



## WORKSHOP

# Syria: Religion in Revolution, War, and Displacement

French Institute for Anatolian Studies  
Istanbul - Türkiye  
5<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> March 2025

### Call for papers

Much has already been written about the role of religion in the 2011 Arab uprising in general, and in the Syrian revolution in particular—religious slogans and the use of mosques in the early phases of the uprisings, or the subsequent rise of Islamist parties across the region have been extensively discussed (Boëx and Pinto, 2018; Aubin-Boltanski, 2022). Many authors have focused on the Syrian conflict's sectarian dimension, that is, on politically relevant, mutually competitive religious identities. Theoretically sophisticated accounts have proposed useful correctives to the ethno-primordialist notion that the war was a mere resurgence of 'ancient hatreds'. They rather emphasize the fact that the 'sectarianization' of the conflict resulted from complex interactions between existing social and political structures, on the one hand, and the warring parties' strategies of mobilization, on the other hand (Satik, 2013; Phillips, 2015; Stolleis, 2015; Leenders, 2016; Pinto, 2017; Belhadj and Ruiz de Elvira, 2018; Hinnebusch, 2019; Mazur, 2021). Sectarianization is an important part of the context we aim to explore in this conference, but it does not constitute the focus of our reflection. Rather, we seek contributions that address the impact of the revolution, war, and mass displacement of the Syrian population, not on sectarian identities, but on religion per se, which is broadly understood here as a set of beliefs and practices within a given spiritual tradition. The latter's transformations in post-2011 Syria shall be examined through three main perspectives, although we remain open to other relevant approaches.

### 1. *Doctrines and practices*

Sectarian polarization had a homogenizing effect on Syria's religious communities, whose members were often forced to align with the dominant political stance among their coreligionists (besides the literature on sectarianization, see, for the Alawites, Ghanem, 2021). Failure to do so entailed swift punishment or marginalization, as was the case for the nuns of the convent of Saint Thecla in Maaloula (Poujeau, 2021). What is less well known, however, was the specifically *religious* impact of that process. Early in the war,





analysts observed that the military dominance of Salafi and Salafi-Jihadi armed groups gave those brands of Islam a hegemonic status among Sunni communities living in rebel-held areas, a trend that culminated with the establishment of ISIS' quasi-state in the eastern half of the country (International Crisis Group, 2012; Lund, 2013; Pierret, 2017). We know little, however, about the consequences of that hegemony on grassroots beliefs and practices, and about its legacy in regions where Jihadi governance was uprooted, like in formerly ISIS-held territories, or was forced to moderate, like in Idlib under the control of Hay'a Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In the latter case, evidence shows that non-Salafi doctrines remained deeply entrenched among local communities, even forcing HTS to play down (though not to abandon) its ambitions to spread its own brand of Islam (Drevon and Haenni, 2021). Likewise, in Arab regions that were once controlled by ISIS, the Kurdish-led Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) has fostered the reassertion of Sufi leaders and brotherhoods (Pierret and Alrefaai, 2021). However, the extent of the following they managed to retain, or reconstitute, remains obscure.

One knows even less about corresponding dynamics among other religious communities. Before the war, it was widely assumed that the level of religious observance among Alawites and Druzes was low in comparison with Sunnis and Christians. To what extent did this situation change during the conflict? Another issue that needs in-depth exploration is the religious dimension of conversions to Shiism, a phenomenon that has been predominantly observed in regions of Syria that fell under the direct control of paramilitary groups aligned with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (e.g., parts of the Lebanese border area, the Deir ez-Zor province, and the southern countryside of Aleppo) (Awad, 2019; Baker, 2023). Beyond the recruitment of formerly Sunni tribesmen into these paramilitary groups, what is the real extent of Shiite outreach among these communities?

