmakers but also an ethically comfortable isolation from the secular-minded, Alawite-dominated elements that rule over those state agencies. By contrast, the team was jointly established by the Ministry of Religious Endowments and the intensely loyalist National Union of Syrian Students as an “integral part” of the union, as explained by Darin Suleiman, who has been head of the union since 2020 and who attended most major events held by the Youth Religious Team in pride of place.<sup>30</sup>

Very much like the Baath Party itself, the team is best conceived of as a patronage structure that members join in search of political and security benefits rather than as a political movement eliciting genuine ideological conviction in its ranks. The main incentives for joining it are privileges granted to



members by the ministry and security apparatus regarding appointments and authorizations for religious activities.<sup>31</sup> This patronage has proven particularly appealing in formerly rebel-held areas, which remain submitted to drastic security measures.<sup>32</sup> However, the moral discomfort aroused by this bargain is such that some scholars—including team members themselves—advance religious arguments to discourage their colleagues from joining it.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, through the Youth Religious Team, the ministry is propping up a new generation of clerics that owe little to their own scholarly merits and much to their political connections. Besides ethical considerations, there are limitations to this strategy. In spite of Abdullah al-Sayyed's exaltation of young religious scholars as more capable of propagating a flexible religious discourse than their elders, younger scholars are not about to replace their more experienced colleagues.<sup>34</sup> In the religious field at least, the Assad regime still needs the religious old guard's scholarly credibility, as well as its human and institutional resources. In 2019, Assad inaugurated the International Islamic Cham Center on confronting terrorism and extremism not in the company of the Youth Religious Team but instead with senior ulema from the Fath Institute and the Kuftaro Academy (including then mufti of Damascus and its countryside, Adnan al-Afiyuni, who was appointed as the center's director).<sup>35</sup> A few months later, Umayyad Mosque preacher Ma'mun Rahme, whose unrestrained pro-regime enthusiasm was inversely proportional to the reverence he inspired among the faithful, was replaced by Tawfiq al-Buti, the son of aforementioned religious luminary, Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti.<sup>36</sup>

Support from the mukhabarat is likely to ensure that the team will remain a key player within the Sunni religious field. However, in Syrian politics at large, the Sayyeds' ambitions have faced significant setbacks. Upon its establishment in 2016, the Youth Religious Team had four members of its fifteen-member Central Council elected to the People's Assembly, Syria's parliament.<sup>37</sup> Team affiliates—who replaced the handful of more senior ulema who had represented religious-minded Sunni constituencies in parliament since the early 1970s—included female preacher Farah Hamsho, the sister of crony businessman Muhammad Hamsho, and Muhammad Zuray'a, who was appointed as the assembly's secretary.<sup>38</sup> However, not a single Sunni religious candidate succeeded in the next round of legislative elections that was held in 2020.<sup>39</sup> Two years earlier, the Sayyeds faced another political setback when explicit mention of the Youth Religious Team in Decree 16/2018 (the draft version of Law 31/2018) was eventually replaced with a mere reference to *al-'unsur al-shababi* (the young element).<sup>40</sup>

The team's political misfortunes resulted, first, from the considerable anxiety its emergence sparked among members of pro-regime minority constituencies, who view any political empowerment of conservative Sunnis as an existential threat and who initially perceived the team as an Islamic movement akin to the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>41</sup> Opposition to the Sayyeds' policies broke out at the People's Assembly and on social media upon the release of Decree 16/2018, as both Latakia Province's parliamentary representative Nabil Salih and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (which draws the bulk of its membership from Alawite and Christian communities) denounced what it called an attempt at "Islamizing society."<sup>42</sup> This outcry resulted in several amendments to the draft law, including the deletion of the mention of the team and the lifting of a provision allowing the ministry to recruit foreign nationals, which was widely interpreted as a means to incorporate Iran-backed Twelver Shia missionaries into Syria's religious bureaucracy.<sup>43</sup>

Minority constituencies had already expressed their opposition to the Sunni religious establishment in 2016 during an outreach event held by the Youth Religious Team in the Alawite-majority province of Tartus. Obviously uncomfortable Sunni clerics had to face attacks from participants reproaching them for giving firebrand sermons and for instilling in their listeners "the fear of God more than the love of God."<sup>44</sup> In recent years, secular-minded observers have blamed various instances of censorship and imposed public morality on the ministry's alleged hidden influence.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, these fears appear to be overblown. On matters of strategic importance, the religious establishment is less able to shape regime policies than it used to be before the civil war. Notably, a committee of conservative legal experts provoked widespread indignation in secularist circles in 2009 by drafting amendments to Syria's personal status law. The government ultimately withdrew the amendments, but the affair nevertheless demonstrated the influence of conservative religious opinion on social matters.<sup>46</sup> Ten years later, however, the government enacted amendments that shifted the personal status law in a somewhat more secular direction, changes that were described by conservative observers as "violations of sharia."<sup>47</sup>

