Atlantic Council
RAFIK HARIRI CENTER FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

RELIGION, IDENTITY,
AND
COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

CONVENER
Geneive Abdo

CO-AUTHOR
Nathan Brown

A WORKING GROUP REPORT OF THE MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY TASK FORCE

RELIGION, IDENTITY,
AND
COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

CONVENER
Geneive Abdo

CO-AUTHOR
Nathan Brown

September 2016

RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM WORKING GROUP

CONVENER
Geneive Abdo
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East

CO-AUTHOR
Nathan Brown
Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, George Washington Elliott School of International Affairs

WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Ahmed Abbadi - President, Mohammedia League of Moroccan Ulama

Rumee Ahmed - Assistant Professor of Islamic Law, University of British Columbia

Khalil Al-Anani - Adjunct Professor, Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies

Joseph Bahout - Visiting Scholar, Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Drew Christiansen - Senior Research Fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University

Mark Farha - Assistant Professor, Georgetown School of Foreign Service in Qatar

Fanar Haddad - Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

H.A. Hellyer - Nonresident Senior Fellow, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Atlantic Council

Ahmad Iravani - President, Center for the Study of Islam and the Middle East, Catholic University of America

Mehran Kamrava - Director, Center for Internatioanl and Regional Studies, Georgetown School of Foreign Service in Qatar

Humera Khan - Executive Director, Muflehun

Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee - Robert G. James Scholar at Risk Fellow, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University

Imad Salamey - Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, Lebanese American University

Chris Seiple - President Emeritus, Institute for Global Engagement

Emad El-Din Shahin - Hasib Sabbagh Distinguished Visiting Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies and Visiting Professor of Political Science, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The Middle East is seeing a century-old political order unravel, an unprecedented struggle for power within and between states, and the rise of extremist elements that have already exacted a devastating human and economic toll that the world cannot continue to bear. That is why we, in partnership with the Atlantic Council, have undertaken a bipartisan effort to advance the public discussion in the direction of a global strategy for addressing these and other, longer-term challenges confronting the region.

To that end, we convened in February 2015 a Middle East Strategy Task Force to examine the underlying issues of state failure and political legitimacy that contribute to extremist violence, and to suggest ways that the international community can work in true partnership with the people of the region to address these challenges. As Co-Chairs for this project, our emphasis is on developing a positive agenda that focuses not just on the problems of the region, but recognizes and seeks to harness its vast potential and empower its people.

We have undertaken this effort together with a diverse and high-level group of senior advisers from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, underscoring the truly international approach that is necessary to address this global problem and the need, first and foremost, to listen to responsible voices from the region. We approach this project with great humility, since the challenges facing the region are some of the most difficult that either of us has ever seen.

Engaging some of the brightest minds in the region and beyond, we organized five working groups to examine the broad topical issues that we see as essential to unlocking a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. These issues include:

- Security and Public Order

- Religion, Identity, and Countering Violent Extremism

- Rebuilding Societies: Refugees, Recovery, and Reconciliation

- Governance and State-Society Relations

- Economic Recovery and Revitalization

Over the course of 2015, each of these working groups discussed key aspects of the topic as they saw it, culminating in each case in a paper outlining the individual working group convener's conclusions and recommendations based on these discussions. This paper is the outcome of the working group on Religion, Identity, and Countering Violent Extremism, convened by Geneive Abdo, a Senior Nonresident Fellow at the Atlantic Council, with the support of co-author Nathan Brown, who serves as Director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at The George Washington University. We are extremely grateful to Geneive and Nathan for the time and dedication they offered to this project.

This paper represents Ms. Abdo's and Dr. Brown's personal conclusions. While these conclusions were greatly informed by the debates within the working group, this paper is not a consensus document and does not necessarily represent the views of each individual working group member. Nor does it necessarily represent our views as Co-Chairs, or those of the Senior Advisers to the project. Instead, this paper is intended as a think piece to spur further discussions of these matters.

We greatly appreciated Ms. Abdo's and Dr. Brown's bold examination of such an intensely sensitive and contested issue as religion and ideology in the Middle East. Their analysis of the nature of sectarianism in the region today, and how the sectarian divide interacts with conflict and politics is a nuanced and welcome contribution to the current debate. Furthermore, their consideration of the relationship between religion and the state in the Middle

East leads to unexpected and thought-provoking conclusions that provide important food for thought on how the West might more effectively approach the problem of extremism.

We have considered closely Ms. Abdo's and Dr. Brown's ideas in the process of preparing our Co-Chairs' final report, which will appear in November 2016. It is our hope that this concluding report, when it is released, will represent a constructive, considered, and above all, solutions-oriented approach to a region that we see as vital to American interests, global security, and human prosperity. We hope that the broad, collaborative approach we have emphasized throughout this project can serve as a model for future problem-solving on issues of the Middle East. We also hope that our final report will not be an end point, but instead will be the first part of an ongoing conversation amongst the global network of stakeholders that we have assembled for this Task Force.

The situation in the Middle East is difficult but progress is not impossible. It is our desire that this Task Force might serve as the first step toward better international cooperation with the people of the Middle East to set the region on a more positive trajectory, and to realize its incredible potential.

Madeleine K. Albright
Co-Chair

Stephen J. Hadley
Co-Chair

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent decades, Muslims have been debating political and social aspects of their religious teachings in new ways. The religious debates are connected to and sometimes stem in considerable part from underlying political and social trends—demographic shifts; rising education; unaccountable and authoritarian governance; stuttering economic and governmental performance; and corruption. They cannot, however, be wholly reduced to those trends. Religion is not an isolated field, but neither is it simply a mask for other struggles; the terms and outcomes of religious debates matter in their own right.

It is precisely for that reason that the debates are receiving increasing attention not merely from those involved in them but also from non-Muslims in various policy communities. In particular, there is escalating alarm in security-oriented circles that radical individuals and movements, making their arguments in Islamic terms, are threatening global and regional security through terrorism, revolutionary activity, and other forms of political violence.

This report seeks to explain why these debates are occurring. However, in seeking to explore and explain the debates, it does not suggest that Western states try to intervene directly. The outcomes of religious debates matter; nonetheless, Western governments should not be parties to those debates. They can, at best, encourage their partners in the region to move in directions that allow those debates to take peaceful forms.

If religious extremism is to be curtailed, states in the region have an important role to play. Middle East regional governments have a responsibility to prevent the export of religious and sectarian violence. States also have every right to protect their citizens from the scourge of terrorism—in fact, it is their sovereign duty—but they should do so in ways that strengthen the rule of law, and by extension their own legitimacy,

rather than undermining it. Short-term measures, such as clamping down on opposition forces, policing religious space, and persuading senior religious officials to endorse official policy, often backfire in the long term.

