Religion and the Authoritarian State:

The Case of Syria

By Paul L. Heck

The impact of religion on society can be said to derive partly from the fact that religion represents an authority which the nation state, irrespective of its own configuration, can never fully usurp. This is especially noteworthy in the case of an authoritarian state, such as Syria, which is assumed to have arrogated – through cooption or suppression – all alternative sources of authority. While it is true that this appropriation of power has happened in Syria constitutionally and institutionally, it is not clear whether non-state actors, even if incorporated into state-defined networks, are unable to set expectations for society. This has been observed in Syria's private sector.[1] Is it also true of religion? Syria offers particularly useful perspective, for it can be argued that the state there has been more successful than others in the region – Turkey, Egypt, or Jordan – in coopting local religious institutions and suppressing religious opposition.[2] Yet, religion in Syria seems to maintain an independence enabling the production of unexpected changes that even the state must recognize.

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> ## RELIGION CERTAINLY BENEFITS THE STATE AS A SOURCE OF LEGITIMACY IN A SOCIETY WHERE RELIGION IS HIGHLY VALUED, ESPECIALLY WHEN THE STATE'S LEGITIMACY IS IN QUESTION

It is to be noted, firstly, that the explanatory value of religion for understanding Syria has largely been dismissed in favor of politics and economics.[3] Despite the occasional article,[4] we have no comprehensive picture of religion in contemporary Syria. Research focusing on Ottoman and French colonial periods is more exact in noting the function of religion as an alternative, purportedly superior, authority and way of life over and against increasingly influential European-inspired paradigms of civilization.[5] Religious actors, even if formulating reforms in European categories,[6] maintained a local moral identity that diverged from state definitions and, in that sense, helped preserve at least the conception of civil society. Does Islam continue to play such a role in Syria today, now vis-à-vis the Ba'thist project? If so, is it necessary to refine how we assume religion to function under an authoritarian state?

The suggestion is that Islam in Syria cannot be reduced to state-qualified categories of suppression and cooption.

Recognition of religion certainly benefits the state as a source of legitimacy in a society where religion is highly valued, especially when the state's legitimacy is in question;[7] this thus awards religion a latent authority that can mobilize people to civil action under certain circumstances, concrete examples of which do exist.[8] Even when speaking of religious institutions as a sector within a state-defined context, religion still stands apart from Ba'thist ideology – not as direct challenge to the regime, but as alternative viewpoint with a mediating capacity between state and people.

Moreover, the commonly perceived division of Islam in Syria into a state-coopted Sufism (spiritual and quietist) and a state-suppressed Salafism (textual and activist) fails to see them as two strands of a single religion which are never finally separable. Both elements participated in the Sunni insurrection that culminated in the 1982 massacre at Hamah.[9] Religious leaders of Sufi and Salafi orientation, sometimes combined in single figures, attend the same conferences, read the same publications, and teach the same religious heritage. This is not to overlook differences, even antagonism, between the two, but rather to note that leaders of both dispositions acknowledge common textual origins and common reformist goals.[10] The Sufi-Salafi dynamic is better viewed not as essential division, but dialogue, sometimes hostile, that affects both sides. There are certainly extremist elements, such as "The Army of Damascus for Monotheism and Jihad," but to speak of pious Muslims in Syria, Sufi and Salafi alike, is to speak overwhelmingly of a conservative, not an extremist, attitude. Those who hope for a greater place for Islam in the laws and policies, as well as the identity, of the nation, view it as a gradual process in line with the pace of reform set by the state.

By its willingness to operate within a Ba'thist defined framework, the religious establishment set the stage for a greater Islamization of society, as evident today in attire, behavior, values, and mind-set. The fact that the secular opposition is so insignificant is due not only to state strate-

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gies, but also to the freedom the religious establishment has had – to open schools and centers, distribute publications, teach, and preach a way of life, thereby cultivating a societal moral consciousness shaped by the authority of Islam. Advice in decision-making, including legal decisions, continues to be sought from religious authorities who receive a traditional "licensing" in the law of Islam not from any state agency but the personal authorization of a recognized sheikh.[11] Religious leaders do at times parrot state rhetoric, even with conviction. They also enjoy considerable leeway to promote religion and even introduce it into the national discourse,[12] forcing state circles to respond with their own conceptualization of Islam.[13] The secularist, socialist state has become a player in the game of defining religion – a game it does not have the authority to win in the end, even if it has shown some success in playing it.

