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# New Texts Out Now: Thomas Pierret, Religion and State in Syria



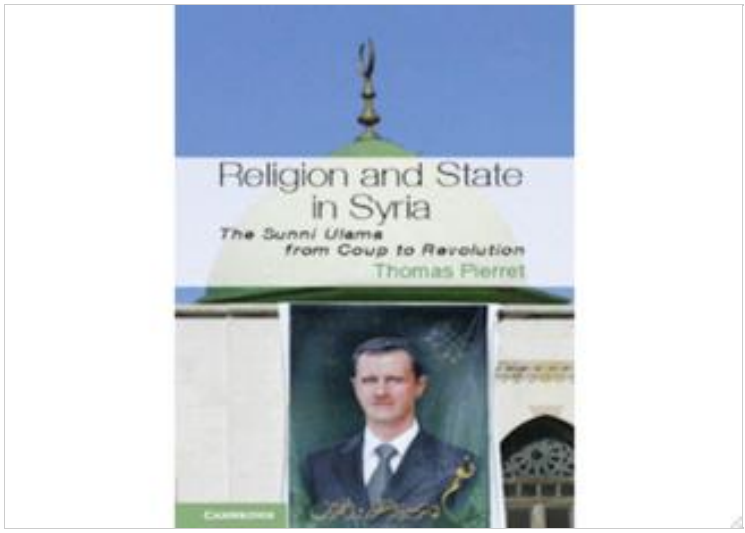
by Thomas Pierret Jun 12 2013

Listen

**Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.**

**Jadaliyya (J): What made you write this book?**

**Thomas Pierret (TP):** The main incentive was the dearth of scholarly literature on two issues I am interested in: the role of the ulama in contemporary societies, and Islam in Syria. Until the late 1990s, common wisdom had it that the ulama had suffered a significant decline throughout the twentieth century, to the extent that they were hardly worthy of interest for researchers. Consequently, the burgeoning of studies on modern Islam after the Iranian revolution in 1979 did not really translate into renewed interest in the ulama, who were largely overshadowed by Islamist movements in Western scholarship.




**[Cover of Thomas Pierret, "Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution"]**

My interest in this topic was sparked by the reading of the few available case-studies, as well as by preliminary research I did on Syria, which suggested that the ulama were very prominent on this country's religious scene. I found Syria all the more interesting in that very little was known about Islam there. The main reason for this lack of knowledge was the difficulty of researching such an issue after the bloody suppression of the 1979-1982 revolt, following which the regime imposed extremely severe restrictions on and strict monitoring of religious activities. A few valuable studies were available, which focused on the official side of Syrian Islam as well as on topics such as Sufism and reformist thought, but I wanted to go beyond that.

**J: What particular topics, issues, and literatures does the book address?**

**TP:** The book provides a social and political history of the Syrian Sunni religious elite in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It analyzes this elite's social background, its transformations, its modes of organization, its written production, its outreach activities (proselytizing, charity), its internal fault lines (factionalism, the Sufi-Salafi divide), as well as its relations with the economic and political-military elites. My main argument is that the resources of Islamic tradition allowed the ulama to overcome the challenges of social change and Ba'thist authoritarianism. Whereas previous works on the ulama stressed that they were able to take advantage of the Islamic revival that started in the 1970s, I push the argument further by asserting that in Syria at least, they have in fact pioneered that movement.

**J: How does this book connect to and/or depart from your previous research?**

**TP:** My previous research project was devoted to al-Ahbash, a Lebanese Sunni Islamic movement. This study is another reason that led me to write a book on the Syrian ulama: because al-Ahbash is an ulama-led movement (contrary, for instance, to the Muslim Brothers, who tend to have a lay leadership), and because it has enjoyed excellent relations with the Syrian regime.

**J: Who do you hope will read this book, and what sort of impact would you like it to have?**

**TP:** The book addresses two main categories of readers. The first category comprises anyone wants to know more about the politics and society of modern Syria. Although the book focuses on the religious elite, it provides new insights on other issues such as the political system and the private sector—in fact, the book was flatteringly described as "an alternative history of modern Syrian politics" by Syria expert Raymond Hinnebusch. The second category of readers includes people with an interest in the anthropology, sociology, and politics of modern Islam in general. As I said above, the number of in-depth case studies on the contemporary ulama remains limited, and I think that this book constitutes a valuable contribution to that field of research, as well as to the broader debate on the transformations of religious authority in modern Muslim societies.

