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Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba‘thi Syria

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Given the ruthless repression of lay Islamic activists, Sunni clerics have come to occupy a hegemonic position on Syria’s religious scene. By actively supporting the regime, some of these clerics (‘*ulama*) have been able to monopolise access to official institutions and media, following the example of the late Grand Mufti Ahmad Kaftaru and the Kurdish-born scholar Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti. In its quest for legitimacy, however, the Ba‘thi regime of President Bashshar al-Asad has been forced to widen its support base by giving freer rein to previously hostile but popular religious trends. Relying on two years of fieldwork among Syrian Islamic circles,[1] this article aims to scratch the surface of ‘official Islam’ and shed light on lesser-known players whose role is likely to increase in the future.

The scope of this article is limited to people commonly considered to be *‘ulama*. In contemporary Syria, the category is loosely defined, since it supposes neither official appointment nor graduation from an Islamic university. Rather, the social construction of this status is a complex process that involves formal and informal religious criteria, career orientation, self-presentation and family background. It consequently sometimes overlaps with the group of lay Islamic activists and intellectuals, who are not included in the present study.

In the absence of a unified public sphere, Syria’s *‘ulama* are fragmented into a number of local scenes that are marginally interconnected. Regional identities remain very strong, as illustrated by the proverbial antagonism between Damascus and Aleppo, which is still deeply felt in relations between the two cities’ religious elites. The choice made here to focus on the country’s two largest urban centres results not only from practical considerations but also from the fact that tight control by the security apparatus in smaller cities and towns, including Homs and Hama, restrains both the clergy’s dynamism and the possibilities for field research.

Informal Networks

Most Syrian *'ulama* adhere to a text-oriented version of Sufi Islam,[2] because state repression helped this trend to marginalise its Salafi rival. The main gatekeeper of this orthodoxy is Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti,[3] who is also the chief mediator between the regime and the Sunni clergy. As a result, he has come to occupy a kind of 'papal' position. The latter implies that he is not clearly identified with any particular network, making him different from the vast majority of the country's Sunnni clerics, who generally belong to Sufi brotherhoods and more influential groups known as *jama'at*.

Sufi Brotherhoods and *Jama'at*

In the second half of the twentieth century, Syria's Sunni scholars were mainly affiliated with the Shadhili and Naqshbandi orders.[4] The former is frequently dubbed al-Hashimiyyah after Muhammad al-Hashimi (d. 1961), an Algerian shaikh who spread the order throughout the country.[5] Thanks to the latter's charisma, as well as to the Shadhiliyyah's distinctly elitist orientation, this Sufi way became a favourite one among local *'ulama* and the urban middle class. In the capital, al-Hashimi's main contemporary successors are Hisham al-Burhani, a renowned Hanafi jurist who lived in exile in the United Arab Emirates until 1993, as well as 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghuri (d. 2004). Al-Shaghuri was the most prestigious Shadhili shaikh of his time and many Damascene *'ulama* recognised him as a spiritual master. His deputies are even found in Aleppo, most notably Mahmud al-Husaini, a rising star of the local religious scene, that is, on the other side of the generally rigid north–south divide. In central and northern Syria, al-Hashimi's deputy was 'Abd al-Qadir 'Isa (d. 1991), who went into exile during the uprising of the late 1970s. His successor Ahmad Fathallah Jami still lives in Turkey but several of his disciples are prominent Sunni scholars in Aleppo (Nadim al-Shihabi, Bakri al-Hayyani) and Homs (Sa'id al-Kahil, the shaikh of the city's Grand Mosque, and 'Adnan al-Saqqa, who became the leading figure of the city's clergy after his return from exile in 2000).

Syrian branches of the Shadhili order have always retained 'traditional' structures, that is, non-centralised networks which almost inevitably fragment among the leading disciples of the shaikh after he dies. In contrast, by adding a sense of social mission to the transmission of religious knowledge, several – mostly Naqshbandi-

affiliated – scholars have managed to create more cohesive movements known as *jama'at*. The latter emerged in the middle of the twentieth century in the context of what was retrospectively called the 'awakening of the sheikhs', a traditionalist reaction to the spread of secular ideas. In a bid to 'bring society back onto the path of Islam', some of these shaikhs concentrated on setting up formal schools to teach the future religious elite, like Hasan Habannaka (d. 1978) and Salih al-Farfur (d. 1986) in Damascus, as well as 'Abdullah Siraj al-Din (d. 2004) in Aleppo. All of these *'ulama* had Sufi affiliations and their authority relied more on vertical spiritual ties than on the functional structures they set up. Two of their peers, Ahmad Kaftaru (d. 2004) in Damascus and Muhammad al-Nabhan (d. 1974) in Aleppo, were famous both as founders of successful educational institutions and as heads of large Naqshbandi brotherhoods, which spread respectively to Beirut (under the direction of Kaftaru's disciple Rajab Dib)[6] and to the Iraqi province of al-'Anbar.