There are periodic calls for Western governments to find the right religious actors to engage and support. Sometimes specific religious figures or regimes are held up as positive models that Western policy should support. The authors argue against such an approach. On the contrary, Western governments should avoid getting trapped in terminology that suggests there is an essential religious or civilizational conflict. The religious issues are critical to understand, but they are not ones that Western governments have the tools to address directly. The attempt to find the right religious actors to "engage" (with "engagement" often a euphemism for support) is likely to draw Western governments not only into religious controversies where they have no role but also into partisan political struggles they do not fully understand.

A positive neutrality toward religion should not lead to ignorance. A more sophisticated understanding of religious issues is required to inform more productive political and security approaches and should thus be encouraged. However, it should not be seen as a step toward endorsing any particular theological, jurisprudential, or religious position, or toward selecting particular actors to carry and promote a message that is aligned with the foreign policy and security priorities of the moment. While not denying the connection between security concerns and Islamic religious debates, the authors aim to show that a focus strictly on a perceived nexus between religion and terrorism, and strategy by non-Muslims to intervene in religious debates in order to combat terrorism, would be facile and ineffective.

I. THE CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

The issues we discuss in this report span the entire Islamic world, but we focus on the Middle East simply because that is where they have become particularly acute—though much of what we write could be applied easily to struggles in other regions. And we place issues confronting the policy community in a broader context of the shifting nature of authority.

Muslims remain united in their sacred texts, but the ways they interpret those texts—and who is accepted as authoritative—have become questions of utmost importance and increasing contention. The absence of a supreme earthly arbiter of religious questions has also allowed a degree of dissent, fragmentation of the community, and the emergence of distinct sects or groupings. The phenomenon is not new; in the world of Islam, the problem of religious authority has periodically proven acute. With the arguable exception of the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (the *Rashidun*) in the earliest days of Islam, there has never been anything truly resembling a consensus figure or unquestioned institution of religious authority among Muslims.[1] Periodic attempts by religious-political leaders, chiefly in the person of the later caliphs of classical Islamic history, to impose an orthodoxy on believers largely failed; any success was restricted to a specific group and often localized and ephemeral. None has had a durable effect for Muslims as a whole. There have been more or less influential approaches, but there is nothing like an orthodoxy in terms of doctrine or law that goes beyond a small consensal core. The result might be seen as enriching—there has been robust debate among Muslims that ranges over time and place—but can also be confounding for observers and believers alike.

> Muslims remain united in their sacred texts, but the ways they interpret those texts . . . have become questions of utmost importance and increasing contention.

Disagreement is therefore not new, but older trends have been amplified in the modern period. In many ways, the challenges have become especially daunting, at least in the eyes of some of the faithful. They have had to contend with a host of other ideologies such as nationalism, socialism, imperialism, cultural change, economic change, and globalization. Rising literacy and mass media have made it possible for many more to participate in debates and still more to follow them.

States have trodden quite heavily in the religious realm, working to regulate religious discourse, determine religious education, and assume leadership of religious institutions. Various social and political movements have staked their own claims on religious truth. Since the death of the Prophet in 632, the question of legitimate religious authority has troubled the worldwide community of believers. *Who, then, is a good Muslim? And who gets to decide?*

Some of these various orientations (such as the *madhahib*, the schools of Sunni law) acknowledge each other's legitimacy without hesitation. Also, many Muslims have deliberately been extremely hesitant to question the faith of those who identify as Muslims, no matter how deeply they might differ. Others, however, have been a bit less forgiving. While "*takfir*"—declaring someone an apostate—has generally been treated gingerly, there are some current movements that embrace it wholeheartedly, raising the stakes as well as the potential for violence.

This report draws on the discussions and findings of the Middle East Strategy Task Force's Working Group on Religion, Identity, and Countering Violent Extremism. The participants included academics and practitioners in the United States and the Middle East who met for four sessions in 2015. In this report, we draw on those discussions in order to broaden the analytical framework through which governments should think about how religion is linked to politics

---

1   It should be noted here that Shia Islam, which only emerged as a distinct form in any meaningful sense well after the death of its own champion Ali ibn Abi Talib, the last of the four *Rashidun*, rejects any notion of a Rightly Guided Caliphate.

Like in many mosques of the Ottoman Empire, calligraphic plates of the first four caliphs (the Rashidun) are displayed on the pillars of the dome of the Yeni Cami (New Mosque) in Istanbul, Turkey. *Photo credit:* Josep Renalias/Wikimedia.

in order to craft more effective measures to curtail radicalization. Our goal here has been to understand before we rush to prescribe. This will require a significant shift in perspective, namely the recognition of the important role played by religion and religious identity throughout the Muslim world. Such a shift poses a particular intellectual challenge, for it seems to fly in the face of Western experience since the early modern period, which has seen the gradual (if incomplete) relegation of religion to the private sphere. We will also map out some policy implications of this understanding—paradoxically showing that an understanding of the nature of religious debates is critical to good policy.

II. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN A SHIFTING WORLD

The vast majority of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims understand and practice their religion in ways that eschew violence. Few have respect for the barbarism of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). However, this does not mean that state-sponsored institutions speak for the world's Muslims. Ministers of religious affairs, state muftis, and chief judges of religious courts exercise tremendous institutional authority, but that does not always translate into moral authority. Authoritarian rulers in the Middle East have used state-sponsored institutions as the primary method to control religious interpretation in mosques at Friday sermons, school textbooks, official media, religious courts, and elsewhere.

It is easy to understand the deep feelings of disempowerment endemic in Middle Eastern societies. Weak and corrupt states govern many of these societies; the effort to secure basic needs and social expectations requires arduous daily struggles in which citizens are increasingly unable to rely on state support. Feelings of citizenship and nationalism are often violated by existing political arrangements at the local, national, and global levels. The forces of globalization, instantaneous media, and low-cost communications worldwide have brought a flood of seemingly unstoppable social and cultural challenges. As the environment brings in pressures from every direction, it also offers guidance—perhaps too much guidance. The pious—or even those who seek to have expert and moral guidance on how to handle daily problems—have many sources to consult. Social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as the earlier emergence of pan-Arab satellite television, have delivered an enormous range of religious opinion. This market of religious opinion is more open and less regulated than anything that has existed in the past. It offers a range of viewpoints. Within this cacophony, often radical readings of Islam, unmediated by scholarly consensus or state power, easily enter the marketplace of ideas across the entire region.

As a bottom-up, grassroots search for religious identity and guidance evolves, so too does a top-down campaign of state repression to counter extremism and also public protest of any kind in many countries across the region. Of course, heavy-handed regulation and repression do not go unnoticed. Governments risk losing the trust of some of their citizens through political and social marginalization, exclusionary politics, rough policing, a lack of civil liberties—including bans on freedom of expression—and "anti-terrorist" campaigns that paint even mildly dissident voices with the hues of violent extremism. Numerous exhaustive studies, including those conducted by the US government and international organizations, such as the World Bank, have drawn this conclusion based upon empirical evidence. For example, a comprehensive US Agency for International Development (USAID) report published in 2009 made the following assessment: "The systematic denial of opportunities for influencing decision-making at the level of the community and/or the state, or for reforming regimes perceived to be corrupt and/or unjust has been shown to operate as a significant driver of VE (violent extremism) . . . Recent research has uncovered compelling empirical evidence to demonstrate that, at the macro-level, political exclusion and denial of civil liberties represent an important risk factor."[2]

For the foreseeable future, the most extreme voices—what one scholar in the working group called "the road rage" of ISIS and similar movements—are likely to jostle more moderate ones, whether online or in the public square; not because they are the more numerous but because they are the loudest, most ideological, and most technologically sophisticated. With so many voices compromised and co-opted, radical ones can seem authentic or sincere. This does not necessarily make them the most persuasive, but in a region with human security so deeply threatened, they can more easily earn a hearing.