Finally, the most significant limitation on the empowerment of the Youth Religious Team and of Sunni clerics at large is their questionable political relevance for the regime. In that respect, Sunni religious elites compare unfavorably with far more resourceful players—namely, paramilitary leaders and war profiteers—whose growing influence resulted in the former's exclusion from parliament in 2020.<sup>48</sup> Except for topmost religious cronies such as al-Sayyed and Hassoun, the ulema have traditionally been tied to businessmen running small- and medium-sized businesses who have been overshadowed by the aforementioned war-created economic elites.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, whereas clerical go-betweens proved instrumental in the negotiated surrender of rebel-held localities around Damascus from 2014 onward, those so-called sheikhs of reconciliation lost much of their relevance after the regime completed the reconquest of the capital's suburbs in 2018. Most prominent among them was al-Afiyuni, who died in an October 2020 car bombing while in the company of Sheikh 'Adil Mastu (who survived the blast) in Qudsaya, a town the two men had once helped return to regime control.<sup>50</sup> By a troubling coincidence, the assassination occurred on the day the People's Assembly approved a decree abolishing the National Reconciliation Committee (the body in charge of supervising local negotiated surrenders), which a member of parliament described as now being "useless."<sup>51</sup>

## Religious Governance in Idlib Province

An early insurgent stronghold, the province of Idlib fell entirely to the rebels in 2015 following an offensive by the Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), a military coalition dominated by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani's Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. Between 2017 and 2019, several rounds of infighting resulted in the victory of Jabhat al-Nusra (by then renamed as HTS) over Ahrar al-Sham and its allies. The infighting also led to the submission of the province to the authority of an HTS-affiliated civilian administration, the Syrian Salvation Government. From a military perspective, the region became a de facto Turkish protectorate when Ankara's army, which had deployed there as an observation force in 2017, forcefully repelled a major regime offensive in early 2020.

Among the four state or state-like entities now ruling over parts of Syria, HTS is the only one that overtly endorses an Islamist ideology. Originally a franchise of the Islamic State in Iraq, and then the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra broke with the latter in 2016 and renamed itself HTS the following year. Subsequently, al-Jolani's group gradually distanced itself from transnational jihadi ideals and adopted an increasingly pragmatic, Syria-centered ideology.

HTS's Islamist outlook is reflected, first, in the forward-looking denomination of the Syrian Salvation Government's dedicated agency, namely, the *Wizarat al-Awqaf wa-l-Da'wa wal-Irshad* (Ministry of

Religious Endowments, Islamic Call and Guidance). HTS sees the agency as particularly strategic: Whereas the Syrian Salvation Government upon being established in 2017 allocated ten out of eleven portfolios to sympathetic yet formally independent figures, the Ministry of Religious Endowments (HTS) was entrusted to a senior HTS member—namely, then chairman of the group's al-Majlis al-Shar'i (Legal-Religious Council), Anas Muhammad Bashir al-Mousa, also known as Bahir al-Shami.<sup>52</sup> A subsequent holder of the post was Ibrahim Shasho, who defected from Ahrar al-Sham to HTS after his former faction endorsed codified law in June 2017.<sup>53</sup>

While the ministry is concerned with the management of religious institutions, the Syrian Salvation Government's *marja'iyya* (legal-religious reference) is al-Majlis al-A'la li-l-Ifta' (the Higher Fatwa Council), which was established in April 2019. The latter is also embedded within HTS's own religious apparatus: Besides the ministers of religious endowments and justice, its founding members include HTS's two top *shar'is* (Islamic jurists), namely, 'Abd al-Rahim 'Atun (also known as Abu Abdullah al-Shami) and Mazhar al-Ways.<sup>54</sup>

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HTS's direct control over religious institutions entails policies that interviewees among Idlib-based clerics uniformly describe as highly centralized and authoritarian. Everyday monitoring of local mosque activities is carried out by a ministry-appointed, HTS-loyal *mas'ul al-masajid* (mosque officer).<sup>55</sup> Mosque officers have been charged with putting an end to the unregulated character of mosque-based lessons and conferences that has prevailed since the advent of insurgent rule in 2012.<sup>56</sup>

Appointments and dismissals of imams and preachers are strictly conditioned on compliance with official guidelines.<sup>57</sup> As a result, several clerics have been replaced with HTS affiliates and sympathizers.<sup>58</sup> Independent *khatibs* (preachers at Friday prayers) who retained their position were temporarily substituted with HTS-affiliated *shar'is* at sensitive political moments; preachers who refused to step aside could be permanently dismissed. This particularly has been the case during the repeated rounds of infighting between HTS and other factions since 2017. Preachers who are not aligned with HTS have been reluctant to support al-Jolani's group in such contexts because of a deep-seated belief in the sinful character of rebel fratricide, and/or because they had sympathies for HTS's rivals.<sup>59</sup> As one interviewee remembers, "during HTS's war against the Nur al-Din Zenki Movement [around late 2018 and early 2019], [HTS leaders] asked a respected Friday preacher to stay home while they sent one of their kids to give the sermon and incite people to fight Zenki."<sup>60</sup>

In spite of the above, there are several limitations to HTS's domination over Idlib's religious field. First, attempts to placate local communities through displays of pragmatism have resulted in policies that, although inflexible on political loyalty, appear more lenient on matters of religious doctrine. There has been no wholesale imposition of the group's Salafist creed over local men of religion who, to a non-negligible extent, still embrace the Sufi version of Islam that used to be dominant before 2011. Dismissals of clerics on religious grounds have most often been a pretext for politically motivated decisions. Moreover, whereas Salafists generally eschew *madhabib* (established schools

of jurisprudence), HTS has started to promote the teaching and judicial use of the Shafi'i school (the most widespread school of Islamic jurisprudence in the Syrian countryside) to ease relations with homegrown men of religion and to stifle the most doctrinaire jihadi shar'is among its ranks.<sup>61</sup> Such doctrinaires often belong to HTS's foreign contingent of clerics, who have largely been kept away from Friday pulpits and mostly officiate as military chaplains.<sup>62</sup>