**J: What other projects are you working on now?**

**TP:** I am presently studying the role of religious actors in the current Syrian uprising. These religious actors include the grand ulama I studied in my book, but also newcomers who have emerged on the religious scene as a result of the ongoing uprising and conflict, such as provincial clerics and military leaders. I also have side-projects such as a history of Syrian Salafism in the twentieth century and a more theoretical reflection on the religious legitimization of authoritarian regimes.

**J: How does your book diverge from recent discussions on the role of Islam and sectarianism in Syria?**

**TP:** The conclusions I draw from my book lead me to take issue with widespread narratives about the current rise of Sunni Islamism, and in particular of Salafism in Syria. This phenomenon is usually perceived in a negative way, that is, as an expression of sectarian radicalization against religious communities. There is undeniably some truth in that, but it is a partial view of the problem. There is also a "positive" dimension to it: the expression of an identity that has been suppressed for decades, notably, as I show in the book, by imposing severe restrictions on religious practices and symbols that are considered as perfectly harmless in most other Muslim countries.

In my view, this is one of the reasons that explains why several of the first insurgent battalions established by defector officers in 2011 were given Islamic names, despite the fact that they were not displaying any specifically Islamist agenda. The army is probably the most aggressively anti-religious institution in the Syrian regime, which means that for defectors, choosing religious names for their battalions was part of a paradigmatic, revolutionary break with the past. Later on, in liberated areas, growing a beard, adopting a Salafi style, and raising the black and white banner of the Prophet have been part of a process of self-assertion that does not necessarily amount to declaring war against those who do not share that religious identity, although of course this can be the case.

The rise of Salafism is also part of what I would call the "religious empowerment" of the Syrian peripheries (suburbs, small towns, and villages). Until 2011, the religious center— that is, the scholarly elite I study in the book—was very much rooted in traditional-Sufi Islam, and this was the case for both pro-regime and independent ulama. As for Salafi Islam, including its dominant quietist wing, it suffered genuine persecution at the hands of the regime and only survived in a kind of semi-underground fashion, often in the peripheries mentioned above. Seen from that point of view, the current rise of Salafism is not only a revenge against the regime and/or Alawite domination, but also a revenge of the social and geographical margins against the center. To a large extent, this is what this uprising is about.

There are some very telling examples. In Duma, an eastern suburb of Damascus and one of the very first strongholds of the uprising, the powerful rebel group Liwa al-Islam is led by Zahran Allush, the son of a Salafi sheikh who was barred from any religious activities since the mid-1990s. In Idlib, the equally influential insurgent organization Suqur al-Sham is led by Abu Issa, a long-standing Islamist militant and former political prisoner from the small and remote village of Sarja, whose mosque was run in 2011 by a Salafi cleric who had studied with Allush's father.

**J: How did the current uprising and conflict impact on the Syrian religious elite?**

**TP:** Syria has lost much of its religious elite since 2011, because many pro-revolution ulama were forced to go into exile, and because a couple of their pro-regime counterparts were assassinated, as was recently the case with Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti. But deeper structural changes have been ongoing over the last two years. The grand ulama have lost some credibility, either because they were silent or pro-regime, or because they went into exile and rarely managed to retain influence on the ground. It does not mean that they will not play a role in the future. They will remain the "religious arm" of the pious middle and upper classes, to which they are tied by a long-standing alliance I analyze in the book.

Some Syrians may also possibly look at the traditional ulama as a bulwark against extreme interpretations of Islam promoted by radical Salafi groups. Mouaz al-Khatib, the former head of the Syrian National Coalition and a member of the League of the Ulama of Sham, recently tried to convey that message: during a conference that was mostly attended by men of religion, he used elements from the traditional interpretation of Islamic law to condemn the execution of an adulterous woman by a rebel group.

