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The Syrian Baath Party and Sunni Islam: Conflicts and Connivance

Dr. Thomas Pierret

In the first weeks of the Syrian uprising that began in March 2011, religious symbols and figures rapidly emerged as important components of the movement. *Allah Akbar* (“God is the Greatest”) was often shouted, along with liberal slogans like “God, Syria, Freedom, and that’s it!” Certain Muslim scholars or *ulama* became iconic figures of the protests, and many demonstrations took place in and around mosques, which offered some degree of protection from security forces. With the gradual radicalization of the uprising in the months since, and the consequently greater presence of Islamist armed groups, religion came to occupy an increasingly central place in the rhetoric of the opposition.

Religion is also key to understanding the Syrian conflict to the extent that the issue of religious—or, more precisely, sectarian—identity has been at the heart of Syria’s domestic tensions for decades. Although Sunni Muslims probably account for 80 percent of the country’s population, members of President Bashar al-Assad’s Alawite sect, which accounts for only 10 percent, have dominated the military, and hence the regime, from the 1960s on. By 2011, it was estimated that a majority of the officers in the army and the intelligence apparatus were Alawites, as were most of the rank and file in elite units such as the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division.

In this Brief, I address the issue of sectarianism in Syria by analyzing the history of the relationship between the regime and the Sunni Islamic community: to the Islamist opposition movements, on the one hand, and the *ulama* (the learned religious elite), on the other. (I will highlight the

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specificities of the Syrian case but also point out the resemblance of the Syrian situation to that of other states in the region.) I discuss the regime's partnership with foreign Shia actors and the resentment that has generated among Syrian Sunnis, as well as the role of economic liberalization in the post-2000 rapprochement between the regime, the *ulama*, and the Sunni bourgeoisie at large. On that basis, I will analyze the stance adopted by Sunni religious actors since the outbreak of the current uprising.¹

The Eradication of Political Islam

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, established in 1946, made its debut in the context of a parliamentary democracy. Although at that time, notables (belonging to the landed and merchant elites) dominated the political system, the Islamists nevertheless managed to secure a few seats in the assembly in the elections of 1949 and 1962 as well as ministerial portfolios. The Brotherhood had another good reason to be loyal to the parliamentary system: This system's main enemy—that is, the military—which regularly intervened in Syrian political life from 1949 on, was heavily influenced by the founder of the Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's experience of authoritarian secularization. As for the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who from 1958 to 1961 ruled over Syria as a result of the latter's merger with Egypt into the short-lived United Arab Republic, he marginalized the Brotherhood in Syria along with any ideological party that might overshadow him.

In 1963, two years after Syria's return to parliamentary life as a result of its secession from the United Arab Republic, the Baathist coup put a definitive end to the country's democratic experience. The Brotherhood was now at odds with the new masters of the country not only ideologically—since the secularist enthusiasm of the Baath was at its apex in the mid-1960s—but also socially and sectarianly. Whereas the new regime's strongmen were often sons of peasants from heterodox Muslim minorities (Druzes, Ismailis, and Alawites), the Muslim Brotherhood was strongly rooted in the urban Sunni middle class.

Following the Baathist coup of 1963, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood continued to operate in a semi-underground fashion; but by the mid-1960s, the organization was bled dry by the self-imposed exile of hundreds of its members to Gulf monarchies. In the 1970s, however, in a context of a looming Islamic revival throughout the region, they took advantage of the very limited liberalization initiated by Hafez al-Assad to rebuild their forces in a semi-clandestine fashion. This development coincided with the emergence of a militant current advocating the abandonment of the Brotherhood's educational strategy in favor of armed struggle—which in turn gave rise to the Fighting Vanguard, a breakaway faction that at the end of the decade launched a campaign of assassinations and bomb attacks against the regime. By early 1980, northern cities like Aleppo and Hama had witnessed broad protest movements involving students, professional associations, and the merchant bourgeoisie.

The regime responded to this predominantly urban uprising with military operations that culminated with the 1982 siege of the rebel stronghold of Hama, which led to the death of thousands and the destruction of the city's old center. Assad's ability to defeat the insurgency came about as a result of the loyalty of the Alawite community along with the passivity of Sunni peasants, many of whom had benefited from the regime's agrarian policies. Limited economic liberalization

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in the 1970s had also entailed a rapprochement between Assad and the Damascene bourgeoisie, which helped Assad circumvent dissent in the capital.