HTS's grip over the religious field has proven softer in regions where it does not hold full military dominance over other rebel factions, such as in the western countryside of Aleppo.<sup>63</sup> This is more generally the case outside major population centers, considering that the Syrian Salvation Government's religious bureaucracy has invested the bulk of its (limited) economic and human resources in the control of the urban religious field.<sup>64</sup> HTS's Ministry of Religious Endowments being unable to pay salaries for all mosque personnel, the mosque personnel often have to rely on their own resources and those of local communities.<sup>65</sup> Appointments of ministry-affiliated clerics thus occur when political necessity dictates; in the summer of 2020, for instance, HTS asserted its authority over the village of Arab Sa'id, which until then was controlled by the al-Qaeda loyalists of the group called Hurras al-Din.<sup>66</sup>

The management of specialist Islamic education conforms to the mixed pattern expounded above. HTS runs its own Preachers Training Institute, while key positions are occupied by HTS sympathizers such as Anas 'Ayrut, the leader of the 2011 uprising in Banyas in Tartus Governorate who succeeded Shasho as dean of the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Idlib.<sup>67</sup> Yet independent Islamic institutes continue to operate in Idlib. The Syrian Salvation Government closed down or seized institutions it perceived as hostile, such as Idlib's branches of the Free Aleppo University, which is affiliated with the rival Syrian Interim Government.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, it has continued to tolerate sharia institutes run by non-Salafist groups that are seen as politically neutral, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Tabligh, both of which teach Ash'ari theology, which contradicts the Salafist creed.<sup>69</sup>

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Likewise, the Syrian Salvation Government has opted for strict monitoring, rather than a full takeover, in its relations with major Islamic charities such as Idlib's Jam'iyyat al-Nahdat al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Renaissance Association). Self-restraint in this matter derives from a concern, as the saying goes, to avoid "killing the goose that lays the golden eggs"—that is, putting off donors, including the Turkish Diyanet and the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Jam'iyyat 'Ita' (Giving Association), by replacing the existing management with HTS loyalists.<sup>70</sup>

As a result of HTS's Islamist nature, the remit of religious affairs is not as clearly delimited among Idlib's political institutions as it is in other Syrian polities. Legal matters, in particular, are closely interconnected with religious affairs, notably because they are run by clerics rather than by experts in secular law. Prior to his appointment as Minister of Religious Endowments, al-Mousa chaired the court of appeals in the Army of Conquest coalition.<sup>71</sup> His successor, Shasho, had served as minister of justice in the Syrian Salvation Government's first line-up.<sup>72</sup> Shasho himself was replaced in the latter position by Anas Mansur Sulayman, a sharia graduate who built his credentials by serving as a

judge in post-2011 sharia courts.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, the first general conference of Idlib's heads of courts in May 2020 was jointly held by the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Religious Endowments (HTS).<sup>74</sup>

The Syrian Salvation Government's religious policies also extend into the economic realm. As a means of bolstering the government's ability to levy income tax (a major challenge for both state and nonstate actors ruling over Syrian territory), the Ministry of Religious Endowments (HTS) supervised the establishment of al-Hay'a al-'Amma li-l-Zakat (the General Authority for Zakat), whose task is to centralize the collection of compulsory alms and their redistribution to the needy. In the fall of 2019, popular protests erupted in the northwestern city of Kafr Takharim after officers of zakat, or the mandatory annual charitable donations made by Muslims, seized the alms' share of oil from users of olive presses. Discontent resulted from excessive levies (a fact that the zakat authority itself eventually acknowledged by demonstratively returning the oil to some farmers) but also from a broader rejection of the Syrian Salvation Government's legitimacy, as local communities preferred to continue paying zakat into grassroots, decentralized schemes.<sup>75</sup> Similar, albeit less visible, dissatisfaction has been provoked by the ministry's drive to register religious endowments and centralize their revenues (against the preferences of local communities) for schemes in which endowments specifically cater to the mosque to which they are attached.<sup>76</sup>

Because the Syrian Salvation Government's *raison d'être* is to confer a modicum of respectability on HTS's rule in the eye of foreign actors and local communities, the most controversial aspect of Islamist governance in Idlib is not carried out by the Syrian Salvation Government but by bodies that are directly commanded by HTS. That greatest source of controversy is the practice of *hisba*, or the enforcement of religious norms, particularly in terms of female modesty and gender segregation, in public spaces. Following the near-complete takeover of Idlib in 2017, the group established a *hisba* apparatus named Sawa'id al-Khayr (Arms of Good).<sup>77</sup> The apparatus became particularly active in the spring of 2018, when a new round of infighting against Ahrar al-Sham and its allied factions led to a rare stalemate that made HTS appear vulnerable, hence particularly eager to tighten its control over society.<sup>78</sup> Yet popular discontent with *hisba* practices and this heavy-handed interference in the operations of educational and medical institutions subsequently convinced HTS to freeze the activities of the Arms of Good.<sup>79</sup> By early 2019, another crushing victory against rival rebel factions allowed HTS to concentrate on polishing its image and, more vitally, on preparing the defense of Idlib against a looming large-scale loyalist offensive.