State legitimacy has been framed largely in terms of the economic needs of the people and commercial aspirations of the private sector. Religion too, as a sector incorporated into the state, has become a constituency to be patronized. The state has funded a now widespread network of elementary-level centers, often attached to mosques, for the memorization of the Qur'ān. Degree-granting programs, through the doctorate, have been opened under the supervision of the religious establishment, e.g. at Abū Nūr and Masjid al-Fath. Aside from the religion curriculum of state schools, which functions to promote the pan-Arabism of Ba'thist ideology, popular education in Islam as provided by the religious establishment serves other purposes. It introduces Islam into the life of the nation in a way that goes beyond the symbolism of its constitutional status as the religion of the president and a possible source of legislation. To be sure, the state monitors religious activity, but its existence outside state institutions has worked to preserve, even strengthen, the influence of religion.

This can explain recent state concessions to Islam: the decision to allow prayer, a kind of religious association, in the military; and the licenses granted to the first Islamic banks. Who is coopting whom? Is the state going Islamic? No, but it cannot neglect the religiously imbued loyalties and aspirations of its people. The few members of parliament known to represent Islam, there as a way to integrate Islam into the state, bring an official sanction to their proposed measures in the name of Islam. Their project, for example, to renew "religious speech" (al-khitāb al-dīnī) does coincide with state interests in defining "true" Islam as a moderate religion, but it also awards Islam an effective, nationally recognized position from which to speak to contemporary society.

While the path to liberalization seems a never-ending process, it is worth asking about Islamic political parties in Syria's future. The recent Tenth Ba'th Party Congress called for – even if it did not formulate details for implementing – change, including non-state-regulated political parties. This, however, is limited to secularly – not religiously or ethnically-oriented parties. Given the weakness of the secular opposition, the viability of such parties will depend on their ability to form alliances with the state-banned religious opposition. The state has made clear it will not tolerate this. A combined secular-religious opposition, however, is not the only scenario for the political future of Islam in Syria.

MPs who represent Islam, having unsuccessfully requested state reconsideration of religiously oriented parties, still discuss publicly the importance of political representation that is religious but does not reduce religion to politics. This, to them, would lead not to the politicization of Islam, but the preservation of its moral integrity. Allowing Islam a

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public voice in the form of political parties as so conceived would effectively allow the religion to address popular sentiment, shape the moral discourse of the nation, and prevent the politicization of Islam by extremist elements claiming to speak in the name of God. Religious actors are thus seeking to ensure the societal influence of Islam in view of anticipated change but with the goal of Islam as moral authority not political end. Implicit in this strategizing is a conception of Islam as civic-minded religion where toleration, not coercion, is paramount principle: an affirmation of religious pluralism emerging from within religious circles committed to preventing the distortion of Islam by extremists, who, in the opinion of these MPs, would undermine its credibility as formative agent of the moral fabric of Syrian society.

Islam in Syria is in a position to participate in and even facilitate the political transformation envisioned by the state and demanded by current domestic and regional challenges. This is not to suggest a one-to-one correspondence between state and religion thinking on a pluralistic future – even within a Ba'thist framework – but rather a partnership, wherein both sides have goals of self-preservation that may produce unexpected results. The religion, seeking to protect its moral authority, is showing signs of

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framing at least the beginnings of democratic procedure. Wherever things end up, it is at the very least necessary for us to revise our perception of religion in Syria. Along with other sectors, amidst shifting circumstances and needs, religion needs to be taken into account in explaining (civil) society within the context of the authoritarian state.

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ENDNOTES

1   B. Haddad, "The Formation and Development of Economic Networks in Syria: Implications for Economic and Fiscal Reform, 1986-2000," in S. Heydemann (ed.), *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited*, New York and London 2004.

