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Where Will Erdogan’s Revolution Stop?

By Suleyman Ozeren, Suat Cubukcu, and Matthew Bastug

In recent years, Turkey has been undergoing a dramatic socio-political transformation. The country’s constitution and system of governance have been formally changed from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential system that grants extensive power to the autocratic President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Along the way, the president and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have pushed through sweeping reforms of the judiciary, military, national police, media, and Directorate of Religious Affairs, which have included purging their political opponents from these institutions and replacing them with party loyalists. This has enhanced the AKP regime’s overall power and bolstered its political and ideological agenda.

These far-reaching changes in Turkish internal politics have also manifested in the country’s foreign policy, which was traditionally Western-oriented and used to prioritize strong relations with Europe and the United States. Instead, Erdogan has dragged the country in a different direction. He has significantly improved ties and pursued cooperation with the revolutionary Islamist regime in Iran and also with Russia. Meantime, since the 2011 Arab Spring and the Middle Eastern turmoil and wars that ensued, the AKP regime has attempted to enlarge its regional political and military influence—including by backing or directly sponsoring...
various non-state Islamist actors in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Most recently, during the Turkish military incursion into northeastern Syria, Turkish soldiers crossed the Syrian border along with the Free Syrian Army, which consists of several factions of known jihadist groups.

This ongoing transformation that the AKP regime is pursuing in Turkish society and foreign relations is fundamentally revolutionary—it has aimed to subvert nearly a century of Turkish republican institutions, practices, and pro-Western and civil-secular values. In this, Erdogan and the movement that supports him have clearly taken some inspiration from the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. This paper aims to assess the ongoing “revolution” in Turkey and its change from a pro-Western republic to an autocracy that is, according to AKP officials, emphatically “pro-Islamic.” The paper looks at how the Iranian revolutionary model has impacted the Erdogan regime’s sympathies, ideology, and tactics, and what this has meant both for Turkey’s political life and its external conduct—including its support for Islamist extremism.

From Political Islam to Islamist Autocracy

TURKEY’S RULING JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (AKP) OFFICIALLY IDENTIFIES itself as a conservative democratic party with an Islamic identity. However, particularly over the last six years, the party has pursued policies and taken actions that are more autocratic, Islamist and also revolutionary in nature. Among other things, the Erdogan regime has used its power and control of the state apparatus to attempt to transform Turkish government and society for its own gain, including the advancement of its ideological agenda.

When the AKP first came to power in 2002 under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, he and his conservative party colleagues tried to cloak their political background as members of the Turkish Islamist movement in new pro-democracy narratives. Although most of the AKP’s founders had roots in the National Outlook movement—i.e., the Milli Görüs, a political Islamist organization created in the 1970s by Necmettin Erbakan—Erdogan claimed the new AKP had embraced democracy and taken off “their National Outlook shirt.” In fact, AKP’s principal founders had been members of Erbakan’s banned Islamist-oriented Welfare
Party, which functioned as a grassroots Islamic organization and party with the goal of establishing an “Islamic” society and government in Turkey. Because of this, many Turkish observers were suspicious of the early AKP, and unconvinced by the party’s pro-democracy rhetoric. In those early days, many Turks questioned whether the party had a “hidden agenda” and had put on a “pro-democracy shirt” only to conceal its true ambitions. Indeed, as the AKP has grown more powerful, it has become more authoritarian and revealed its revolutionary agenda.

When Erbakan’s Welfare Party won the general election in 1995, it was the first Islam-based party to come to power since the establishment of the secularist Turkish Republic in 1923. Erbakan had been deeply influenced by Sunni revivalists like Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood movement and, more importantly, the 1979 Khomeinist revolution in Iran. Pan-Islamism and anti-Westernism were the two defining themes of his political program. In its founding manifesto, the Welfare Party distinguished Turkish society into two groups—on one side were the members of the National Outlook, and on the other were the “imitators” (taklitciler) who emulated the West and betrayed the truly “national” and “Islamic” norms and values of Turkey. This core ideological distinction infused virtually everything the party did and said.