Leaders of other *jama'at* more exclusively relied on a Sufi-inspired organisational model and developed no formal structures. Instead they based their action entirely on spiritual bonds, informal circles (*halaqat)* and daily lessons in the mosque. Their goal was not to train religious specialists but rather to educate lay people in order to turn them into models of piety. The largest of these *jama'at* were led by two Naqshbandi-affiliated shaikhs, 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i (d. 1973) in Damascus (Jama'at Zayd) and Ahmad al-Bayanuni (d. 1975) in Aleppo (Jama'at Abi Dharr),[7] both of which attracted hundreds of young people stemming from the educated middle class.

The political positions of the *jama'at* evolved in very different ways. The groups established by Kaftaru, al-Farfur, Siraj al-Din and al-Nabhan maintained good – or at least satisfactory – relations with the authorities, with the result that they have remained to date the main private provider of formal Islamic teaching in the country. However, whereas Kaftaru was appointed Grand Mufti in 1964, his rival Habannaka (whose group was named Jama'at al-Midan after the neighbourhood that constituted its stronghold) became the spearhead of the religious opposition to the Ba'th Party. He was briefly jailed in 1967 and his al-Tawjih al-Islami institute was shut down. As for Zayd and Abi Dharr, they were dragged into the 1979–82 Islamist uprising after some of their young adepts succumbed to the calls of militant groups. Abi Dharr was annihilated and one of its rare remnants is Ahmad al-Bayanuni's son Abu al-Fath. A prominent academic in Saudi Arabia, he was allowed to settle in Aleppo in 2006 and was quickly reinstated as a distinguished member of the local religious elite. As for Zayd, it suffered

badly from state repression during the 1980s and its leaders were forced to take refuge in Jiddah. It survives thanks to older and second-rank shaikhs who were allowed to remain in Syria. In order to lessen the resentment of Zayd's wide popular base, which includes a significant part of Damascus's merchant middle class, al-Rifa'i's sons 'Usama and Sariya were allowed to come back in the mid 1990s and progressively rebuilt the movement. After the 2000 presidential succession, the 'new' regime turned to them to improve its shaky legitimacy and Zayd was allowed to expand its charitable activities**.** With 20 to 30 mosques and very popular shaikhs who attract thousands of people to its weekly gatherings, most notably the al-Rifa'i brothers and Na'im al-'Arqsusi, Zayd is by far the most popular religious trend in Damascus today.

Mosque Politics

Given the state's lack of economic and symbolic resources, the process of bureaucratisation of the Syrian clergy has remained embryonic. Of course, the economic and political power of the ministry of religious endowments (*awqaf*) is considerable, as it possesses gigantic properties and is responsible for the appointment – and dismissal – of mosque personnel.[8] At the same time, its relative isolation from the actual religious elite severely curtails its ability to set up a credible state-sponsored clergy. In fact, the Ba'thi regime has never even tried to produce its own brand of religious scholars: Syria has no institution like al-Azhar in Cairo, and the only state-owned school for higher Islamic studies is the Shari'ah Faculty of the University of Damascus which, as will be shown below, was never a proper incubator for an Islamic bureaucracy. Most Syrian *'ulama* still emerge as the result of complex, informal processes of social recognition that take place inside the 'infrastructure' of the religious scene, rather than from administrative appointments.

As a consequence, the regime's preferred strategy for managing the Sunni elite has been the co-optation of personalities who have a genuine social base, rather than merely manufacturing 'Ba'thi shaikhs' out of the void. The best illustration of this policy is the decade-old alliance between the authorities and the late Ahmad Kaftaru, whose popularity preceded – and survived – his 1964 regime-imposed appointment as Grand Mufti. Informal partnership with Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti is another good

example, since the latter managed to balance his vocal support for the two al-Asads and the preservation of his credibility among local religious circles. Even presently isolated pro-regime clerics such as the Islamic member of parliament Muhammad Habash stem from larger *jama'at* and have achieved significant popularity before 'burning their wings' by moving too close to the state.