## 2. *The reconfigurations of religious authority*

As a result of the conflict, Syrian religious leaders and groups have been faced with both opportunities to assert their authority, and challenges from political actors and religious newcomers. In the realm of official religious institutions, enormous change has taken place: in Idlib, the Turkish-controlled northern border areas, and DAANES, the religious field is now administered by institutions that were established *after* 2011 (Pierret and Alrefaai, 2021). These institutions emerged either as a result of top-down policies on the part of the respective powers that be, or due to bottom-up efforts among Muslim scholars—who were themselves divided between pre-existing networks, and new figures propped up by armed groups, the so-called *shar'is* (Cole, 2014; Heller, 2014). Even the Assad regime's religious institutions have been extensively reconfigured in the meantime, most notably through the abolition of the Grand Muftiship in 2021 (Khatib, 2023; Pierret, 2024).





The conflict has also reinforced the transnational dimension of religious structures among the different communities, either by fostering cross-border sectarian solidarities (Smyth, 2015; Pierret, 2017; Ghanem 2021), or through the worldwide dispersion of Syrian religious leaders and communities. Recent publications show, for instance, that dreams (shared via instant messaging applications) have played a crucial role in the recreation of Alepine Sufi communities across the diaspora (Pinto, 2024), and that faith leaders have located themselves at the intersection between donors and implementers of aid among refugee communities in Lebanon (Carpi, 2023). Wartime circumstances have also created new opportunities, on both sides of the frontlines and in the diaspora, for religious charities of all denominations (Akdedian, 2021) and Sunni missionary movements such as Salafi NGOs, the female-only Qubaysiyat, the Tabligh, and the anti-Salafi, Lebanon-based Ahbash (Pierret, 2018; Aubin-Boltanski, 2023). Comparable dynamics within other sects remain largely obscure. For instance, what does the role of Druze religious leaders in the ongoing Suwayda protests tell us about the transformation of their religious field over the last decade and a half?

### ***3. Questioning faith, challenging religious norms?***

Recent opinion polls suggest that religiosity has increased again in most Arab countries after a momentaneous drop in the late 2010s (Robbins, 2023). In Syria, the latter trend was echoed by anecdotal observations and a sense of alarm among some men of religion. Common explanations for this phenomenon included the trauma caused by the atrocities (and ultimate failure) of Jihadi groups, and the fact that because of their expatriation, particularly in Europe, some Syrians have moved to a social environment in which religious norms are less constraining. Serious research is sorely lacking to make sense of this ebb and flow of religiosity, and of its underlying factors. Moreover, religious skepticism remains worthy of being studied even if it remains marginal among Syrian communities, as illustrated by a stimulating reflection on unbelief in pre-revolutionary Egypt (Schielke, 2012). Besides outright atheism and abandonment of religious observance, we also seek contributions on other kinds of challenges to established religious norms, such as pragmatic lifestyle adaptation, anticlericalism and liberal interpretations of the Scriptures.

Proposals for papers should be sent in English to [thomas.pierret@univ-amu.fr](mailto:thomas.pierret@univ-amu.fr), Paulo Pinto [philu99@gmail.com](mailto:philu99@gmail.com), [anna.poujeau@cnrs.fr](mailto:anna.poujeau@cnrs.fr) by **3<sup>th</sup> February 2025** at the latest. Abstracts should not exceed 500 words and should be accompanied by a short presentation of the author.

### **Bibliography**

Akdedian, Harout (2021) Stifling the Public Domain in Syria: Religion & State from Neo-Liberalism to State Atrophy. In Aziz al-Azmeh, Nadia Al-Bagdadi, Harout Akdedian and





Harith Hassan (eds) *Striking From the Margins: State, Religion and Devolution of Authority* (Saqi Books): 91-117.

Aubin-Boltanski, Emma (2022) Contester l'omnipotence du leader, conjurer et susciter la peur. Les usages multiples de la formule Allâhu Akbar. In *Lexique vivant de la révolution et de la guerre en Syrie* (ANR Shakk), <https://doi.org/10.21428/3633fae9.8d19805d>.

——— (2023) *A Mawlid al-Nabî* under Close Surveillance Beirut, November 2019. In Nelly Amri, Rachida Chih and Stefan Reichsmuth (eds.) *The Presence of the Prophet in Early Modern and Contemporary Islam* (Brill).

Awad, Ziad (2019) *Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities* (Middle East Directions, Research Project Report 21).

Baker, Rauf (2023) Tehran's Shiification of Syria. Iran's Hegemonic Drive. *Middle East Quarterly* 30/1.