---

2   Guilain Denoeux with Lynn Carter, "Guide to Drivers of Violent Extremism," USAID, 2009, https://goo.gl/1DJFOw.

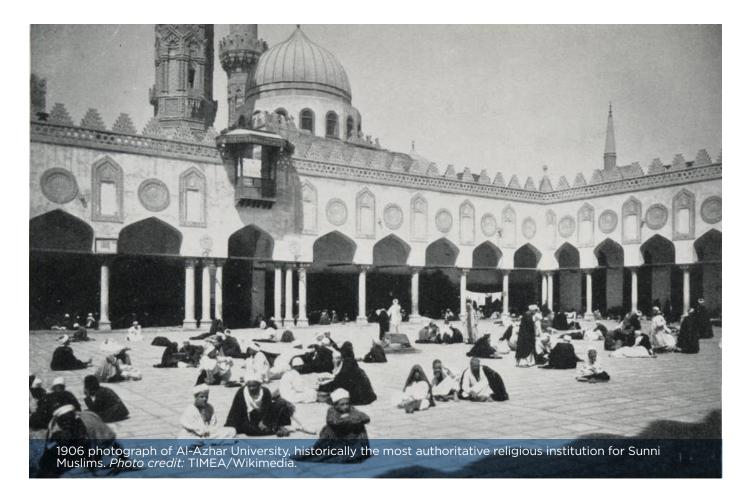# III. THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF AUTHORITY WITHIN ISLAM

The long-standing crisis of religious authority, particularly among the Sunni Muslim majority, is a central reason why Middle Eastern states have generally lacked control over the way Islam is interpreted and practiced by their Muslim citizens, even though some states have tried to regulate religious preaching and practice. Such regulation is pervasive: mosques are often licensed, as are their preachers and the contents of sermons; religious endowments are often regulated and frequently nationalized; religious education is often mandatory (with a state-designed curriculum and set of textbooks); state-owned media propagate official voices; and legislation codifies those areas of Islamic law (often personal status) that are officially enforced. Although Sunni Islam has recognized channels and established methods of interpreting religious texts and jurisprudence for adjudicating various interpretations, religious authorities have always had to confront the influence of the ruling elites. Yet, they often did so with some autonomy. The state role in the religious realm greatly accelerated in the post-colonial period, when authoritarian regimes actively co-opted Muslim clerics in an effort to shore up their hold on power. As corrupt national governments have seen their own legitimacy erode, state religious institutions have suffered a loss of legitimacy along with them.

Nationalist Rule and the Abuse of Religion

In the post-colonial period, a new generation of nationalist leaders—such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi—backed their policies, both domestic and international, with claims of religious sanction, especially by invoking the Sunni tradition of strong allegiance to the political leader—and used local religious institutions to solidify their hold on power and endorse official ideologies. In co-opting religious authority in support of regime aims and interests, however, these same authoritarian leaders undermined the standing of religious institutions, greatly weakening the influence they once wielded over an increasingly cynical society. Socialism and private property, war and peace, openness and repression all could be dressed in religious garb. This, in turn, paved the way for an upsurge in grassroots religiosity fueled by self-proclaimed preachers and informal prayer leaders whose opinions and religious

rulings fell outside the mainstream of traditional Islamic thought and institutions. When states began to fall short of their welfare claims—as jobs, basic commodities, and housing proved difficult to provide—religious organizations, some organized around self-help principles, could step into the gap. Even in some fiscally healthier states, corruption and inefficiency opened the door to those who propounded moral principles in a manner that seemed uncompromising. It is no accident, then, that Egypt and Libya later emerged among the most prominent battlegrounds between dictatorial state power and popular demands for self-determination. Tussles over religious authority date back long before the Arab uprisings of 2011; they were visible as early as the 1970s, if not before.

Local religious leaders were often caught between a desire to be responsive to their communities and the commands of a watchful security apparatus. High-level religious authorities would sometimes try to carve out a somewhat independent voice, but even the bolder ones had to do so in a circumspect manner. A set of official religious figures was open to criticism that they had been converted into obedient civil servants. Even those inclined to take a more charitable view of top religious officials would admit that many could no longer play as strong a mediating role between ruler and ruled or ensure some level of civic discourse even under authoritarian systems. Some regimes further compounded the problem by cynically promoting a religious agenda whenever the survival of their power was threatened. For example, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein—a nationalist figure hardly known for pious personal conduct or respect for religious teachings—found an ability to invoke religious symbols and slogans as he twice faced invading US forces, just as he had done earlier in the war with Shia-ruled Iran.

The long-term risks of such an approach were already on full display in the aftermath of the disastrous 1967 Arab-Israeli War, a defeat that caught the Arab world by surprise and exposed the underlying weakness of the pan-Arabist vision. The social, political, and religious upheavals that followed the devastating Israeli victory opened the door to today's charismatic religious ideologues, who began to make their presence felt in the 1970s by challenging the status

1906 photograph of Al-Azhar University, historically the most authoritative religious institution for Sunni Muslims. *Photo credit:* TIMEA/Wikimedia.

quo.[3] The growing retreat of the state from providing social services—evident in some oil-poor countries—opened the door for private voluntary organizations, many with a religious hue, to enter the field. In oil-rich states, private philanthropy often flowed through unofficial religious channels.

This laid the foundation among Arab societies for a religious revival that continues to this day. Some Shia and Sunni communities—the former in response to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the latter in response to the developing power of the Islamist political groups in Egypt—began to associate religion as a form of political identity supplanting nationalism. Moreover, the Islamic Revolution in Iran offered a theocratic state as an alternative model for governance to the nationalism then on offer across the region.

As these religious revivals gathered momentum—often as the most promising outlet for social and political activity—states that tried to invent traditions believed

to secure the idea of nationhood began to collide with societies' growing Islamism, among other ideologies. Grassroots religiosity steadily eroded the power of many of the region's authoritarian rulers, but also challenged established religious institutions, which were widely seen as having placed the interests of the state over those of the *ummah*, the larger community of Muslim believers.