Such a strategy has brought only limited results, since even the powerful Kaftaru network never managed to establish itself solidly outside its historic stronghold in northern Damascus. Consequently, the regime had to rely on religious actors who could be called quietist rather than enthusiastic supporters, like al-Farfur's group in Damascus and al-Nabhan's in Aleppo, whose shaikhs filled part of the void created by the repression of the 1980s uprising. The former trend is probably the most widespread in the capital's suburbs while the second has trained today's most famous preachers in Aleppo, namely Mahmud al-Hut, 'Abd al-Hadi Badla and Nabih Salim. In Damascus, even rebellious *jama'at* like Zayd and al-Midan have never been rooted out of their traditional fiefdoms.

In order to understand the regime's inability to 'format' the religious scene according to its own interests, it is necessary to stress the fact that the central administration's power to appoint mosque staff is limited. The government has no candidates of its own to fill the posts and only offers nominal salaries, whereas existing religious networks can provide trained clerics and substantial economic resources. In addition, thanks to its social capital and financial incentives, the *'ulama*–merchants nexus exerts significant pressure on the administration and security apparatuses alike.

Formal Institutions

In the wake of the limited liberalisation of the regime's religious policy that started in the early 2000s, educational institutions, charities and mass media have increasingly represented the different trends that can be found in Syria's Islamic scene. This process now also involves administrative and political structures.

Formal Schools

Formal Islamic teaching is mainly represented by secondary *shari'ah* institutes. In the larger cities, most of these schools were established before 1963 and are controlled by the *jama'at* and the families that established a hold on the religious scene in the middle of the last century: in Damacus, al-Ansar (Kaftaru), al-Fath (al-Farfur), al-Furqan (Zayd), al-Gharra (al-Daqr) and al-Tahdhib wal-Ta'lim (al-Khatib);[9] in Aleppo, besides the state-owned Khusrawiyyah, the two main ones are al-Nabhan's al-Kiltawiyyah (now headed by the popular preacher Mahmud al-Hut) and Siraj al-Din's al-Sha'baniyyah (directed by Nur al-Din 'Itr, Siraj al-Din's son-in-law and Syria's leading scholar in the study of the traditions of the Prophet [*hadith*]).

In the last few years, *détente* between the regime and the religious elite has resulted in the opening of new *shari'ah* institutes in Damascus at a rate unseen since the March 1963 revolution. In order to alleviate the popular but distrustful students of Hasan Habannaka, the authorities have begun to hold out the prospect of allowing the reopening of his al-Tawijh al-Islami institute, which was closed in 1967. Certain local observers see a co-ordinated move in the 2007 appointment of Hasan, the son of Mustafa al-Bugha, as the head of the Shari'ah Faculty 'of Damascus University. Mustafa al-Bugha, the most prominent student of Habannaka still living, was privately visited twice by President Bashshar al-Asad, an extremely rare honour for a Sunni scholar. Al-Bugha now routinely occupies top-level positions at official religious ceremonies.

Traditional *jama'at* also run the two only private Syrian institutes for higher Islamic studies, the Shaikh Ahmad Kaftaru Academy (formerly known as Abu al-Nur and now headed by Kaftaru's son Salah al-Din) and the al-Fath Institute (directed by Salih al-Farfur's son Husam), that was allowed to open an academic section in 1991.

As for Damascus University's Shari'ah Faculty, it has never constituted a reliable means to train a religious elite loyal to the state. It is thus a marginal producer of mosque personnel, since derisory salaries do not render this career very attractive for university graduates. Beside academic functions in Syria and abroad, many alumni choose to work as religious teachers in secondary schools or engage in business activities. For the same economic reasons, the latter are also practised by those who end up as mosque preachers or teachers, but for them graduation from the faculty is no more than a means to improve their academic credentials. It is neither necessary nor

sufficient to obtain such positions, which is generally accomplished through the backing of established *'ulama*.