**Excerpts from *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution***

> Whatever happens, however, the grand ulama will be faced with a radically different environment from the one they knew before 2011. The uprising has made the Syrian religious scene considerably more open and diverse. Whereas in the past state repression resulted in the fact that the hegemony of the grand ulama was virtually unchallenged, the current upheaval has led to the emergence of alternative centers of religious authority: minor clerics from peripheral areas whose legitimacy relies on their role in the revolution and armed struggle, exiles using the media to build themselves an audience inside the country (a pattern best illustrated by the famous Salafi TV preacher Adnan al-'Ar'ur), as well as religious-political movements like the Muslim Brothers, who had no presence inside Syria since their annihilation by the regime in 1982, and of course Salafi organizations like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.
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> […]
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> The new media also allowed for the involvement of actors who over recent decades had been excluded from the Syrian religious debate by the combined efforts of the state and the religious elite: the Salafis. By far the most prominent of this group was ‘Adnan al-‘Ar‘ur (b. 1948), a Hama-born, Saudi-based TV sheikh who had made a name for himself over the previous five years with his anti-Shiite programmes. As soon as demonstrations started in Der‘a, al-‘Ar‘ur reoriented his media effort to support the uprising with the programme *With Syria Until Victory* (Ma‘a Suriya hatta al-nasr) on al-Wisal channel.
>
> Al-‘Ar‘ur rapidly acquired considerable popularity among the protesters: he was frequently praised by crowds during demonstrations,[1] and his call on Syrians to defy the forces of represssion by shouting “God is great” from their rooftops at night was highly successful. Key to this success was the preacher’s populist, informal style, which stood in sharp contrast to the solemn attitude of his colleagues. He used both (very simple) classical Arabic and the Syrian dialect, and his tone alternated between laughter and tears, calm and anger. Especially striking was the cheering smile he wore when dealing with one of the main concerns of an audience regularly faced with live fire: death and martyrdom.
>
> Al-‘Ar‘ur’s imprecations were not reserved for the regime and its allies among the clergy, but also targeted the Syrian National Council. Although initially supportive of the organization he gradually turned against it, accusing its members of being more concerned with sharing its seats between them than with practical support for the revolutionaries. By February 2012, al-‘Ar'ur was calling on exiled defector officers to set up a body that would constitute an alternative political leadership for the revolution.
>
> For a regime eager to portray the revolution as a fanatical Sunni movement, the fact that a Salafi preacher was one of the most prominent media figures of the opposition was a godsend. Official and semi-official media presented al-‘Ar‘ur as the mastermind of the uprising,[2] with some success, since *al-‘ara‘ira* (lit. ‘the ‘Ar‘urs’) became a common nickname for opponents among regime supporters.
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> The “star” of *With Syria Until Victory* was demonized and portrayed as a bloodthirsty sectarian agitator whose programs were said to consist of hate-filled diatribes and fatwas ordering the murder of the Alawites and the rape of their womenfolk. The reality was somewhat different. During the first year after the beginning of the uprising, al-‘Ar‘ur made only one really controversial statement concerning the Alawites, and it was one in which he specifically targeted those who had “violated sanctities,” a probable reference to the rape of women:
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> > The problem resides in the fact that the regime has succeeded in seducing a small number of minorities into supporting it…I would like to mention in particular the Alawite community: no harm will be done to those who remained neutral [during the revolution]; as for those who supported the revolution, they will be with us… however, those who violated sanctities, [here he rises from his chair and points a threatening finger to the camera], we will chop their flesh and feed them to dogs.
>
> This gruesome statement had such a negative impact among Alawites that it largely overshadowed al-‘Ar‘ur’s

references to the “noble” Alawites who were opposing the regime,[3] as well as his endorsement of an open letter addressed to the religious community of the president by the Muslim Brothers and the League of Syrian Ulama, in which it was stated that “none would be condemned on the basis of his communal identity” after the revolution.[4]

By early 2012, al-‘Ar‘ur’s popularity looked likely to continue to rise among Syrian revolutionaries because of a lack of competitors: the grand ulama living inside Syria were either pro-regime, silent, or pathetically helpless, and their exiled non-Salafi colleagues had failed to set up such powerful media outlets as *With Syria Until Victory*. Moreover, internal rivalries were badly damaging the credibility of the Syrian National Council, whereas the brigades of the Free Syrian Army, of which al-‘Ar‘ur was a vocal supporter, were now seen by many as the true depositories of revolutionary legitimacy.

NOTES

[1] In Der‘a, 27 April 2011; in Homs, 4 June 2011.

[2] See for instance “Istijabatan li-da‘wat al-‘Ar‘ur … ighlaq al-mahal al-tijariyya fi Hama bi-quwwat al-tahdid” [In response to the call of al-‘Ar‘ur … closing of shops under threat in Hama] (16 July 2011).

[3] See for instance this dialogue with an Alawite opponent, 16 September 2011.

[4] Thomas Pierret, “Des islamistes syriens tendent la main à la communauté alaouite,” 4 October 2011.

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