The Impact of Social Media

At the same time, new communication technologies, from satellite television to Facebook and Twitter, began to provide a platform for many non-traditional religious figures to get their message out to a broader audience. The rise of social media and its rapid adoption across the Muslim world provided new avenues to circulate ideas and thus further diffuse religious authority. The existence of such networks has not only led to the spread of ideas but also to the creation of like-minded communities and thus a degree of polarization and an exacerbation of sectarian tensions amid a renewed focus on religious difference. New social media technologies taking hold—Twitter in particular—have given extremist, and

---

3 For a detailed account of the rise of popular religiosity in the Arab world's most populous country, see Geneive Abdo, *No God but God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 19-40.

heterodox, religious groups greater access than ever before to pools of followers and potential recruits. At the same time, Twitter and other such platforms have expanded the marketplace of ideas for the self-educated and self-proclaimed "street sheikhs" of the 1980s and 1990s to reach numbers unimaginable in their small mosques. A few of those with dissident views but more formal credentials have similarly found alternatives to state-regulated mosques. These developments further dilute the prestige and influence of the official religious establishment.

An analysis of select Twitter feeds can offer valuable insight into extremist ideas and practices and help identify leading personalities, uncover important relationships, and reveal significant discursive trends. Some of the violent and non-violent Salafists in the Arab world have millions of Twitter followers scattered across many countries. A few years ago, before the Arab uprisings, some of today's most popular Salafists were completely unknown outside their own narrow circles. Now, they rank among the region's most influential non-state actors—another result of the democratization of religion aided and abetted by the social media revolution.

The crisis of religious authority can be seen as a kind of democratization of religion, with both positive and negative consequences. The spread of education, the construction of new modes of communication, the willingness of publics to engage in matters that deeply affect their lives, and the emergence of a more participatory form of religious community are not in and of themselves negative trends (nor could they be resisted if they were). However, they open the door to a variety of freelance religious interpretations, not only by self-proclaimed sheikhs in urban neighborhoods, but also by actors whose intentions are far more ambitious and threaten violence, both on a global level and against their more immediate neighbors. In just the last fifteen years, those posing serious existential threats to the ruling political elites include Osama bin Laden and his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri of al-Qaeda, and more recently Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of ISIS.

The broad effects of this democratization can be illustrated by the rise of varieties of Salafism, an intellectual trend that was virtually unknown in the West outside of narrow specialized circles until very recently. Salafist Islam is predicated on an attempt to recover the purported original practices of the early Muslim community, stripping away the accretions and layers of interpretation that centuries of learned figures have developed. While Salafist leaders might be highly learned, they focus their efforts on original texts and feel less bound to understandings that have emerged in standard interpretive traditions among scholars.

While some official religious establishments (most notably those in Saudi Arabia's) have wholeheartedly embraced a Salafist approach, today's Salafists often operate outside of official channels. In their literalism, some are willing to adopt doctrines and pursue interpretations (abjured by more traditional authorities) that endorse forms of political violence. Indeed, movements predicated on ideas propounded by some Salafists have come to pose a formidable challenge to Western and Middle Eastern governments alike. The challenge is not only to existing states and regimes but also to social peace. Many Salafists thoroughly de-humanize the Shia, whom they believe are now an existential threat to the Sunnis. As part of this phenomenon, the vitriol of the Salafists and the response from the Shia are now politicized and transnational. Sectarian conflicts have afflicted societies with no history of such turmoil and have inflected rivalries among some states (most notably, but not exclusively, Iran and Saudi Arabia) with heavy religious overtones. What happens in one country unleashes a reaction across the region and beyond.

Salafism is hardly monolithic and many have little use for the violence of ISIS or other movements. Nevertheless, it still pose something of a religious challenge to existing authorities. Non-violent Salafists, stretching from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia, are also benefiting—some have millions of Twitter followers.

These and other figures now compete for authority with state-sponsored religious institutions, such as Al-Azhar in Egypt (which for Sunni Arabs was historically the most authoritative religious institution), Al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco, the Kairouan in Tunisia, the Turkish Divanet, and the Nahdlatul Ulama network in Indonesia.

> The crisis of religious authority can be seen as a kind of democratization of religion, with both positive and negative consequences.

States are not powerless in the religious struggle: they write religious curricula for schools, codify religious law, patrol mosques, and regulate the contents of sermons. Yet the often heavy-handed behavior of existing regimes and their instrumentalization of religion to support their own ends have made those tools less credible.

This can be seen in the case of Al-Azhar itself—a 1,100-year-old mosque and university complex founded by the Fatimid dynasty, which was Shia. This formidable complex of religious institutions is a part of the Egyptian state, and some Egyptian regimes have intervened heavily in its structure—especially over the past half century. The position of those within Al-Azhar varies considerably. While most within the body view it as pursuing a form of Islam that is deeply learned and protective of social peace, one can hear voices both critical and supportive of Egypt's leaders. Nevertheless, the top leadership of Al-Azhar has generally been seen as politically loyal to the regime, and, more broadly, the state has relied upon Al-Azhar's leadership to regulate religious practice and interpretation as much as possible. The result is that Al-Azhar is seen by some critics as politically compromised. Even some of those who defend the institution as a whole suggest that the top leadership is overly politically identified with the regime. The institution is treated as the official voice of Islam in Egypt. For that reason, its word is derided by some radicals as tainted and co-opted, a criticism that resonates even among some of its own members and graduates.

What has happened with Al-Azhar can be seen far more generally. The specific challenge among Sunni Muslims, and the root cause of such unbridled competition between state and non-state actors, lies with the lack of any recognized hierarchical authority. Without any formal institution on par with the Vatican among Catholics to guide everyday believers or to warn of doctrinal error or heretical practice, and with the increasing contestation of institutions that have been officially endorsed or are considered informally authoritative, Sunni Islam has entered a highly contentious age. This, particularly given the scope of new media, opens the way for any would-be Sunni religious leader—whether formally educated or not—to lay claim to religious interpretation because, in this sense, it is a far more equal playing field than that which existed in the past.

The Arab Spring

By the time the Arab uprisings erupted, there was fertile ground for unrest, insecurity, and violence. In previous decades, religious movements had arisen challenging the political order, sometimes violently, in a number of states. Since 2011, the struggle over the degree to which religion would determine how countries are governed has reached new heights and spilled across borders. While it is imprecise to conclude that the Arab uprisings alone produced violence in the name of religion, with the authority of the state eroded or eroding in many countries, they provided further opportunities for non-state actors to seek to become the premier interpreters of the faith.

What appeared to Western eyes as a familiar struggle between dictatorial state power and bottom-up demands for democracy and civil society was just that. Even so, it was also more—the upheaval gave embodiment to debates about the proper role of religion and religious movements in Arab political life.

> [T]he struggle over the degree to which religion would determine how countries are governed has reached new heights and spilled across borders.

RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

IV. THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND AL-SHAM

A confluence of inter-related factors has led to unprecedented instability and violence throughout much of the region, all relating back to the weakening of political and religious authority. These include state collapse in some cases or outright failure in others, both leading to a lack of security. With existing regimes faltering and even some states collapsing, an opportunity opened for violent extremist groups that had earlier seemed marginal or contained, including those now proclaiming fealty to ISIS and al-Qaeda, to fill the resulting vacuum and come to the fore. In such an environment, such groups appear well-placed to articulate political, social, and economic grievances in a shared idiom of religiosity.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, extremist groups such as ISIS did not appear out of nowhere. Rather, these extremist groups are benefiting from all the conditions described above, and they have found support from those who have been economically and politically marginalized—not necessarily from the beginning of the Arab uprisings alone—and the factors that helped spark the 2011 revolts.

This significant development took many in the West by surprise, with good reason: The hope for democratic transition that emerged in many societies in 2011 made the more radical challengers seem less promising. To be sure, the more open environment did allow some challengers to emerge more fully, such as Salafists in Egypt and Tunisia.

As the political upheavals came to depart from any clean path of transition from authoritarianism to democracy, the religious battle became more prominent—and the path of mediating differences through a peaceful and democratic political process disappeared in most countries. Following in the footsteps of al-Qaeda—and of countless extremist movements throughout the history of Islam—ISIS propagates a violent and almost messianic reading of the faith, assuring followers and recruits that its vision is the authentic one, untrammeled by corrupt politicians and a compliant and feckless religious establishment. The appropriation of powerful religious symbolism and the invocation of highly selective textual references, shorn of the interpretive traditions that had developed over a millennium, complete what has proven to be a powerful ideology capable of attracting and mobilizing followers at home and abroad.

> ISIS propagates a violent and almost messianic reading of the faith, assuring followers and recruits that its vision is the authentic one, untrammeled by corrupt politicians and a compliant and feckless religious establishment.

ATLANTIC COUNCIL   11

V. CONTEMPORARY SHIA-SUNNI RIVALRY AND THE ERUPTION OF VIOLENT SECTARIANISM

Recent estimates put the world's Muslim population at around 1.6 billion, with Shia Muslims representing 10 to 13 percent of that figure.[4] The overwhelming majority of Shia, perhaps as many as 80 percent, are concentrated in just four countries: Iran, Pakistan, India, and Iraq. Iran and, to a less certain degree Iraq and Azerbaijan, are the only modern states in which Shia political power predominates, whereas in Bahrain they are a politically subordinate majority. As with many other minority groups, the Shia have safeguarded their traditions, practices, and identity, which they believe have been at risk from encroachment by the large Sunni majority, while at the same time staking out their place within the totality of the Muslim *ummah.*

It is worth noting that in Shia Islam the system for obtaining authority is based upon a recognized and accepted hierarchy of religious education. That hierarchy was more complex and it survives more robustly (though it is hardly without challenge) in the world today than that which developed in Sunni Islam. Although Shi'ism has been in a constant state of reinterpretation (*ijtihad),* the endeavor of the jurist to formulate law based upon evidence from the Quran and the *hadiths* (the teachings of the Prophet), generally fell to learned theologians. The decrees of senior jurists (*mujtahids)* are generally relevant only to their particular followers and do not survive them. The result is a Shia religious authority that is robust but not consolidated among the entire body of adherents in space or time.

This system of religious authority has likely survived in stronger form among Shia for two reasons. First, the sense of hierarchy has been more developed and more formalized, leading to fewer renegades or freelance interpreters who ignored the established authorities. Second, the hierarchy maintained greater distance from governing. Those Shia who seek religious guidance have less reason to regard their scholars as pursuing an instrumentalized and tainted version of Islam. Of course, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the founding of a system in which religious

authorities have a strong political role has disrupted these arrangements, and Shia Islam is beginning to show signs of the same kinds of contestation that characterize the Sunni world. In Iraq, for example, as the clerical establishment—particularly Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani—has become more involved in politics, there is now a growing rift within the Shia population as some lean toward Iran and its Revolutionary Guards in opposition to the Iraqi government and Sistani. Others, on the other hand—particularly in Najaf, the home to many influential Shia scholars—exhibit opposition to Iran's political and religious intervention in Iraq.
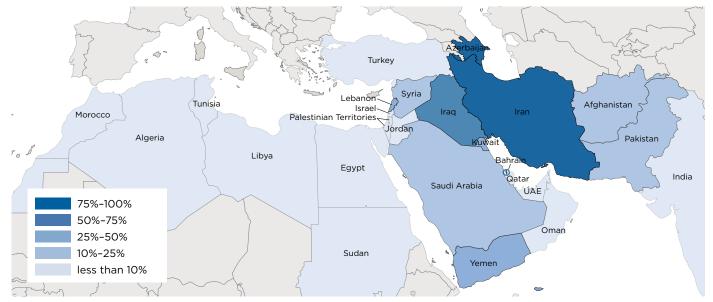
The Iranian Revolution has not been the only political event that has changed the sectarian equation. The American invasion of Iraq and the Arab upheavals accelerated a shift in the balance of political power between Shia and Sunni Islam. While the Sunnis previously controlled most states in the Arab world, the wars and turmoil since 2003 secured the rise of a Shia-led government in Iraq, led to the state-sponsored massacre of Sunnis in Syria, further empowered the Shia Hezbollah in Lebanon, and fomented sectarian conflict in Yemen led by the Iran-backed Shia Houthis. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear program, which frees up more than a billion dollars in frozen state assets and promises to open the Islamic Republic to Western investment, has only further heightened fears among Tehran's Sunni rivals, particularly Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies.

For Sunni societies, this has resulted in intense anxiety. Despite their large demographic preponderance, they feel threatened by the changed political dynamics. In Egypt, a country with a tiny Shia minority, religious and political figures speak as if Shi'ism is a moral and security threat. For example, in 2015, Egypt's Ministry of Endowments closed two Shia mosques in Cairo ahead of the Ashura holiday.[5]

Additionally, sectarian language tends to spiral. For the Shia, a long-standing perceived need for self-assertion in the face of prejudice, persecution, or even outright repression over the centuries at the

---

4   Pew Research Center, "The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030," http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/01/FutureGlobalMuslimPopulation-WebPDF-Feb10.pdf, accessed May 7, 2015.

5   Tom Rollins, "Politicizing Religion: Egypt's Shia," *Mada Masr,* October 27, 2015, available from http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/politicizing-religion-egypt%E2%80%99s-shia.

Map 1. Shi'ism in the Middle East and Neighboring Countries

■	75%–100%
■	50%–75%
■	25%–50%
■	10%–25%
■	less than 10%

Sources: CIA Factbook and Strategic Studies Institute.

hands of Sunnis has served to sharpen Shia attitudes and reinforce their communal sense of self. This, in turn, has provoked a hardening of religious identity on both sides. "The responsibility for the salience of Shia identity in society and politics lies not with the Shia alone, but at least as much with the Sunnis who dominate social and political attitudes," write Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke in their study of the Arab Shia.[6]

Sectarianism—often a factor in the politics of some Arab societies but one that has been contained and manipulated—also becomes a more powerful force when states decay and populations are forced to draw on their political and religious identities to knit together webs of security and mutual assistance.

As regimes reach across borders in decaying states to cultivate allies, sectarianism can be a useful tool.