HTS's religious police reemerged in March 2020 under the name Markaz al-Falah (Bliss Center), whose members subsequently arrested the head of a midwifery institute following a drawing exhibition featuring a "masonic emblem" (in reality, the female symbol: ♀).<sup>80</sup> This time, the return of HTS's vice squad seemed related to concerns over the group's internal cohesion. An increasingly blunt embrace of *realpolitik* (a *de facto* military partnership with the Turkish army, acceptance of the March 5 Turkish-Russian ceasefire, and a crackdown on Hurras al-Din) was met with unease by hardliners. Yet religious actors typically see the sacred realm as a more legitimate and solid grounds for challenging the incumbent than purely political considerations. Therefore, HTS dissidents such as Egyptian cleric Abu al-Yaqzan al-Masri and military commander Abu Malik al-Telli (who established his own short-lived faction before being arrested by HTS) seized the opportunity of the coronavirus pandemic-induced closure of mosques in April to voice their criticism of the Syrian Salvation Government.<sup>81</sup> But HTS's Consultative Council member Abu al-Fath al-Farghali, another Egyptian hawk who remained loyal to al-Jolani, insisted that, notwithstanding the political compromises imposed on the group by the Turkish military buildup of February 2020, the domestic implementation of sharia remained a red line.<sup>82</sup> Against this background, the reactivation of the *hisba* might be interpreted as a means of enticing figures like al-Farghali and the many foreigners that reportedly man the Bliss Center into remaining loyal to HTS rather than joining Hurras al-Din or other hardline groups.<sup>83</sup> This expedient might only be temporary, however, and is likely to become unnecessary given HTS's ever-increasing military superiority over its radical contenders.



# Religious Governance in Turkish-Controlled Areas

The Turkish-controlled zone of northern Syria was established through three military operations. First in 2016–2017, Operation Euphrates Shield secured the rebel-held city of Azaz and expelled the Islamic State from the northwestern cities Jarablus and al-Bab. Then in 2018, Operation Olive Branch seized the Kurdish-majority region of Afrin from the PKK-aligned People's Protection Units (YPG). Finally, in 2019, Operation Peace Spring targeted a border strip extending from Tell Abyad to Ras al-Ayn.<sup>84</sup>

Religious institutions in those areas stand out due to their decentralized, multilayered, and fragmented character. This is because Ankara's approach to governance in northern Syria simultaneously relies on the co-optation of mutually competing Syrian revolutionary structures and on the direct involvement of Turkish institutions.

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Like all rebel-held Syrian regions, northern Syria witnessed a mushrooming of uncoordinated grassroots religious initiatives following the expulsion of regime troops in 2012. A myriad of religious schools, Islamic charities, and ulema leagues were created by local men of religion, rebel factions, and foreign (mostly Gulf-based) sponsors.<sup>85</sup> In the province of Aleppo, the Legal-Religious Council began a process of bottom-up coordination of these initiatives in 2013.<sup>86</sup> Initially conceived of as a syndicate for clerics, the council gradually came to claim—against similar ambitions on the part of Islamist factions like Ahrar al-Sham and HTS's predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra—the status of a quasi-official institution exerting prerogatives formerly held by the Assad regime's Ministry of Religious Endowments.<sup>87</sup> The council saw itself as the nucleus of a new Ministry of Religious Endowments to be established within the Gaziantep-based Syrian Interim Government of the Syrian National Coalition (the largest opposition alliance), but the latter focused its limited resources on other priorities, namely, education and healthcare.<sup>88</sup> Formal cooperation between the council and the interim government was thus initially limited to the joint management of the three dozen *thanawiyyat shar'iyya* (sharia secondary schools) established by the council.<sup>89</sup>

In 2014, the Legal-Religious Council became a founding component of the Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council. In a similarly bottom-up fashion, the latter assembled a vast array of ulama organizations from all over Syria and the diaspora, including Sufis, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and (non-jihadi) Salafists.<sup>90</sup> The Syrian Islamic Council was conceived of as a purely scholarly, non-executive body claiming the status of *marja'iyya* for the Syrian opposition. Accordingly, it has been chiefly concerned with the issuance of fatwas and statements on religious issues (such as setting the amount of Ramadan alms), though it also has addressed political developments such as disputes between rebel factions.<sup>91</sup> Although the council generally aligns with Turkish policies, it recently demonstrated a degree of independence by condemning those who leave the domestic front to fight abroad, an oblique reference to Syrians who volunteered as mercenaries to participate in

## Ankara's military interventions in Libya and Azerbaijan.<sup>92</sup>

When Operation Euphrates Shield was launched in 2016, the Legal-Religious Council, with the support of the Syrian Islamic Council and the Syrian Interim Government, presented itself to Turkish authorities as the most suitable partner to administer Islam in the area.<sup>93</sup> Yet, reflecting in this a broader pattern of Turkish governance in northern Syria,<sup>94</sup> Ankara eventually tasked each major town's *al-majlis al-mahalli* (local council) with establishing an *idarat al-awqaf wa-l-ifta' wa-l-shu'un al-diniyya* (directorates of endowments, fatwa, and religious affairs). Local directorates are responsible for managing endowments, appointing mosque personnel and muftis, organizing Quran classes, and monitoring Friday sermons in their respective districts. The nineteen such directorates that saw the light of day in the three zones of Turkish military operations were later assembled into a loose single *idara* (administration), while in reality they reported directly to the Diyanet.<sup>95</sup> The latter's *vakif* (foundation) is the chief provider of funding for the restoration, maintenance, and staffing of mosques.<sup>96</sup> Turkey also imposed its own model of recruitment of mosque personnel through a competitive examination, which contrasts with the connection-based model that prevailed before 2011.<sup>97</sup> By May 2019, the Diyanet claimed to have hired over 1,400 clerics in northern Syria.<sup>98</sup>