In the meantime, the regime had put an end to the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood inside the country. In 1980, with the promulgation of Law No. 49, mere membership in the organization was made punishable by death. In the following years, the gradual annihilation of Islamist networks in the country resulted in a new generation of exiles swelling the ranks of the Syrian Islamist diaspora in the Middle East and Europe. From then on, this diaspora became the only real sphere of operations for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which was now no more than a movement of exiles run by aging figures. Secret talks between the Brotherhood and the regime took place from the late 1980s on, but the latter offered only individual amnesties and never indicated any intention of allowing the reintegration of the Brotherhood into the political game.

Despite this intransigence, some Islamic-leaning intellectuals based in Syria hoped that the major foreign policy crises of the 2000s (the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon two years later) would encourage the regime to authorize the creation of moderate Islamist parties inspired by the Turkish AKP. These hopes were dashed, however, by the indefinite postponement of a projected new law providing for a genuine multi-party system.

In an interview in 2006, Muhammad Habash, one of the few Islamic-leaning members of the Syrian Parliament and an outspoken advocate of the authorization of “faith-based” parties, summed up the problem this way: “Baathist ideology does not have a problem with Islam, it has a problem with liberalism, because embracing the latter would mean that the Baath party has to renounce its constitutional role as the “leading party in society and state,” and that religion and state should be separated.”² Indeed, the regime has had little difficulty establishing partnerships with conservative Muslim scholars whose views were far more opposed to Baathist ideology than the Brotherhood’s moderate Islamism and the AKP admirers’ “Muslim democrat” approach. From the regime’s viewpoint, however, conservative Muslim scholars had the advantage of focusing on the defense of narrowly defined sectoral interests (religious education, public morality) rather than demanding democratic reforms.

Relations with the Sunni Ulama

The Syrian Baathist regime’s management of Sunni religious institutions has been more distinctly idiosyncratic than its relationship with the political Islamic opposition. Between independence in 1946 and 1963, Syrian governments adopted an approach similar to that of Kemalist Turkey and Nasserite Egypt: They “nationalized” religious institutions. The state built up legal and administrative structures (creation of a position of Grand Mufti, establishment of a Ministry of Religious Endowments [*awqaf*] in charge of religious affairs); actively participated in the modernization of higher religious education (opening of a Faculty of Sharia at the University of Damascus); and even tried to impose a uniform on Muslim clerics, detailed down to the color of their socks!

After 1963, the Baath rapidly broke with that model by shifting away from institution building and focusing on the political neutralization of the Sunni religious elite. Rather than incorporating the latter into the state bureaucracy, as Nasser had done in Egypt, the new Syrian regime opted for a policy of exclusion, by depriving the vast majority of the grand *ulama* from any responsibility in the religious administration. Moreover, that bureaucracy did not undergo the expansion enjoyed by other state agencies in the now socialist state, and private Islamic seminaries were among the few exceptions to the nationalization of schools that the regime effected at the end of the 1960s.

The religious policies of the Baathist regime were driven by two main considerations. On an ideological level, the secularist revolutionaries in power were reluctant to use state resources to the benefit of a reactionary religious establishment that many in the party assumed was doomed to disappear in any case. In terms of political strategy, the ruling team did not wish to open the gates of the state apparatus to an inherently hostile conservative religious elite.

Instead of encouraging the regime to rethink this approach, the Islamist insurgency of 1979-82 only radicalized it further. The state religious bureaucracy, now perceived as a threat rather than employed as an instrument of control, lost no less than two-thirds of its staff during the 1980s and 1990s. The establishment of the Assad Institutes for the Memorization of the Quran was in fact a mere relabeling of pre-existing, mosque-based informal study circles. As for the expansion of higher Islamic education in response to a growing social demand, it was entrusted to new institutes run by pro-regime clerics, like Grand Mufti Ahmad Kaftaro, but remained entirely private from both legal and financial points of view.

The 1979–82 uprising also led to the establishment of an unlikely alliance between the regime and a prestigious Sunni religious figure, the dean of the Faculty of Sharia, Sa'īd Ramadan al-Buti. Al-Buti was radically hostile to the pillars of Baathist ideology—that is, nationalism and socialism—which he had denounced in several of his widely read books. At the same time, his arch-conservative understanding of Sunni political theology included advocating absolute obedience to political authority, regardless of its (many) flaws, on the basis that tyranny is preferable to “discord” (*fitna*); but it was also justified by the belief that dialogue with the government was the surest path to eventually achieving clerical goals.