2   A. Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*, Freiburg 1998.

3   For example: R. Hinnebusch, *Syria. Revolution from Above*, London 2001; and V. Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad. Modernisation and the Limits of Change*, Oxford 2004. This is not to depreciate the value of these works, but to suggest the need for more nuanced analysis of religion in the study of Syria.

4   For example, É. Geoffroy, "Sufisme, réformisme et pouvoir en Syrie contemporaine," *Égypte/Monde arabe* 29 (1997), 11-21; L. Stenberg, "Naqshbandiyya in Damascus. Strategies to Establish and Strengthen the Order in a Changing Society," in E. Özdalga (ed.) *Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia — Change and Continuity*, Richmond, Surrey 1999; A. Christmann, "Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader. A Portrait of Muḥammad Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 9 (1998), 149-169; and P. L. Heck, "Religious Renewal in Syria. The Case of Muḥammad al-Ḥabash," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15 (2004), 185-207.

5   I refer here to a series of recent publications by I. Weismann. To name three: *Taste of Modernity. Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus*, Leiden 2001; "Between Sufi Reformism and Modernist Rationalism. A Reappraisal of the Origins of the Salafiyya from the Damascene Angle," *Die Welt des Islams* 41 (2001), 206-237; and "Religious Strife on the Periphery. Sufi Populists, Salafi Ideologues, and Muslim Brothers in Twentieth-Century Hamah," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (2005), 39-58.

6   For the dynamics of the Muslim response to European-driven modernism, involving both preservation and alteration of the religious heritage, see A. Salvatore, "The 'Implosion' of *Sharīʿa* within the Emergence of Public Normativity. The Impact on Personal Responsibility and the Impersonality of Law," in B. Dupret (ed.), *Standing Trial. Law and Person in the Modern Middle East*, London 2004, pp. 116-139.

7   The Arab press has not failed to call into question Syrian Baʿthism, e.g. a three-part series appearing on the front page of the "analysis" section of the Lebanese al-Nahar (February 4, 5, and 6, 2004).

8   For example, in Daryā, a town a few miles from Damascus. M. Kilū, "Sujanaʾ Daryā," *al-Nahar*, January 24, 2004, p. 18. A group of young people, inspired specifically by Islam, began to work to eradicate local corruption (perhaps the most serious flaw of government institutions in Syria); to educate the populace in local problem-solving, in rights as safe-guarded by Islam, and in various sciences and job skills; and to mobilize local action for environment protection, religious tolerance and the extra-judiciary settlement of local disputes. Kilū, a well-known Syrian advocate of civil society, concludes, "Perhaps the uniqueness of the experience [in Daryā] resides in the capacity of non-partisan youth, members of Syria's civil society, to advance a civil reading of Islam that led them to a political engagement with the problems of their small community that can serve as a model for a [similar] engagement with the problems of the other cities and towns of Syria, in all of which are youth resembling the youth of Daryā."

9   See Geoffroy, op. cit. (1997).

10   For example, Aḥmad Kuftārū (d. 2004), former long-standing Grand Mufti of Syria and leader of the Naqshbani-Khālidi Sufi order, who was known for his promotion of Sufi-Salafi rapprochement.

11   See M. S. Berger, "The *Sharīʿa* and Legal Pluralism: The Example of Syria," in B. Dupret et al. (eds.), *Legal Pluralism in the Arab World*, The Hague 1999.

12   Religion subtly but persistently influences the moral discourse of the nation. See P. Pinto, "Sufism and the Political Economy of Morality in Syria," in P. L. Heck (ed.), *Sufism and Politics*, forthcoming issue of *Princeton Papers. Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.

13   Articles periodically appear in state-aligned newspapers to argue for more flexible understandings of religion. For a recent example of this, see ʿAdnan al-Rifaʿī, "Muʿawiqqat al-islah al-dini fi l-fikr al-mahsūb ʿalā l-Islam," *Tishrin*, 26 July 2005, p. 8.

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