The Legal-Religious Council and the Syrian Islamic Council reacted to their marginalization at the hands of local directorates by encouraging the Syrian Interim Government to finally establish its own Hay'at al-Awqaf wa-l-Shu'un al-Diniyya (Authority of Endowments and Religious Affairs), a hundred-members-strong administration, in January 2018. The authority's president since that date has been Rafa'a 'Abd al-Fattah, a founding member of the Syrian Islamic Council. Accordingly, the authority vocally proclaims its recognition of the Syrian Islamic Council as its *marja'iyya*.<sup>99</sup> On matters of mosque management, the role of the authority is apparently confined to Afrin, Ras al-Ayn, and Tell Abyad, due to the absence of preexisting local councils following the uprooting of PKK-aligned institutions upon Turkey's capture of those areas.<sup>100</sup> The authority plays a more significant role in the educational realm because it inherited the management of the sharia high schools formerly affiliated with the Legal-Religious Council and because of the leverage it derives from the Syrian Interim Government's ability to standardize diplomas and have them recognized by national institutions of higher learning in Syria and abroad.<sup>101</sup>

Besides sheer administrative rivalries, there are doctrinal dimensions to the competition between local directorates and the Syrian Interim Government's religious affairs authority. The former are dominated by homegrown, traditionalist, Sufi-leaning scholars who intend to take advantage of their empowerment by the Diyanet to roll back Salafist influence. The latter remains strong as a result of the legacy of the Islamic State's three-year rule over the al-Bab area, the ongoing presence of Salafist-leaning rebel factions like Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, and the activities of Gulf-funded nongovernmental organizations like the Taj Association for Quran Teaching.<sup>102</sup> By contrast, the nexus between the Syrian Islamic Council and the Authority of Endowments and Religious Affairs displays an inclusive attitude reflecting its own pluralistic makeup. Moreover, whereas the directorates and Turkish authorities favor a statist, top-down approach to the management of religion and education, the authority, once again echoing the Syrian Islamic Council's preferences, emphasizes the need to facilitate the role of what authority members call religious civil society—that is, the many grassroots initiatives that appeared from 2012 onward.<sup>103</sup>



Administrative fragmentation explains the exceedingly complex structure of the Islamic educational sector in northern Syria. At the middle and high school levels, it includes three distinct categories. First, there are sharia secondary schools, which are religious courses of study within general, nonvocational high schools, affiliated with either local councils or the Interim Government. Then there are equivalent Imam-Khatib high schools directly attached to the Turkish Ministry of Education.<sup>104</sup> Finally, northern Syria has *ma'abid shar'iyya* (authority-affiliated private Islamic institutes, or vocational Islamic high schools) like the Mecca Institute of the League of Syrian Ulama—itsself linked to the Muslim Brotherhood—and the Abdallah Ibn Hudhafa al-Sihami Institute run by the Ahbab Association, a local offspring of the Jama'at ad-Da'wa wat-Tabligh.<sup>105</sup> In the realm of higher Islamic studies, likewise, the offer is divided between the Faculty of Sharia of the Syrian Interim Government–affiliated Free Aleppo University; branches of the Turkish Gaziantep University, such as the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Azaz or the Sharia Institute in Jarablus; and the al-Bab branch of Başakşehir Academy, a private, Istanbul-based, Syrian-run university.<sup>106</sup>

The multiplicity of Islamic educational institutions in northern Syria should not be mistaken for the extent of their reach. Members of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Azaz lament that sharia institutes and secondary schools only cater to a minuscule share (which they estimate at around 1 percent) of all school pupils in northern Syria.<sup>107</sup> This low figure does not necessarily constitute evidence of a decrease in religiosity among locals, as it could also be explained by concerns over career opportunities. Yet it is consistent with other trends that local men of religion interpret as signs of a popular backlash against religious norms which, in their view, finds its origin in the abuses committed by the Islamic State and other hardline Islamist rebels.<sup>108</sup> Preventing the resurgence of *ghuluw* (extremism) and the spread of irreligion are the twin challenges that local religious institutions see themselves as poised to face in the future.

## Religious Governance in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which was proclaimed in 2018, is the latest iteration to date of the governance structure first established in 2012 by the YPG in the Kurdish-majority areas of Afrin, Kobane, and Qamishli. Between 2015 and 2019, U.S. military support against the Islamic State allowed the YPG and its partners within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to expand southward into Arab-majority areas of the provinces of al-Hasakah, Raqqqa, and Deir ez-Zor.

Official religious institutions in the autonomous administration have been shaped by three main dynamics. First, there is the leftist, secularist, and feminist ideology of PKK founder and ideologue Abdullah Öcalan. The second one is a top-down, hegemonic party model of governance that leaves very little space for private initiatives. And the third is the post-2015 inclusion of large Arab communities that remain suspected of harboring sympathies for the Islamic State and radical interpretations of Islam in general.