And indeed, from the mid-1990s on, the regime gradually lifted severe restrictions on basic religious practices, such as wearing headscarves in schools, holding religious lessons in mosques, and celebrating the Prophet's birthday. During the next decade, the new president, Bashar al-Assad, while turning a deaf ear to the Islamist parties' demands for political inclusion, was increasingly receptive to the demands of the *ulama* as a means of securing their support in the context of multiple regional crises (the U.S. occupation of Iraq; Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon). Reaching out to former enemies—some of them freshly returned from exile, like leaders of the Zayd movement Osama and Sariya al-Rifa'i—Bashar allowed them to expand informal networks of religious education, while the number of charities and Islamic secondary schools skyrocketed.

Assad's conciliatory strategy did not produce the desired outcome, however, as the Sunni religious elite's retrieved self-confidence rapidly proved embarrassing. Of course, no one dared attack the President himself, and even traditionally independent figures exhibited a readiness to praise Assad's anti-American and anti-Israeli stance. But the *ulama* did feel strong enough to launch rhetorical offensives against secularist elements within state agencies like the ministries of Media and Education. In 2006, in response to the Ministry of Education's decision to abolish the preparatory level (first three years) of Sharia high schools and institutes in order to extend the compulsory core curriculum of general education, forty of the country's most famous Muslim scholars sent Assad a petition condemning a “conspiracy” fomented by the Ministry of Education in order to “destroy religion.”

In the face of such wayward clerical behavior, the regime started to look for an alternative to its policy of relative lenience toward the *ulama*. The opportunity to change course arose in 2008, when Syria's foreign policy successes (the victory of pro-Syrian militias in the May 2008 clashes in Beirut; Assad's official visit to Paris in

July) relieved the regime of the need to seek the support of the *ulama*. Combined with a deadly terrorist attack in September that was attributed to Islamic militants, that context paved the way for an ambitious program of reforms, which aimed to significantly increase the role and resources of the state religious bureaucracy, particularly through the partial nationalization of private Islamic seminaries. These measures were accompanied by a revival of the regime's secularist ambitions, as evidenced by the closing of prayer halls in shopping malls, the ban on face veils (*niqab*) in universities, the transfer of face-veiled schoolteachers to administrative positions, and the prohibition against displaying signs of sectarian affiliation on cars. As a result, on the eve of the uprising of 2011, relations between the regime and the Sunni religious elite had considerably deteriorated, not only because of the 2008 crackdown but also because of growing rumors of Shiite missionary activities in the country.

The Shiite Presence

Of all the issues discussed above, the Syrian state's relationship to Shiite Islam is undoubtedly the most directly related to the Alawite affiliation of the regime's strongmen. Despite a distant common origin, clerics belonging to Twelver Shia Islam—that is, the mainstream brand of Shiism, predominantly found today in Iran and Iraq—long looked upon the secretive doctrines of the Alawites, and in particular their reported deification of Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as nothing but heresy, and many still do. Only in the first half of the twentieth century did reformist Alawite scholars make serious efforts to foster doctrinal rapprochement with Twelver Shiism. As for the Baathist regime, its partnership with Twelver Shiism started after Hafez al-Assad's coming to power in 1970.

As the first non-Sunni president of a country whose constitution requires that the head of state be a Muslim, Assad sought *fatwas* affirming the Alawites' affiliation with Islam. He never obtained such *fatwas* from Syrian Sunni clerics, even the most obsequious among them, but rather from foreign Twelver Shia scholars who were indebted to him for political reasons: Hasan al-Shirazi, an Iraqi opponent who sought refuge in Syria, and Musa al-Sadr, the founder of the Syrian-sponsored Lebanese Amal movement. Assad's network of Shia partners vastly expanded after 1979 when he established a strategic alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its Lebanese extension, Hezbollah.³

Thanks to their excellent relations with the Syrian regime, various foreign Twelver Shia networks were allowed to

open several *hawzat* (seminaries) in the Damascene suburb of Sayyida Zaynab. They also rebuilt, at great expense and according to the canons of Persian architecture, the shrines of key figures of Shia hagiography, such as the Prophet's relatives Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyida Ruqqaya in Damascus, and the Companions Ammar bin Yasir and Uways al-Qarni in the north central city of al-Raqqa. By 2011, these sites had been visited by hundreds of thousands of foreign Shia pilgrims every year.

Early on, Shia institutions in Syria were suspected of working for the conversion of Sunnis, a goal some Shia clerics were in fact not really trying to conceal. Although they did not achieve significant success in that endeavor, individual—and, in one village of the Euphrates valley, collective—conversions grabbed people's attention. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, anti-Shia resentment spread among Sunni Syrians, along with rumors of "Shiitization" (*tashayyu'*) in the country. The regional context—a Sunni-Shia civil war in Iraq and looming sectarian tensions in Lebanon—provided fertile ground for such apprehensions. They were fed, as well, by propaganda efforts on the part of both radical and moderate Syrian Islamist opponents and other enemies of Assad in the region. Anxiety in the face of Shiite activities was such that even a loyal regime ally like Dr. al-Buti dedicated a Friday sermon to denouncing the Syrian authorities' permissiveness with respect to Shia missionaries.