The problem posed by the faculty is also political. Despite failed attempts at Ba'thisation in the 1980s,[10] this institution founded in 1954 by the Muslim Brothers has continuously included professors known either for their political independence (such as the present Mufti of Aleppo Ibrahim al-Salqini) or for their sympathy for the Muslim Brothers (Wahba al-Zuhaili). It has also attracted scholars who belong to previously repressed traditionalist currents like Habannaka's student Mustafa al-Bugha and the Shadhili shaikh Hisham al-Burhani, who joined the teaching staff immediately after his return from exile in 1993. Some of these scholars owe their rather unexpected appointment to the support of the influential al-Buti, who has taught there for almost half a century. Moreover, the faculty appears to be a nursery for reformist, politically minded Islamic intellectuals like 'Imad al-Din al-Rashid, the young vice dean of the faculty, whose 'Muslim democratic' views are avowedly influenced by the experience of the Turkish AKP.

Charitable Associations

The 1963 revolution made the foundation of Islamic charities extremely difficult and several of them were banned in the wake of the 1979–82 uprising. As a result, most of Syria's Islamic charities go back to the pre-Ba'th era and are often controlled by the *jama'at* that emerged during that period. Since the 1990s, however, charitable activities have grown in number and scale as a result of worsening economic and social conditions.[11]

Given its underlying legitimacy problem, the regime is in no position to extract spontaneous donations from society. Moreover, traditionally regime-friendly Islamic networks such as Kaftaru's have relied on too narrow a social base to bear the burden of welfare privatisation by themselves. As a result, the regime has allowed the takeover of Damascus's charitable sector by the Zayd movement, because of the latter's popularity among the merchant middle class and its ability to attract funds from the private sector. Relying on a network of neighbourhood associations set up in the 1950s, Zayd has launched the Hifdh al-Ni'ma (Preservation of Grace) project, which collects surpluses of food, medicine, clothes, furniture and books to aid more than 6,000 families. In 2006, Zayd-linked businesspeople were allowed to take control of the Union of Charitable Associations in Damascus, which co-ordinates and represents the

city's charities. Since 1997, the union also set up large-scale projects such as Sunduq al-'Afiya (The Health Fund), which covers surgical expenses, and Sunduq al-Mawadda wal-Rahmah (The Love and Mercy Fund) that subsidises marriages.

Media

Syria is one of the less hospitable Arab countries for Islamic mass media. In the mainly state-owned daily press, the only religious column is that of Muhammad Habash, which comes out every Friday in the official *al-Thawrah.* In the 2000s, Habash emerged as a prominent personality in Syrian and global media as well as in local parliamentary politics. The son-in-law of Kaftaru, he was expelled from the latter's circle because of his liberal positions regarding women's status and inter-faith relations.[12] Since then, his estrangement from the conservative religious elite has been matched by his *rapprochement* with the regime and he increasingly appears as the government's unofficial public information officer.

As for monthly journals, the ministry of religious endowments's *Nahj al-Islam* ('The Way of Islam') is the only one to have been authorised since the early 1980s. Conceived at first as an ideological weapon against the Muslim Brothers, *Nahj al-Islam* subsequently watered down its tone and now increasingly welcomes authors from outside the narrow circle of notoriously pro-regime clerics, such as Zayd's Sariya al-Rifa'i. In the private realm, disciples of Ahmad Kaftaru have actively sought to bypass restrictions on Islamic press. Between 1996 and 2002, they printed the monthly *Sada al-Iman* ('The Echo of the Faith') in Beirut and, in 2006, they obtained authorisation to release the 'generalist' *al-Ijtima'iyyah* ('The Social Review'), which dealt extensively with religious issues. However, it was forbidden the following year, after one of its editorials called on readers to 'urinate' on the radical secularist intellectual Nabil Fayyad.[13]

Until the 2000s, appearances by Sunni scholars on official audio-visual radio and television programmes were limited to a select few pro-regime clerics like al-Buti and Kaftaru's right-hand man, Marwan Shaikhu (d. 2001). During the present decade, the state monopoly in this realm has been formally broken, thanks to the extensive religious programmes broadcast by Radio al-Quds of Ahmad Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command, which include the extraordinarily popular lessons of Ratib al-Nabulsi. The latter is a peculiar phenomenon on the local

religious scene, since he is an independent shaikh and does not belong to any *jama'a*; his fame comes exclusively from his media performances.