Following the proclamation of the Rojava self-rule administration in 2014, *hay'at diniyya* (religious bodies) were established in the three cantons of Afrin, Jazira (including Qamishli and al-Hasakah), and Kobane.<sup>109</sup> In 2016, these bodies were placed under the authority of the *Maktab Shu'un al-Adiyan wal-Mu'taqadat* (Bureau of Religions and Beliefs) for Northern and Eastern Syria.<sup>110</sup> Whereas all official religious institutions in Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East and North Africa define themselves as primarily—or exclusively—Islamic, the bureau is inherently conceived as pluralistic. First, its name not only makes space for several religions but also for potentially nonreligious beliefs. Second, its logo gives the same importance to the symbols of Islam (a crescent), Christianity (a cross and a dove), and Yezidism (a peacock). Third, it is headed by three *ra'is musharak* (co-presidents) representing each of the three religions.<sup>111</sup> Fourth, it is supplemented with a *Maktab Multaqa al-Adiyan* (Bureau for Religious Encounter) whose task is to reach out to non-Muslim communities inside the autonomous administration and abroad.<sup>112</sup>

Besides a heavy emphasis on tolerance and religious coexistence, another key feature of the autonomous administration's religious discourse is an insistence on gender equality. Mirroring the administration's Executive Council, the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs is headed by a mixed co-presidency: while the Syriac Christian and Yezidi presidents are men, the Muslim president is a woman, namely, a sharia graduate from al-Azhar University named 'Aziza Khanafir.<sup>113</sup>

The bureau is an executive body rather than a *marja'iyya*. The latter function is exerted by the *Mu'tamar al-Mujtama' al-Dimuqrati al-Islami* (Islamic Democratic Society Congress), which originated as the Union of Muslim Scholars in the Jazira Canton (also called the Union of Kurdish Muslim Scholars). The union was established in 2015 by the local autonomous administration as a means of co-opting clerics and, as a founding member has explained, to “get rid” of extremist fatwas and scholars.<sup>114</sup>

Union members were subsequently appointed to key positions within the autonomous administration's religious institutions. Union chairman Mohammed Mullah Rashid Gharzani became the head of the Islamic Democratic Society Congress upon its establishment in 2019.<sup>115</sup> Sheikh Muhammad al-Qadiri is the son of 'Ubayd Allah al-Qadiri, a prominent figure of the Qadiriyya Sufi order based in Amuda, a town near the Turkish border, and whose following includes many Arabs from the Euphrates Valley.<sup>116</sup> Muhammad al-Qadiri presided over the Religious Body of the Jazira Canton upon its establishment and continues to exert a supervisory role over the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs in his capacity as head of the organization and administration.<sup>117</sup> In parallel, he has occupied political positions such as head of the *Hay'at al-A'yan* (Council of Dignitaries), which primarily includes tribal chiefs and board member in the *Minassa Jamahiriyya* (Peopledom Platform), a coalition that promotes unity among Syrian Kurdish parties.<sup>118</sup> The union's media chief, Duran al-Hashimi, a young scholar also affiliated with the Qadiriyya, owes the trust of the autonomous administration's authorities to his participation in the defense of Rojava as a fighter and military chaplain.<sup>119</sup> He has played crucial roles such as manager of investment projects related to religious endowments and superintendent for local branches of the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs established in Arab-majority areas after their capture from the Islamic State.<sup>120</sup>

The transformation of the Union of Muslim Scholars into the Islamic Democratic Society Congress indicated the extent of the PKK's ideological influence over religious governance in the autonomous administration. During the first decade of this century, Öcalan evolved from a rigidly antireligious

stance toward a tactical embrace of Islam, whose neglect, he argued, was responsible for the failure of many leftist movements across the region.<sup>121</sup> According to Rahman Dag, Öcalan extolled what he called cultural Islam, which forms the basis of Islamic society in opposition to state-dominated or political interpretations of religion championed by the PKK's Islamist enemies.<sup>122</sup> As Kurdish self-rule consolidated in northern Syria from 2012 onward, Öcalan's local followers also found themselves ruling over other ethnic groups like Arabs and Assyrians. As such, the party's ideologues used the Charter of Medina, which was designed by the Prophet upon his arrival in the city of Medina, as a means of conferring Islamic legitimacy upon the notions of peaceful coexistence and equality of rights between Muslims and non-Muslims and between Muslims of various tribes and origins. It was on the basis of these elaborations, and upon Öcalan's call, that the first Democratic Islam Congress was held in 2014 in Diyarbakir, a Kurdish city in Turkey along the Tigris River.<sup>123</sup> Likewise, the first Islamic Democratic Society Congress that met in Rumeilan (Syrian Jazira) in April 2019 opened with a reading of Öcalan's letter to the 2014 congress and took place under the slogan "reviving the Charter of Medina." Accordingly, the congress adopted a banner featuring the Prophet's shrine in Medina.<sup>124</sup>

The congress decided to incorporate the essentially Kurdish Union of Muslim Scholars into a multiethnic structure, which meant including Arab scholars such as Mufti of Manbij 'Abd al-Razzaq Kalo as a congress speaker and establishing its headquarters in the Arab-majority Syrian city of al-Hasakah.<sup>125</sup> The timing of this shift was significant, as it shortly followed the SDF's capture of the Islamic State's last stronghold in the Syrian town of Baghuz Fawqani, which had put an end to four years of military expansion that brought sizeable Arab communities under the autonomous administration's purview.