The Consequences of Economic Liberalization

Regardless of the tensions generated by the post-2008 crackdown and by rumors of Shiitization, the partnership between the regime and the *ulama* was being structurally consolidated as a result of the process of economic liberalization that had accelerated earlier in the decade. Although the "opening" (*infatih*) of the Syrian economy—meaning opening it to private investment—formally started in the 1970s, it remained extremely limited until the rule of Bashar al-Assad. Under his aegis, the Syrian economy officially moved from socialism to a "social market economy," and experienced such radical changes as the launching of private banks and the establishment of a legal framework aimed at stimulating foreign direct investment.

Although economic liberalization and the post-2003 oil boom primarily enriched a handful of regime cronies (such as Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf), it also benefited businessmen of lower standing—including the small- and medium-sized "pious bourgeoisie," along with members of old merchant families who had traditionally provided

the *ulama* with the resources required to sustain their mosques, seminaries, and charities. Donations to religious institutions thus skyrocketed after 2003 because of the oil boom and economic liberalization, and also increased as a result of the support of regime cronies trying to buy themselves some respectability. Such was the case, for example, with respect to Muhammad Hamshu, the brother-in-law of Bashar al-Assad's brother Mahir and an "independent" member of Parliament (meaning, non-affiliated with the Baath or one of its satellite parties). Hamshu spent millions of pounds in support of religious activities, and many *ulama* reciprocated the favor by supporting him during his electoral campaigns.

Economic liberalization also benefited the *ulama* by giving some of them a prominent role in newly founded Islamic banks. The Sharia boards of these banks recruited prestigious religious figures as well as experts in Islamic finance in order to appeal to potential customers. In the end, therefore, the neo-liberal turn in the economy strengthened the *ulama's* relationship with Syrian economic elites and, through the latter, with the political and military establishment.

Sunni Islam and the 2011 uprising

As a result of the contradictory dynamics discussed above, the Sunni elites in Syria did not react to the 2011 crisis in a unified fashion. Whereas the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist opponents unsurprisingly lent full support to a movement that offered an opportunity to finally break the Baath's monopoly on state power, the *ulama* were divided.

Long-standing allies of the regime, such as Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassun as well as al-Buti, put aside the grievances provoked by the regime's recent "anti-religious" policies: Being deeply involved in the incumbent system, they had much to lose from Assad's disappearance. Al-Buti immediately denounced the protest as a foreign conspiracy and went so far as to praise the Syrian military at a time when it was already responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians. Al-Buti died in a bomb attack while giving a mosque lesson in March 2013. Very few scholars were as vocal as al-Buti in their support for the regime, but many merely warned against "discord" or took refuge in silence.

On the other side of the struggle, revolutionary *ulama* first emerged in secondary cities that were in the forefront of the uprising, such as Daraa in the south, Homs in the center, and Baniyas on the coast. In Damascus and Aleppo, which witnessed only limited demonstrations during the first months of the uprising, Friday preachers were

considerably more measured in their rhetoric; but some of them nevertheless stood out as particularly outspoken, and consequently attracted anti-regime crowds. In the capital, the mosques of two of the city's most respected scholars, Osama al-Rifa'i and Krayyim Rajih, served as a starting points for several demonstrations. Although they did not initially call for the overthrow of Assad, these preachers totally rejected the regime narrative of the uprising (which attributed it to "armed gangs" remote-controlled from abroad); asserted the legitimacy of democratic demands; and blamed the police for the violence. Unsurprisingly, such challenges to the state generally came from former opponents (al-Rifa'i had spent fifteen years in exile) who had reconciled with the regime only recently, and had subsequently maintained ambiguous relations with the authorities.

After five months of hesitation, the regime cracked down on Damascus' rebellious preachers. After these preachers' fierce criticism of the army's intervention in the cities of Hama and Deir ez-Zor, dissenter *ulama* were banned from preaching, and al-Rifa'i was even physically assaulted by regime thugs. Many expected that this sacrilegious aggression against an immensely respected religious scholar would trigger outraged protest that would shatter the regime's control over Damascus. Yet, surprisingly, very little happened: Demonstrations were witnessed in the populous suburbs of the capital, which were already revolutionary strongholds, but downtown Damascus remained calm, even though the affluent neighborhoods of the city center were home to the majority of al-Rifa'i's followers. The sheikh's most enthusiastic supporters did not hide their feeling of betrayal in light of the passivity of those who, but a few days before, were still thronging to kiss the hand of their spiritual leader.