As for television, Muhammad Habash was responsible for the religious transmissions made by the first, but short-lived (2006–07), private Syrian channel *al-Sham* of the Idlib businessman and deputy Akram al-Jundi. Since 2007, the Kuwait-based *al-Risalah* satellite channel has aired mosque lessons by a dozen Syrian Sunni scholars who were chosen according to their popularity, like Zayd's 'Usama al-Rifa'i and Na'im al-'Arqsusi.

Heads of the Religious Administration

The purely religious authority of top religious civil servants is at best marginal. The Grand Mufti and his subordinates rarely issue the kind of widely publicised edicts (*fatwa*s) that are common in Egypt. Instead, most of the activities of the head of Syrian Sunni Islam consists of 'faith-based diplomacy' through incessant journeys abroad and welcoming foreign delegations. In the absence of any real autonomy that would allow official religious figures to express themselves on social and political issues, the only rationale for issuing *fatwa*s would be to answer the regime's wishes. Except when in dire need – for instance during the 1979–82 uprising – the authorities have avoided inscribing their decisions in an Islamic normative framework that might prove constraining in the long term.

The current policy of appointment to official religious positions reflects both the authorities' continued reliance on their most loyal partners and a slow, calculated opening towards more distant ones. Kaftaru's succession clearly followed the first trend: when he died in September 2004, rumours evoked the possibility of his replacement by a prominent 'non-Kaftari' Damascene religious figure like al-Buti or Wahba al-Zuhaili**.** However, the regime was just entering a period of deep internal and foreign crisis, with the result that it was unwilling to reinforce the already too powerful religious establishment of the capital. The government found the issue so delicate that it waited almost a year and eventually bypassed the legal procedure of election by the Higher Council for Ifta, instead appointing the new Mufti by presidential decree. The beneficiary was the young Mufti of Aleppo, Ahmad Hassun, the son of Adib Hassun (d. 2008), Muhammad al-Nabhan's leading deputy as a Sufi master. The first non-Damascene occupant of the post since its creation in 1947, Ahmad Hassun was more famous for his career as a member of parliament than for his scholarly credentials.[14]

Appointments to the post of minister of religious endowments illustrate the same cautiousness, since Ziad al-Ayyubi, a disciple of Ahmad Kaftaru, was replaced in 2007 by his assistant Muhammad al-Sayyid,[15] the former Mufti of Tartus and son of ‘Abd al-Sattar al-Sayyid, a long-time supporter of the regime who headed the same ministry between 1971 and 1980.

At the local level, however, the picture is more nuanced. In Damascus, the Shafi‘i and Hanafi *ifta* have been handed over to representatives of, respectively, the Kaftaru trend (Bashir al-Bari, since 1986) and the al-Fath Institute (‘Abd al-Fattah al-Bazam, since 1993). Since early 2008, the latter current also headed the directorship of the city’s religious endowments (Ahmad Qabbani), but a new player made an appearance through the appointment of a shaikh of the Zayd movement (Ziad al-Musalli) to be director of the Damascus countryside’s religious endowments. As for Aleppo’s Islamic scene, it has been dominated until recently by the sons of two prominent disciples of al-Nabhan, Muhammad al-Shami (d. 1980) and Adib Hassun. When the former was assassinated by Islamic militants, he was succeeded at the head of religious endowments by his son Suhaib. The latter was dismissed in 2005 after his arch-rival, Hassun’s son Ahmad, left his position as Mufti of Aleppo to become Grand Mufti of the Republic. Al-Shami was replaced by a Ba‘th Party member but in an opening move, the city’s muftiship was entrusted to the politically independent Ibrahim al-Salqini. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the latter was flanked with a more ‘reliable’ Second Mufti in the person of Mahmud ‘Akkam, another leading cleric of the post-1980 local religious scene. A former member of Abi Dharr, ‘Akkam received a doctorate in Paris under the supervision of Muhammad ‘Arkun. Once very popular among the educated youth, he has been increasingly reproached for his close ties with the authorities and interest in Shi‘i Islam. In 2006, he was entrusted with the supervision of the newly founded University of Aleppo’s Faculty of Shari‘ah.