Belhadj, Souhail and Laura Ruiz de Elvira (2018). Sectarianism and civil conflict in Syria: reconfigurations of a reluctant issue. In Hendrik Kraetzschmar and Paola Rivetti (eds). *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention* (Edinburgh University Press): 322-340.

Bunzel, Cole (2014) The Caliphate's scholar-in-arms. *Jihadica*, <http://www.jihadica.com/the-caliphate's-scholar-in-arms/>.

Boëx, Cécile and Paulo Pinto (2018) Restituer la densité et la diversité des liens entre le religieux et le politique. *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 181.

Carpi, Estella (2023) Syrian Refugee Faith Leaders in Lebanon: Navigating the Intersection Between Assistance Provision and "Spiritual Activism". In Anna Rowlands and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Contemporary Migration* (Oxford University Press).

Drevon, Jérôme and Patrick Haenni (2021) *How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where It Leads: The Case of HTS, the Former AQ franchise in Syria* (European University Institute, Middle East Directions 108).

Ghanem, Aghiad (2021) *Patronage, refuge, ancrage : l'internationalisation des Alaouites (Syrie, Turquie, Liban) face au conflit syrien*. Ph.D. Thesis in Political Sciences, Institut d'études politiques, Paris.





Heller, Sam (2014) Islam's lawyers in arms. *Foreign Policy*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181121161122/https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/06/islams-lawyers-in-arms/>.

Hinnebusch, Raymond (2019) Sectarianism and Governance in Syria. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19: 41-66.

International Crisis Group (2012) *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition* (Middle East & North Africa Report 131).

Khatib, Line (2023) Autocracy, Iran and Religious Transformation in Syria, *Syria Studies* 15.

Leenders, Reinoud (2016) Master Frames of the Syrian Conflict: Early Violence and Sectarian Response Revisited. In *POMEPS Studies 20: From Mobilization to Counter-Revolution*.

Lund, Aron (2013). *Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front* (Swedish Institute of International Affairs).

Mazur, Kevin (2021). *Revolution in Syria. Identity, Networks, and Repression* (Cambridge University Press).

Phillips, Christopher (2015). Sectarianism and conflict in Syria. *Third World Quarterly* 36/2, 357-76.

Pierret, Thomas (2017) Syrian Salafis at War: Logics of Fragmentation and Realignment. In Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (eds) *Salafism After the Arab Awakening. Contending with People's Power* (Hurst: 137-153).

——— (2018) L'Instance Islamique du Cham : une 'voie moyenne' salafiste contre la radicalisation jihadiste. *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 181: 219-239.

——— (2024) Minister vs. Mufti. The Struggle Over 'Moderate Islam' in Wartime Syria (2011-2021). *Mediterranean Politics*.

Pierret, Thomas and Laila Alrefaai (2021) Religious Governance in Syria Amid Territorial Fragmentation. In Frederic Wehrey (ed) *Islamic Institutions in Arab States. Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-option, and Contention* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).





Pinto, Paulo (2017) *The Shattered Nation: The Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict*. In Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds) *Sectarianization. Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (Hurst).

——— (2024) *Uncertain futures: Memory, performance and temporality among Syrian Sufis. History and Anthropology*: 1–15.

Poujeau, Anna (2021) *L'affaire des moniales de Sainte-Thècle. La communauté chrétienne en Syrie au cœur d'images et de récits concurrents*. In Cécile Boëx and Agnès Devictor (eds) *Syrie, une nouvelle ère des images. De la révolte au conflit transnational* (Paris, CNRS) : 302-.

Robbins, Michael (2023) *MENA Youth Lead Return to Religion*. Arab Barometer, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2023/03/mena-youth-lead-return-to-religion/>.

Satik, Nayruz (2013) *al-hala al-ta'ifiya fi-l-intifada al-Suriya. Omran* 5/2: 373-427.

Schielke, Samuli (2012) *Being a non-believer in a time of Islamic revival: Trajectories of doubt and certainty in contemporary Egypt. International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44/2: 301–20.

Stolleis, Friederike (2015) *Playing the Sectarian Card. Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung).