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The congress also absorbed the union's female counterpart, the Religious Foundation for the Muslim Woman. Resultingly, the three hundred attendants elected female scholar Dalal Khalil as co-president of the congress with Gharzani and created a mixed consultative council of twenty-five members.<sup>126</sup> Reflecting on the autonomous administration's decision to increase its investment in the control of the religious field, the congress was conceived as an all-encompassing Islamic establishment. As a *marja'iyya*, it issues fatwas such as the one that provided a religious rationale for the decision by the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs to close mosques during the coronavirus pandemic. The congress also denounced the re-publication of French cartoons of the Prophet in September 2020.<sup>127</sup> It runs an Islamic college (the Democratic Islam Academy), secondary vocational Islamic schools (al-Salam institutes), Quran memorization circles, a charity (al-Salam Humanitarian Association), and a journal (*Social Islam*).<sup>128</sup> Finally, since 2019, it has been liaising with Saudi authorities to organize the pilgrimages of the autonomous administration's residents to Mecca. The launch of this partnership ended a seven-year monopoly of the Syrian National Coalition's Pilgrimage Committee in this domain.<sup>129</sup>

Like the congress, the Democratic Islam Academy is co-presided by Gharzani and Khalil.<sup>130</sup> Its four-

year course trains male pupils as imams and Friday preachers, and their female classmates (who made up three-fourths of the class of 2019's thirty students) as religious teachers in mosques and schools.<sup>131</sup> The academy seemingly endorses the autonomous administration's ideological orientations, as illustrated by a quote from Öcalan that features on its banner (which reads "religion is the memory of society").<sup>132</sup> Its peculiar logo symbolizes the superiority of reasoning and creativity over rote learning and indoctrination, as it consists of a brain and an open book—not the Quran that appears on the emblem of numerous Islamic organizations, but a blank book surmounted by a pen. In practice, however, the academy features more conservative elements that reflect the mindset of the traditionalist Sufi scholars who presided over its establishment. Indeed, male and female pupils attend classes in separate rooms, and jurisprudence syllabi are mostly based on the Shafi'i school of *fiqh* (human attempts to understand and apply jurisprudence of sharia).<sup>133</sup>

It was precisely to preserve its vocational and relatively traditional character that the academy was not included in the more decidedly modernist Faculty of Religious Studies that was inaugurated at Rojava University in 2020.<sup>134</sup> Like the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs, the faculty at Rojava University is a pluralistic institution consisting of three departments for Islam, Christianity, and Yezidism. A modicum of gender balance was achieved, here again, through the appointment of a female scholar as head of the Islamic department. Remarkably, students of all religious backgrounds follow the same curriculum during the first two years of study and only specialize in the third and fourth years.<sup>135</sup> As a result of this revolutionary approach, the faculty was hailed by Muhammad Habash, an influential Dubai-based cleric and former member of the Syrian parliament who has been vilified by his senior colleagues due to his claim that Islam holds no monopoly on eternal salvation.<sup>136</sup>

The local management of Islam in the autonomous administration lies with *mu'assasat diniyya* (religious institutions) affiliated with the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs. The latter are supposed to work hand in hand with consultative councils of local ulema, but in Arab-majority areas, at least, those councils do not seem to play any effective role.<sup>137</sup> Each religious institution is officially headed by a local cleric, typically with a Sufi background (such as Ali al-Nayif al-Shu'ayb in Raqqa, 'Abd al-Razzaq Kalo in Manbij, and Najm al-Din al-Husseini in Deir ez-Zor).<sup>138</sup>

Local religious institutions deal with day-to-day issues such as mosque appointments and Friday sermons, which they write and distribute to the city's preachers. The local religious institutions operate under the close supervision of a Kurdish official known as the *kadir al-awqaf* (cadre of religious endowments)—*kadro* (cadre) refers to diehard PKK loyalists who control key positions within the SDF and the autonomous administration.<sup>139</sup> On two occasions at least, decisions made by local religious institutions (a threat to arrest whoever might publicly break the Ramadan fast in Manbij in 2018 and the reinstatement of collective prayers in mosques in Raqqa during the coronavirus pandemic) were repealed immediately after they were announced.<sup>140</sup> Local religious bureaucrats seem to enjoy slightly more autonomy at the ideological level. In February 2020, for instance, the Religious Institution in Raqqa hosted the first Islamic conference held in the city since its capture from the Islamic State by the SDF two years earlier.<sup>141</sup> Although the conference's final statement included obligatory references to moderation and tolerance, it made no mention of the more controversial concept of democratic Islam.<sup>142</sup>

The consolidation and expansion of the autonomous administration's religious institutions should not be interpreted as a break with the PKK's secularist agenda, which remains alive and well, as illustrated by the suppression of Islamic education in school curricula.<sup>143</sup> Unlike their counterparts in other regions of Syria (including in regime-held areas), the autonomous administration's religious institutions are not supposed to promote Islamic values. Instead, as illustrated by the establishment of the Islamic Democratic Society Congress, they are aimed at ensuring that religious discourse and practices strictly comply with the ruling party's ideology. No Islamic charities, schools, or movements are tolerated outside the realm of official institutions—except for al-Hasakah's 'Irfan Institute, a large

vocational Islamic high school run by the Kurdish-majority Naqshbandi Khaznawi Sufi order, which likely retained its position because of its size and influence.<sup>144</sup> Imams and preachers have been dismissed due to accusations of extremism but also, reportedly, for political offenses such as failing to attend demonstrations against Turkey.<sup>145</sup>

At the same time, the process described above is not merely top-down. It also reflects the efforts of religious actors who, faced with an unfavorable political environment, struggle to remain relevant by espousing the incumbent's discourse. In her capacity as the Democratic Islam Academy co-president, Khalil explains, "at the beginning we faced significant difficulties because Islam was looked upon negatively, so acceptance of such an academy seemed impossible. However, through insistence and efforts, we managed to clarify things and make people revise their views on Islam."<sup>146</sup> Similarly, the booklet of the first Islamic Democratic Society Congress defended the expression "democratic Islam" (against objections that there is only one Islam and that it doesn't suffer epithets) by emphasizing the need to "frame our Islamic thought in a way that reassures people."<sup>147</sup> The autonomous administration's leadership is thus faced with the same problem as twentieth-century secularist rulers across the region, including the Syrian Baathist regime: its embrace of Islam is purely tactical, but its control of the religious field relies on partners who, unlike their political masters, take religion seriously.