On a geopolitical level, the Middle East is the scene of an increasingly bitter rivalry between two of its most powerful states—Shia-ruled Iran and Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia—that has served to exacerbate the societal conflict on the ground.

In nearly every Arab country, Shia and Sunnis say they remember the days before the Arab uprisings when religious sect was not a marker of identity. It is difficult to assess whether these memories are versions of a glorified past or grounded in reality. Still, even if the memories are exaggerated, it is clear that the current bout of sectarian violence is wider in its reach than any other in modern history.

The rapid emergence of ISIS has exploited this acrimonious Shia-Sunni history. The extremist movement, like al-Qaeda before it, views the Shia as infidels and thus legitimate targets of its military might.

6   Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 10.

VI. STATE RESPONSES

To date, governments in the Middle East, threatened by the onslaught of extremism, have tried to clamp down, but few have succeeded. Regimes that have highly developed security sectors have placed them in the lead of the response. That has generally led to poor results. Technology has made controlling the messenger and the message nearly impossible. Governments have adopted a variety of measures—some new, but most borrowed from the past—to try to address the threat of terrorism and religious extremism—including: requiring government ministry approval for clerics to speak in mosques; permitting only state-sanctioned imams to issue fatwas, or religious decrees; requiring state approval for mosque construction; and having state authorities educate and train imams. However, the evolution of religious ideology, with the proliferation of so many diverse, heterodox interpretations of the faith, together with the advent of new communication technologies, has limited the effectiveness of such measures.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, whose custodial claim on the two holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina, has made it a regular target of religious extremism over the years, has officially taken a zero tolerance stance toward ISIS by condemning the organization's activities and participating in the US-led military coalition's efforts to counter the group in Syria and Iraq. It has complemented its external action against ISIS with an aggressive campaign by both official clerics and the king to discredit the group and condemn their activities as acts of terrorism. The kingdom welcomed United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2178, expanding existing counterterrorism programs and rhetoric to address the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, and leveraged terrorist finance provisions of its Law for Crimes of Terrorism and Terrorist-Financing (CT Law) to combat funding of violent extremist groups in Iraq and Syria.

In addition, the Saudi government has cracked down on some of its own indigenous Islamists who could have the potential to inspire extremism. The official version of Islam in Saudi Arabia, while supportive of the political system, still bears a family resemblance to the religious approach of some of the radicals. This may have given some radicals a protected space in the kingdom in the past but also led to periodic efforts to tighten regulation—one of which is currently underway. For example, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs approves all clerics and investigates complaints against these. Provincial councils monitor clerics and refer those who deviate from state policy to a review board. An estimated 3,500 imams have been dismissed through this process since 2003, according to the US Department of State.[7]

In their fight against extremism, Saudi authorities have adopted a two-track approach: a "security strategy," implemented by all Saudi security forces, and an "advocacy and advisory strategy," which includes counseling programs and dialogue for violent extremists who have been incarcerated and advisory and advocacy campaigns for vulnerable youth.[8] The advisory strategy is aimed at prevention on the one hand, by eliminating the sources of extremism through addressing the extremists' understanding of sharia, and treatment on the other, using frank dialogue, bridge-building, and confrontation to encourage those who sympathize with terrorists to question and alter their views. The latter approach uses all means of communication, including the Internet, to discuss ideas and convince home-grown extremists to follow the right path.[9]

While attempting to address the domestic symptoms of the extremist threat, Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia has largely ignored, and at times enabled or even encouraged, radical Islamist activities abroad, often for reasons of national or sectarian interest. A number of private Saudis who have amassed large oil fortunes have used those riches to independently finance their

---

7   Country Reports on Terrorism 2014 (Saudi Arabia), Department of State, http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239407.htm.

8   Noorhaidi Hasan, Bertus Hendriks, Floor Janssen, and Roel Meijer, *Counterterrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, pp. 12-124.

9   Abdullah F. Ansary, *Combating Extremism: A Brief Overview of Saudi Arabia's Approach*, Middle East Policy Council, Summer 2008, Volume XV, Number 2, http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/combating-extremism-brief-overview-saudi-arabias-approach?print.

favored militant groups and political and religious causes in other parts of the Muslim world. The Saudi government acknowledges that its citizens have often provided private financial support, but it denies any government role in encouraging such flows. In recent years, the Saudi government has done more to strengthen policing and regulations to counter terrorist financing, however, according to the US State Department, "some individuals and entities in Saudi Arabia" continue to provide financial support to extremist groups, including those in Syria.[10] Meanwhile, in Kuwait, local Salafi groups have been very successful in raising funds for Salafis internationally, and the Kuwaiti government has sometimes ignored, sometimes discouraged, and sometimes worked to steer such activity—always mindful that the Salafis are a significant presence in their own society.[11]

Indeed, while the Saudi government has moved against radical doctrines that might be threatening in political and security terms, it has been far less enthusiastic in restraining sectarianism. Today, Saudi Arabia is home to some of the most influential Salafist sheikhs who have millions of followers on Twitter. They spread anti-Shia rhetoric and use the narratives of the wars in Syria and Iraq to inspire their followers to fight against what they view as growing Shia supremacy in the region, driven by Iran. At times, the Saudi authorities crack down on such sectarian figures. At other times, the authorities appear to use these Islamists to serve their larger geopolitical aims in the region, particularly with regards to their rivalry with Iran and Iran's proxies.

Mohammad al-Arefe offers a prime example of the ways in which the Saudi authorities can give space to fomenters of sectarianism and even use them. Arefe is a popular Saudi cleric who uses his wide reach on social media—as of this writing, he has more than twelve million Twitter followers—to spread his anti-Shia views. In that sense, his voice has emerged powerfully, partly as a result of the trends we have analyzed above. Still, at times, he has clashed with the Saudi authorities, particularly over his vocal support for the Muslim Brotherhood and ousted Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, whom the Saudi government bitterly opposed. Nevertheless, he is not a pure outsider; he also has proved useful and supportive of state policies, including his open encouragement of young Sunni men to join the Syrian uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, who is backed by Saudi Arabia's archrival Iran.

He holds several official positions with the blessing of the Saudi ruling establishment: He is a professor at King Saud University in Riyadh, the imam of the King Fahd Academy of the Saudi Navy, and a preacher at Al Bawardy Mosque in Riyadh.

Asked in 2011 if it is the role of religious scholars to de-escalate sectarian tension, Arefe answered: "I say that we need both types of scholars. Those who keep the situation calm and others who also say the truth as long as it is wisdom that guides them."[12] Arefe often criticizes the Shia-led government in Iraq and connects events there with the civil war in Syria, which has its own sectarian aspects.

As the case of Arefe illustrates, Saudi Arabia has provided a home and support for a number of extreme religious figures who have preached radical messages and fanned the flames of sectarianism. As these figures have gained prominence and power, they have increasingly posed an uncomfortable dilemma for Saudi authorities, who on the one hand want mechanisms to counter what they perceive as dangerous encroachments on their traditional spheres of influence by Iranian-backed religious and militant forces, but on the other hand worry about the growing stature and power of these Sunni religious extremists and their ability to destabilize the kingdom itself.