What this episode revealed was the importance of social and economic factors in the uprising. The protest movement was clearly dominated by the losers from economic reforms, such as peasants who felt abandoned by the once socialist regime and inhabitants of the cities' lower-class suburbs. The *ulama* belonged to the "other Syria"—that is, to that part of society that had thrived as a result of liberalization. Those among them who supported the revolt out of conviction were forced to acknowledge that they were receiving little, if any, support from most of their wealthy followers.

Class interest thus accounted for the (at least passive) loyalty to the regime exhibited by the Sunni bourgeoisie of Damascus and Aleppo. But the situation changed significantly in the late spring of 2012. Merchant strikes were witnessed in Damascus for the first time, and rumor had it that Bashar al-Assad had threatened prominent

members of the merchant community that he would "break the old souk over their heads." It was in this context of deteriorating relations between the state and the bourgeoisie that many first-rank Damascene *ulama* decided to go into exile, and to openly embrace the revolutionary cause. Among them were Osama al-Rifa'i and Krayyim Rajih as well as the extraordinarily popular radio preacher Ratib al-Nabulsi. The latter explained that he had refrained until then from openly voicing his opposition to the regime because Syrian society was divided—and in particular because of the neutral stance adopted by the wealthy. Things had changed, he claimed, as society was now united in its opposition to Assad.⁴

Conclusion

The deadly battles witnessed in Damascus and Aleppo from the summer of 2012 on had contradictory consequences with respect to the political stance of Sunni economic elites. On the one hand, these events demonstrated that Bashar al-Assad was unable to maintain security in major urban centers, and that he was ready to turn them into rubble rather than lose them to the insurgents; a very large share of the country's business community consequently decided to relocate its activities abroad, particularly in Egypt. On the other hand, military developments showed that the rebels were unable to defeat the regime in its urban strongholds, and that even if they eventually proved able to do this, it would be at the price of the complete destruction of those cities. In Aleppo, moreover, the deep social divide between city dwellers and the predominantly peasant rebellion made many of the former anxious about the possibility of a rebel victory.

By the summer of 2012, the continuation of Assad's control over major urban centers had ceased to be a reflection of the popular support he had possibly enjoyed there. Increasingly, that control was the result of nothing more than brute military force, whose ever-growing use was made possible both by the recruitment of Alawite sectarian militias, which formed the basis of the National Defense Army established in early 2013, and by the support of Shia foreign fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah and the multinational Abu al-Fadl al-'Abbas Brigade. The regime's apparent inability to recruit any significant number of new Sunni soldiers was probably the best proof that sectarian polarization had destroyed Assad's pretensions to be able to exert a genuinely trans-sectarian leadership.

The standing of pre-2011 Sunni elites, too, had been irreparably damaged in the meantime. For decades, the urban Sunni middle and upper classes had provided both the most influential partners *and* foes of the regime from among Syrian society, be they *ulama*, businessmen,

or Islamic activists. After the uprising began, the role of these actors was at times visible, but never decisive. The long-suppressed Muslim Brotherhood took the lead with respect to the opposition's efforts abroad, and leading *ulama* who in the past had already expressed their discontent with the regime's crackdown on religious activities and tolerance for Shia proselytizing expressed support for demonstrators; but neither of these actors was a driving force behind a largely peripheral, lower-class uprising.

On the other side, Muslim scholars who had been more tightly coopted by the regime, along with much of the business class, helped hinder the spread of the protests in Damascus and Aleppo. But by 2013, the extreme level of militarization of the conflict had made such (dwindling) support a negligible factor in the survival of the regime. The war was now between the regime and new Sunni elites of an entirely different kind—that is, Islamist rebel leaders of rural and suburban origin. Thus, by early 2014, although the military stalemate had made the success of Syria's political revolution more uncertain than ever, the conflict had already brought about the deepest social upheaval in the country since the Baath's "revolution from above" in the 1960s.⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise specified, this Brief is based on my book *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 2 Interview with author, Damascus, June 19, 2006.
- 3 This section is based on my "Karbala in the Umayyad Mosque: Sunnite Panic at the 'Shiitization' of Syria in the 2000s," in *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships: Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media*, ed. Brigitte Maréchal and Sami Zemni (London: Hurst, 2013), pp. 99–116.
- 4 Thomas Pierret, "Les oulémas : une hégémonie religieuse ébranlée par la révolution," in *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie*, ed. François Burgat and Bruno Paoli (Paris: La Découverte, 2013).
- 5 Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

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