## Beyond Borders: The Syrian Islamic Council

The Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council is arguably the only Syrian religious institution whose influence meaningfully extends beyond regional and national borders. This is due, first, to inherent features such as its relative independence and inclusion of some of Syria's most respected scholars. For instance, in January 2021, condolences for the death of council member Sheikh Adnan al-Saqqā even came from HTS, in recognition of the deceased's scholarly merits and in spite of the council's vocal support for rebel factions that had battled al-Jolani's men in previous years.<sup>148</sup> The Syrian Islamic Council is, to put it simply, the only major religious body in Syria that is perceived as a political actor in its own right rather than as a mere mouthpiece for its political patron. Whereas the religious apparatuses of the regime, HTS, and YPG are largely ignored (or derided) by their detractors, the Syrian Islamic Council has been excoriated by HTS shar'is for its hostility to their group and was even the target of demonstrations held by the ulema of the autonomous administration in protest over the council's support for Operation Peace Spring in 2019.<sup>149</sup>

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The Syrian Islamic Council is also the leading religious authority among the Syrian diaspora. It does not command unquestioned loyalty, of course: Syrian expatriates might follow other ulema living in exile or inside Syria, affiliate themselves with non-Syrian Islamic groups and figures, or disregard religious leaders altogether. Yet the council's dominant position stems from a lack of meaningful challengers, considering that there has been no real attempt at establishing an alternative Sunni religious authority within the Syrian diaspora. Moreover, few exiled ulema that are not affiliated with the council have secured or retained significant standing—a figure like Sufi scholar Muhammad Abul

Huda al-Yaqoubi is rather exceptional in that respect.<sup>150</sup>

## Conclusion

After a decade of civil war, official religious institutions across Syria are now organized along patterns that vary widely from one region to another. In regime-held areas, the conflict has accelerated the nationalization of the religious field under the authority of al-Sayyed and at the expense of his rival Hassoun, the grand mufti. Notably, al-Sayyed has promoted a new generation of scholars led by his son Abdullah through the establishment of the Youth Religious Team, which, for the first time in the history of Baathist Syria, has brought junior men of religion into the regime's popular organizations. In Idlib, Islamist governance has translated into direct control of clerics affiliated with the ruling HTS over the Syrian Salvation Government's Ministry of Religious Endowments. The prerogatives of official religious institutions extend to the realms of justice, tax collection, and public morality. In Turkish-administered zones in the north, religious governance is at the center of a competition between endowments directorates affiliated with local councils and funded by the Turkish Diyanet, on the one hand, and the Syrian Interim Government's Authority of Endowments and Religious Affairs, which enjoys the support of the Syrian Islamic Council, on the other hand. In the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, finally, a highly centralized religious apparatus headed by the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs and the Islamic Democratic Society Congress promotes a religious dialogue-centered interpretation of Islam in line with the leftist views of the ruling Democratic Union Party.

In spite of such glaring differences, there are several similarities between the four polities. First, the self-management of the religious field once allowed by the collapse of state control over opposition-held areas has given way, in all cases, to some variant of the heavily state-centric, top-down pattern of religious governance that characterizes the Middle East and North Africa more generally. Second, a decade of civil war has considerably increased the imbalance of power between religious actors and commanders of military forces. None of the official religious institutions are in a position to challenge the political leadership—not even in Idlib, where HTS's al-Jolani has regularly dismissed scholars who have opposed his many policy shifts. Finally, however, all of the four political regimes considered here suffer from a lack of financial and symbolic resources that limits their ability to fully control and reshape Islam according to their respective secularist, Islamist, or traditionalist views.

The twin weaknesses of political and religious leaderships create room for compromise. Yet the latter's effects will be felt differently depending on the region. In Idlib and Turkish-administered areas, there is a broad congruence between the views of the two sides regarding the place of Islam in society and politics. Ideological differences chiefly concern doctrinal matters (like the Sufi-Salafist divide) that have already proven surmountable. In such contexts, compromise in the form of increasing tolerance of doctrinal differences on the part of political authorities likely will have a stabilizing effect by removing a major source of tension with religious actors. On the contrary, the political orientations of the Assad regime and the autonomous administration remain fundamentally at odds with the agenda of religious conservatives. Consequently, a modus vivendi that would gradually give clerics more space to operate would inevitably generate contradictions, such as those that were witnessed in Syria prior to 2011. However subservient, religious leaders (including those affiliated with official institutions) are not content with secularist policies and will patiently wait until the context is ripe to reverse them. As these dynamics combine with the two regimes' continuing securitization of (Arab) Sunni Islam for sectarian or ethnic reasons, heavy-handed management of official Islamic institutions is likely to remain a source of friction between both the Assad regime and the autonomous administration and their religious-minded constituencies.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Youssef Courbage, "Syria's Population: Reluctance to (Demographic) Transition" in Baudouin Dupret, Youssef Courbage, Zuhair Ghazal, and Mohammed Al-Dbiyat (eds.), *Syria Today: Reflections of a Society* (French) (Paris: Actes Sud, 2007), 189.

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