Egypt

Egypt has also tried to cope with rising religious extremism and terrorism. Egyptian authorities confront a growing insurgency in the Sinai, which has now aligned itself with ISIS. Since the removal of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi from the presidency in 2013 in a military-backed coup, other Islamist groups have launched a terror campaign against military, police, governmental, and sometimes even civilian targets. The extremely bloody suppression of pro-Morsi protestors in August 2013 has emerged

---

10 Country Reports on Terrorism 2015 (Saudi Arabia), Department of State, http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257517.htm.

11 On the activity of Kuwaiti Salafis, see Zoltan Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in the Levant," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/kuwaiti_salafists.pdf.

12 "Sheikh Mohammad al Arefe: The problem of the Shiites and Sunnis," YouTube, May 15, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bavl3Y_LS78. More significantly, Arefe has challenged the very notion that the Shia are even Muslims: "Shi'ism is a heresy. It did not exist at the time of the Prophet or Abu Bakr or Othman," he said in an interview on May 15, 2011 (available at "Sheikh Mohammad al-Arefe: The problem of the Shiites and Sunnis," YouTube, May 15, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bavl3Y_LS78). "They have an issue with making Ali (peace be upon him) greater than he is. Then they started with other heretical things like building shrines on graves, praying to others than God, claiming that Ali knows the unknown and that he brought the dead back to life." Even before the Syrian war began, Arefe was well-known for incendiary comments towards the Shia across the Middle East. In a sermon in 2009, Arefe asserted that the Shia systematically tortured and murdered Sunnis in Iraq. See "Saudi Cleric Muhammad Al-Arifi Vilifies Shiites, Calling Iraqi Ayatollah Sistani 'an Infidel'," MEMRI, December 11, 2009, http://www.memritv.org/clip_transcript/en/2336.htm.

as a major grievance for all Islamists across the region, and talk of revenge and justice has edged out calls for cleaner elections or political reform.

The Egyptian government under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has responded by stepping up its campaign in the Sinai, designating the Muslim Brotherhood incorrectly as a terrorist organization, banning public demonstrations, jailing thousands of Muslim Brotherhood leaders (as well as supporters and members of more militant Islamist groups), and moving to shut down non-Islamist opposition as well. Egyptian security services seem to have a blank check to behave as they see fit.

The new regime has waded into the religious realm, convinced that Al-Azhar had either made itself irrelevant or was sheltering radicals—or both. In 2015, Sisi called for what he termed "a religious revolution" that would be led by Al-Azhar. The institution has pushed back, with some of its scholars bristling at being lectured on religion by a military figure. Nevertheless, Al-Azhar's current leadership, despite its indignation, is still closely identified with the regime. Indeed, the Minister of Religious Affairs has been a more enthusiastic foot soldier in the battle to bring religious spaces under firmer official control, tightening oversight of mosques. Before the 2013 coup, the state controlled about half of the mosques; the rest were tolerated by a state apparatus that did not seem to have the resources to monitor them all. However, since 2013, the Ministry of Religious Endowments has patrolled sermons more closely, closed many mosques outside of prayer times, and decreed that all mosques smaller than eighty square meters would only be able to operate as daily prayer rooms—with no more sermons and no more collecting alms (effectively closing 27,000). Even larger mosques have lost some control over collection and distribution of charity. In January 2014, the ministry began enforcing a law banning unlicensed imams from preaching, firing about 12,000. It has banned political talk in mosques—though talk that is supportive of the regime is deemed unpolitical and thus permitted.

The result of the Egyptian government's policies is difficult to measure. Estimates suggest that from the spring of 2013 to the summer of 2014, more than 2,500 Egyptians were killed, more than 17,000 wounded, and more than 16,000 arrested in demonstrations and

> Suppression of pro-Morsi protestors in August 2013 has emerged as a major grievance for all Islamists across the region . . .

clashes.[13] In 2015, human rights groups said that almost 500 people were killed by Egyptian security forces, close to 600 people were tortured while in detention,[14] over 1,800 people were forcibly disappeared,[15] and at least 3,000 people were charged or sentenced in military courts.[16] While such repression appeared to be applauded in those state-run media circles allowed to operate after the summer of 2013, the government's repressive policies seem to have done little to stem the rising tide of religiously inspired violence and may well have served to escalate it further.

Morocco

In Morocco, the country's experience with extremism is nowhere on the scale as compared to that of Egypt. The most spectacular events occurred in May 2003, when a series of suicide attacks hit Casablanca. In more recent years, other violence has occurred: in March 2007, a suicide bombing inside an internet café occurred in Sidi Moumen, one of Casablanca's largest slums. In April 2007, a multiple-bomb plot was uncovered and the would-be bombers blew themselves up in Casablanca in order to avoid being killed by police. Also that month, attacks on the US consulate and the American cultural center in Casablanca left two bombers dead.

The Moroccan government has taken decisive and strategic steps to counter extremism, with some measure of success. The state exercises control over religious institutions through the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. It also provides guidance for Friday prayers and approves mosque construction. The Ministry reserves the right to close mosques for breaches of public code. The Ministry also tries to control the sale of what it considers extremist books, videos, and CDs.

In July 2014, Morocco issued a law banning clergy from participating in political life or discussing politics from

---

13 Michele Dunne and Scott Williamson, "Egypt's Unprecedented Instability by the Numbers," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 24, 2014.

14 "Nadeem Center: Egypt's security forces killed 474 people in 2015," *Mada Masr*, January 10, 2016.

15 Robert Trafford and Mays Ramadhani, "Ruling by fear: Egyptian government 'disappears' 1,840 people in just 12 months," *The Independent*, March 10, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/egyptian-government-disappears-1840-people-in-just-12-months-ruling-by-fear-a6923671.html.

16 "World Report 2016: Events of 2015," Human Rights Watch, 2016.

People walk after attending the last Friday prayers of the holy month of Ramadan inside Al-Azhar mosque in the old Islamic area of Cairo, Egypt, July 10, 2015. *Photo credit:* Mohamed Abd El Ghany/Reuters.

the pulpit without government approval. One of the measures of which the government is most proud is an established institute to train state-sanctioned imams and ensure they have met legal obligations.[17]

The measures seem to have been effective. However, Morocco has had limited problems to date with extremism, compared with other Arab countries, such as Egypt, and certainly Iraq and Syria. Morocco's relative success is due to a few conditions that do not exist in other Arab countries. First, the king can claim direct descent from the Prophet Mohammad, and therefore, asserts religious legitimacy in his own right. Second, controlling the religious sphere and, by extension, the political sphere, is easier in Morocco because a major Islamist actor, the Justice and Development Party,

works cooperatively with the king within the political system and does not act as a competitor to the state (in contrast to groups such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which had been excluded from official political participation except for the short time between 2011, when Mubarak was ousted, and 2013, when Morsi was overthrown. For example, Morocco's king appointed the Justice and Development Party's general secretary in order to form a power-sharing coalition government in January 2012).