Preaching at the Grand ‘Umayyad mosque in Damascus has traditionally been the responsibility of Kaftaru’s disciples, as well as members of the al-Khatib family, whose most outspoken representatives, Mu‘adh and his brother ‘Abd al-Qadir, were dismissed in 1995 and 2003 respectively. In early 2008, al-Buti was appointed as the mosque’s chief preacher and director of teaching. This decision constituted an important shift in relations between the regime and the Kurdish scholar, since it was the first time that the latter had accepted a prominent position in the religious administration. Al-Buti quickly left his mark on the institution by completely

reorganising the lesson schedule and appointing eminent *'ulama* from groups that were previously barred from teaching at the capital's most prestigious place of worship, like Krayyim Rajih and Mustafa al-Bugha (al-Midan) as well as 'Usama al-Rifa'i and Na'im al-'Arqsusi (Zayd). Correspondingly, al-Buti's promotion occurred at the expense of the regime's historically privileged Islamic partner, as none of the Kaftari shaikhs included in the previous schedule had his mandate renewed.[16]

Political Representation

In an authoritarian system like Syria's, the main access of religious actors to the authorities remains the *nasiha,* that is, private advice to the ruler. This role has been mainly played by al-Buti since he declared his open support for the regime during the 1979–82 uprising. Al-Buti's aid was of crucial importance because of his personal prestige, which resulted from the fact that he was among the very rare Arab writers to combine impeccable, Azhari scholarly credentials with a 'modern' literary style characteristic of contemporary Islamic literature. After 1980, because most of this literature was forbidden in Syria, al-Buti was the only major writer of the contemporary Islamic awakening *(sahwah*) whose books were easily available in the country's bookshops.

After coming out publicly for the regime, al-Buti has repeatedly praised the Syrian leadership in exchange for a progressive softening of restrictions on non-political Islamic activities and amnesty for some exiled Sunni scholars. At the same time, he has managed to retain credibility by refusing any material reward and formal position, at least until his 2008 appointment as the head of the 'Umayyad mosque.

As far as formal politics is concerned, Sunni *'ulama* have sat in the People's Assembly as 'independent' deputies since the early years of the al-Asad era. From 1980 onwards, all of them have been carefully chosen from among pro-regime clerics, following the example of Kaftaru's disciple Marwan Shaikhu, present Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassun, the late brother of Suhayb al-Shami 'Abd al-'Aziz (d. 2007) and Zakariya Salwaya of Latakia.

The coalitions of businessmen that overwhelmingly dominate the campaigns for independent seats frequently include Muslim scholars, as illustrated by the two winning lists in Damascus in April 2007. Whereas Muhammad Hamshu, a crony of the ruling family, enrolled 'Abd al-Salam Rajih, the dean of the Shari'ah Faculty of the Ahmad Kaftaru Academy, his rival Hashim al-'Aqqad allied with Muhammad Habash.

Hamshu's list managed to get the backing of the city's religious establishment but, in most cases, this was simply compensation for widely publicised pious donations rather than a mark of genuine political involvement.

In 2004–05, Muhammad Habash and Ahmad Kaftaru's son Salah took advantage of the regime's weakening to issue calls for democratic reform which, according to a common pattern of liberalising authoritarianism, would have favoured the clients of the regime. However, because of its cautiousness and distrust of parliamentary politics under Ba'thi rule, the majority of the clergy viewed the establishment of a syndicate of *'ulama* as a more suitable way to increase political influence. There already existed an Association of 'Ulama headed by Habash but this charitable and cultural organisation composed of second-rank clerics could not play such a role. In 2006, two factors pushed the regime to envisage the creation of a more convincing representation of the clergy: the religious elite had to be rewarded for its loyalty during the 2004–05 crisis, and a need was felt to answer the establishment of the League of the 'Ulama of Syria by Majid Makki, an exiled cleric from Aleppo with strong ties to the Muslim Brothers but whose moderate discourse was obviously aimed at attracting Syrian-based religious scholars. As a result, the League of the 'Ulama of Bilad al-Sham was founded in April 2006, whose headquarters and leadership were rather unsurprising (the Kaftaru Academy, with Wahba al-Zuhaili as president, and al-Buti as 'mastermind'). Nevertheless, the organisation was genuinely representative of all of Damascus's major Islamic networks.[17] The League could thus have been a very influential player, if political restrictions and internal rivalry had not led to its final paralysis a few weeks later.

