

Syria in Crisis

The Syrian Islamic Council

Posted by: THOMAS PIERRET

TUESDAY, MAY 13, 2014 3 PRINT PAGE

The Syrian Islamic Council (*al-majlis al-islami al-suri*, or SIC), which is aiming to become the chief opposition Sunni religious authority (*marjaiyya*) for the country, held its inaugural meeting in Istanbul on April 11 and 12. The SIC is currently composed of 128 delegates, 50 of whom are based in rebel-held areas inside Syria. It claims to represent 40 of the religious leagues and committees that have mushroomed in the country and in the diaspora since 2011.

Although the establishment of the SIC was supposed to constitute a show of unity on the part of Syrian religious scholars (ulema), the initiative rapidly proved divisive, particularly because of the withdrawal of Syria's largest rebel coalition, the Islamic Front. Nevertheless, the establishment of the SIC may be an important step toward the goal of consolidating a moderate Islamic axis within the opposition in the face of the large Salafi military factions.

The Role of the Syrian Ulema

Establishing a representative body has been a major concern of Syrian Muslim scholars since the ruling Baathist regime disbanded the League of the Ulema in 1963. In 2006, Muslim Brotherhood-aligned clerics in exile founded the League of the Syrian Ulema, whose chairman, Muhammad Ali Sabuni, featured prominently in the first meetings held by the opposition in Turkey in 2011. However, Sabuni's league suffered from its members being long cut off from Syria as well as from its distinctly northern character—most of its recruits originated from Aleppo and Hama.

From September 2012 onward, moreover, Sabuni's organization was overshadowed by Sheikh Muhammad Kurayyim Rajih's League of the Ulema of Sham (LUS), whose founders were prestigious scholars from Damascus and Homs who had fled repression by the Syrian regime. The LUS initially concentrated its efforts on the shaping of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the primary political body for the exiled opposition, providing it with its first president, Sheikh Moaz al-Khatib, in November 2013.

When Khatib resigned from the coalition five months later, loose coordination between Syrian religious leagues had started to develop in the form of joint statements, but ulema organizations were struggling to demonstrate their relevance. Indeed, radicalization was the order of the day in the face of Hezbollah's

growing involvement in the war, and the religious leagues' calls for jihad sounded like a mere attenuated echo of the hardline Islamists' rhetoric.

By late 2013, however, growing abuses by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, a jihadi opposition group known by the acronym ISIS, generated widespread popular backlash against jihadi extremism, thereby providing senior ulema with the opportunity to claim renewed relevance as beacons of moderation and wisdom.

By mid-November 2013—a month and a half before the launch of an anti-ISIS offensive by Syrian rebel groups—LUS Vice President Sheikh Osama al-Rifai was branding the ISIS as a “*takfiri* [prone to excommunicate others] and extremist” outfit manipulated by Syrian and Iranian intelligence. Al-Rifai reiterated these assertions after he was appointed head of the SIC in April 2013, insisting there was no place in Syria for the ISIS's “*takfiri* thought.” SIC board member Sheikh Yassir al-Masaddi concurrently stressed that Syrians are characterized by their inherent moderation.

Who's In?

The mainstay of the SIC is the LUS, which secured one-third of the board's 21 seats. In addition to al-Rifai and Vice President Moaz al-Khann, LUS representation within the SIC includes figures such as Moaz al-Khatib, immensely popular radio preacher Ratib al-Nabulsi, successful writer Abd al-Karim Bakkar, and head of the National Coalition's Mecca Pilgrimage Committee Abu al-Khayr Shukri.

The weight of the LUS within the SIC contributed to the overrepresentation of Damascene and Homs ulema, who account for more than half of the board's membership. Aleppo, which has witnessed very few defections by senior clerics over the last three years, has only two representatives in the SIC's executive body, including the president of the Front of the Ulema of Aleppo, Abdallah al-Salqini, the brother of the city's late mufti Ibrahim al-Salqini. Northern Syria is also represented on the board by the president of the Association of Kurdish Ulema, Hussein Abd al-Hadi.

After the LUS, the second most prominent component in the SIC is the Syrian National Movement (SNM) of Emad ad-Din al-Rashid, himself a board member, along with the SIC's spokesperson, Fida al-Majdhub. The SNM is a moderate Islamic-leaning group that has competed with the Muslim Brotherhood for membership within the National Coalition and the Syrian National Council, another political body for the opposition in exile. It has had some success, and the SNM-affiliated Badr Jamous currently holds the position of secretary general of the coalition.

In addition to Sufi-leaning traditionalist figures like al-Rifai, who is also the spiritual leader an educational movement called Jamaat Zayd, or Zayd's Group, and reformists like al-Khatib and al-Rashid, the SIC includes Salafis of Sururi obedience. They are activist (*haraki*) Salafis who differ from their quietist counterparts by their acceptance of contentious politics and from jihadis by their rejection of violence in domestic politics (except, of course, in Syria's case). Sururis are named after Syrian veteran ideologue Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abidin, a member of the LUS and the SIC's board.

The SIC board also features Muhammad al-Abda, another major reference for activist Salafis, as well as two members of the Islamic Committee of Sham (Khayrallah Talib and Fayiz al-Salah), a well-funded charity of Sururi obedience.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the SIC

Although the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and its satellite, the League of the Syrian Ulema, hailed the creation of the SIC, both organizations have taken a backseat in the initiative with Ahmad Hawwa, son of the late Islamist ideologue Said Hawwa, as their only representative on the board.

This is all the more remarkable given the key position secured by the rival SNM within the SIC. What

matters here is regionalism, not ideas. Many members of the LUS are ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood, but they enjoy much tighter relations with Issam al-Attar, the former leader of the now-extinct Damascene branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, than with the northerners who have been in control of the Brotherhood for four decades. Tellingly, Attar was quicker to express support for the SIC than the Brotherhood, and the warmth of his video-recorded address contrasted with the relatively distant tone of the Muslim Brotherhood's written statement of support.

In the second part of this piece, I will address the negative reactions generated by the establishment of the SIC among the Salafi-dominated Islamic Front and show that tensions between the two organizations are part of a broader struggle over the definition of religious and judicial authority in rebel-held areas.

Thomas Pierret is a lecturer in contemporary Islam at the University of Edinburgh and the author of Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution (Cambridge University Press, 2013). He has previously written for Syria in Crisis on the Geneva II Syrian peace process.

- ◀The Struggle for Religious Authority in Syria
- ▶The Syrian Constitution: Assad's Magic Wand