However, some North African scholars say the government's success, to the degree it exists today, could be short-lived. Increasing numbers of Moroccans, for example, are entering Libya to fight with ISIS, though the exact number is unknown. Algeria's government is working closely with Morocco to try to curb the flow of fighters who are walking into the hands of ISIS.

---

17 "King Mohammed VI Inaugurates International Imam Training Center in Rabat in Push to Promote Moderate Islam," Reuters, March 27, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/27/idUSnMKWYszqQa+1e2+MKW20150327.

VII. POLICY IMPLICATIONS: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

If religious extremism is to be curtailed, states have an important role to play. States in the region have a responsibility to prevent the export of religious and sectarian violence. States also have every right to protect their citizens from the scourge of terrorism—in fact, it is their sovereign duty—but they should do so in ways that strengthen the rule of law, and by extension their own legitimacy, rather than undermining it. Short-term measures, such as clamping down on opposition forces, policing religious space, and persuading senior religious officials to endorse official policy, often backfire in the long term. By focusing more on behavior than belief, they may lose some of their ability to shape religious debates.

Here, the policy approaches of the United States are crucial. The United States can best help regional states with their struggle against extremist violence by ensuring they strike an appropriate balance between efforts to improve domestic security and the rights of individual citizens. The outcomes of religious debates matter. Nonetheless, Western governments should not be parties to those debates; they can, at best, encourage their partners in the region to move in directions that allow those debates to take peaceful forms. The United States, because of its military role and the aid it provides, can influence their behavior at least in the margins. Up to now, the United States has often sent mixed signals, frequently making it relatively cost-free for Arab states to carry on repressive policies in the name of fighting extremism. The United States does not do enough to highlight that repressive state policies increase extremist tendencies. The great irony is that the very policies that are justified in the name of stability and security form the primary grievances that extremists can so credibly cite.

As Western governments endorse political responses to repressive state policies in the Middle East, the question of how a strictly religious response should

be crafted remains open. We have argued that while political, social, and economic factors are very much at work, the current religious contention cannot be seen simply as a proxy fight for more material interests. There are real religious issues at stake. While religion is sometimes instrumentalized, many of the participants in the religious struggles are quite sincere in their beliefs, and developments in the religious realm have a logic of their own. The crisis of religious authority in the Arab world is one that the policy community needs to understand, but what about plunging into the debate and attempting to place a thumb on the scale of less violent interpretations?

There are periodic calls for Western governments to find the right religious actors to engage. Sometimes specific religious figures or regimes are held up as positive models that Western policy should support. We argue against such an approach. Western governments should avoid getting trapped in terminology that suggests there is an essential religious or civilizational conflict. Clearly, governments should avoid being identified with any particular actor or interpretation of Islam. The religious issues are critical to understand, but they are not ones that Western governments have the tools to address directly. This is not counsel of despair and impotence but an affirmation of values.

It is not a coincidence that Western states have no institutional tools to participate directly in religious debates. We have no tools as a matter of choice—our political systems are created to allow space for religion in public life but not to dictate religious teachings. We have no bureaucratic counterparts to ministries of religious affairs; we do not sponsor specific types of religious teachings anywhere.

The attempt to find the right religious actors to "engage" (with "engagement" often a euphemism for support) is likely to draw Western governments not

> Western governments should avoid getting trapped in terminology that suggests there is an essential religious or civilizational conflict.

only into religious controversies where they have no role but also into partisan political struggles they do not fully understand. Treating some official religious figures as authoritative or as appropriate often risks endorsing the efforts of authoritarian governments. This can induce them to listen for platitudes or attempts to tell them what they wish to hear.

A religious figure who might be forthcoming on some issues from a Western perspective might be less so on others, making the search for an appropriate interlocutor even more difficult. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent Sunni scholar based in Qatar, is a case in point: his positions on some social and political issues can push Islamic teachings in more liberal directions among some traditional followers—but he also endorses violence against civilians in some cases and has engaged in incendiary sectarian rhetoric. A nemesis, Ali Gum'aa of Egypt, offers erudite interpretations of Islamic law that make traditional approaches amenable to modern needs, but has recently engaged in fiery anti-Brotherhood rhetoric that provides a cover for the Egyptian regime's bloody crackdown.

Even when Western officials secure an appropriate statement from a religious official, we should recognize that official attempts to interpret Islamic legal or moral teachings in terms that are amenable to regime policy preferences are likely to be seen as just that in the current decentralized (and often highly critical) environment in which believers are accustomed to leaders securing fatwas that endorse their decisions.

An attempt to move beyond understanding religious debates to participating in them can lead to pronouncements on "what is the right Islam?" and "who is a Muslim?" that sound odd at best to most believers. ISIS is a threat to Western security interests in ways that are easy to understand; but Western officials declaring its leaders as apostates is not likely to be a credible or efficacious step. Few believers are likely to follow Western officials in matters of *takfir*. Moreover, rightly or wrongly, Western governments are widely seen in the region as not merely secular but actively hostile to Islam. Addressing that perception—and the realities that underlie it—are useful tasks for officials. However, that still will not equip them to interpret Islam the right way in the eyes of the faithful.

Nevertheless, a positive neutrality toward religion should not lead to ignorance. To say that we need to understand is not merely an academic attitude. In 1979, a lack of understanding about debates on the nature of religious authority led to a series of misjudgments about the course of politics in revolutionary Iran; the same lack of understanding led to misjudgments about the Shia population of Iraq in 2003. Washington's lack of familiarity with the Muslim Brotherhood—and even weaker understandings of non-Brotherhood Islamist strains—left it poorly positioned to understand these movements in the tumultuous aftermath of the Egyptian uprising of 2011. To say that policymakers should have understood internal religious debates better is not to say that they could have intervened directly in them—the United States is not in a position to develop its own understanding of, for example, the *wilayat al-faqih*, the doctrine of the guardianship of the jurist that exists in Iran and Islamic jurisprudence in general.

A more sophisticated understanding of religious issues is required to inform more productive political and security approaches and should thus be encouraged. However, it should not be seen as a step toward endorsing any particular theological, jurisprudential, or religious position, or toward selecting particular actors to carry and promote a message that is aligned with the foreign policy and security priorities of the moment.

Atlantic Council Board of Directors

Middle East Strategy
Task Force

Economic Recovery and Revitalization
Sherif Kamel, The American University in Cairo
and Christopher M. Schroeder, Entrepreneur & Author

Politics, Governance, and State-Society Relations
Tamara Cofman Wittes, The Brookings Institution

*Rebuilding Societies: Refugees, Recovery,
and Reconciliation*
Manal Omar, United States Institute of Peace

Religion, Identity, and Countering Violent Extremism
Geneive Abdo, Atlantic Council

Security and Public Order
Kenneth M. Pollack, The Brookings Institution