Conclusion

The Syrian regime never possessed sufficient economic means and religious legitimacy to set up the institutional tools that would have enabled it to produce a Sunni clergy that was sympathetic to the Ba'th Party's ideological orientation. Consequently, the *'ulama* remained outside the state apparatus and nothing like an official 'Islamic bureaucracy' ever emerged. Rather, the authorities have dealt with existing religious networks whose social capital is produced by mechanisms that are mostly beyond the reach of the state. Therefore, official religious policy can only be conceived in terms of selection:

compliant actors have been rewarded, neutral ones tolerated and hostile trends suppressed. Such a course of action, however, is difficult to maintain in the long term, since the very partners whose loyalty was of crucial importance during the Islamic uprising of the late 1970s increasingly used their connections with the regime to intercede on behalf of formerly repressed religious players. As a result, exclusive support for a handful of compliant figures has progressively given way to a more pluralist policy of inclusion.

Bashshar al-Asad's leadership is going through a delicate transition in its relations with the Sunni clergy, as it slowly leaves the repressive context that followed the uprising and returns to the more permissive posture that prevailed in the 1970s. In the meantime, radical social and cultural transformation has turned the '*ulama* into a much more influential force than it had previously been. Formerly marginalised actors are no longer satisfied with mere tolerance but instead demand full normalisation on the basis of a true partnership. This means not only more freedom of action in the field of education, charitable activities and the mass media but also wider access to administrative positions and political representation. Such a process has improved the regime's short-run stability by widening its social base. In the future, however, balancing the Sunni clergy's demands against the reservations of the 'Alawi-dominated, secular-minded security apparatus and state intelligentsia may turn out to be an increasingly complicated game.

Notes

1. This article mostly relies on interviews with anonymous Syrian sources, which explains the limited number of references.
2. See Itzchak Weismann, 'Sufi Fundamentalism between India and the Middle East' in Martin Van Bruinessen and Julia Howell, eds. *Sufism and the 'Modern'*, London 2007, pp. 115–28.
3. Andreas Christmann, 'Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: A Portrait of Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan Al-Buti', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1998, pp. 149–69.
4. For a theoretically informed overview of Sufi brotherhoods in Syria, see Paulo Pinto, 'Sufism and the Political Economy of Morality in Syria', *Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 15, 2006, pp. 103–36.
5. Itzchak Weismann, 'The Shadhiliyya-Darqawiyya in the Arab East' in Eric Geoffroy, ed. *La Shadhiliyya – Une Voie Soufie dans le Monde*, Paris 2004.
6. Annabelle Böttcher, 'Official Islam, Transnational Islamic Networks, and Regional Politics: The Case of Syria' in Dietrich Jung, ed. *The Middle East and*

Palestine: Global Politics and Regional Conflict, New York 2004, pp. 125–50; Leif Stenberg, 'Young, Male, and Sufi Muslim in the City of Damascus' in Jorgen Baeck Simonsen, ed. *Youth and Youth Culture in the Contemporary Middle East*, Aarhus 2005, pp. 68–91.

7. Al-Bayanuni is the father of present Muslim Brothers' leader 'Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni. He was succeeded at the head of Abi Dharr by another of his sons, Abu al-Nasr (d. 1987).
8. Annabelle Böttcher, 'Le Ministère des Waqfs', *Maghreb – Machrek*, no. 158, 1997, pp. 18–30.
9. An important exception is the Badr al-Din al-Hasani Institute, which is more bureaucratically organised and open to various doctrinal trends.
10. Bernard Botiveau, 'La Formation des Oulémas en Syrie. La Faculté de Shari'a de l'université de Damas' in Gilbert Delanoue, ed. *Les Intellectuels et le Pouvoir: Syrie, Égypte, Tunisie, Algérie*, Cairo 1986, pp. 67–91.
11. Soukaina Boukhaima, 'Le Mouvement Associatif En Syrie' in Sarah Ben Nefissa, ed. *Pouvoirs et Associations dans le Monde Arabe*, Paris 2002, pp. 77–94.
12. Paul Heck, 'Religious Renewal in Syria: The Case of Muhammad Al-Habash', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2004, pp. 185–207.
13. *Al-Rayat* (Doha), 17 October 2004.
14. *Al-Mar'at al-Yawm* (Abu Dhabi), 16 April 2005 and *Akhbar al-Sharq* (London), 17 July 2005.
15. *Cham Press* (Damascus), 8 December 2007.
16. *Al-Thawrah*, 15 February 2008.
17. *Al-Ray al-'Amm* (Amman), 28 April 2006.