Erbakan strongly criticized the post-1991 global order and its neoliberal institutions. In their place, he championed the creation of an alternative Islamic order, one that Turkey itself would lead, and which included new and exclusively Muslim organizations that would deal with the Muslim World’s economic, political, and security affairs. He called the European Union a “Christian Club” and advocated “for the establishment of a Muslim customs union, an Islamic NATO, an Islamic United Nations, as well as a single Islamic currency.” As an alternative to the G-7, Erbakan created the “Developing 8” (D-8) organization of Muslim-majority countries which, importantly, included the revolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran—a country that Erbakan deeply admired. At home, his government proactively supported the growth of “Islamic” businesses—i.e., companies whose owners had close relations with the Welfare Party or were ideologically affiliated with the National Outlook movement. This formed the basis of a new “Islamic” economy in Turkey that included large holding companies, chain stores, and banks that supported the Welfare government. In turn, the government privileged these companies, including by helping them develop their enterprises with international partners in the Arab Gulf countries.

When Erbakan’s self-declared “pro-Islamic” government was in power, the secular establishment—which subscribed to the pro-democracy and pro-Western principles of Kemal Ataturk—did not remain silent. Turkish institutions that were
steeped in Kemalism strongly opposed him. Ultimately, that opposition led to the famous “post-modern coup” by the Turkish military on February 28, 1997. In the aftermath, the military effectively set about to re-engineer society, intervening directly and aggressively in the lives of Turkish citizens with the goal of minimizing Islamic influence in the public sphere. As a result, Erbakan’s Welfare Party was ousted in 1997 and in 1999, the party was banned from engaging in politics altogether.

Under the “February 28” secularist order, it became nearly impossible for Islamic parties to organize or contest for power. Instead, the Turkish Islamist movement was checked, and also directly challenged by strengthened and empowered secular institutions, including the military and the judiciary. Meantime, ordinary religious believers also faced an oppressive political environment, and were forced to keep their faith hidden. This led to resentment and frustration among Muslim conservatives and also liberals, which the Islamist leaders of the AKP would later take advantage of for its own purposes.

By 2001, Turkey was facing one of the worst financial crises in its history, and this was accompanied by surging frustration and anger among the wider public over the Kemalist military’s pervasive influence over public life. These circumstances paved the way for the rise of the Justice and Development Party in national politics. In their election campaign, Erdogan and the AKP’s platform and rhetoric seemingly abandoned National Outlook’s agenda and emphasized instead a “conservative” but, they claimed, fundamentally democratic agenda. In the general election a year later, the AKP won the vast majority of the parliamentary seats on the ballot.

The initial years of AKP government were indeed shaped by Western-oriented discourse and policies, with an emphasis on strengthening democracy and national economic growth. The Kemalist establishment, however, did not believe the AKP’s rhetoric about democracy was sincere; they continued to see the AKP as an offshoot of the Welfare Party with a hidden agenda that was antagonistic to democracy. The rallying cry “February 28th will last 1,000 years!” became a notorious slogan for Turkish secularists. It also reflected the challenges that awaited the AKP. With Damocles’ sword swinging overhead, the threat of being shut down and banned from politics always seemed inches away for the AKP.

Under Erdogan’s leadership, however, the AKP shrewdly avoided direct conflict with the secular establishment, especially with the military, during its early years in office. Instead, the AKP stressed its pro-democracy and pro-European Union agenda, and it used this to mobilize broad-based support among the public against the Kemalist “deep state” and its heavy-handed interference in society.
Along the way, the AKP took essential steps to expand religious freedom and other essential human rights. They notably sought integration with the European Union by passing constitutional changes to meet the Copenhagen Criteria (i.e., the rules that define whether a country is eligible to join the European Union). While many Turkish liberals came to support the AKP’s agenda, the Kemalist establishment remained skeptical of the party, as many still suspected that its democratic and pro-EU rhetoric was merely a diversion to enable the AKP to stay in power.

After winning its third consecutive general election in 2011, the AKP held more power in its hands than ever before. It also faced fewer institutional checks and balances, as the executive body’s domination over the judicial and legislative branches had continued to expand. In effect, the party acquired a stranglehold on state institutions, and Turkey’s democratic gains, in terms of the rule of law, pluralism, and individual rights, started to decay precipitously.

The AKP’s third term in office was a turning point vis-à-vis the Islamization of politics in Turkey. With its extensive power and confidence, the AKP returned to its “pro-Islamic” roots in the National Outlook movement. The party began to stress Turkey’s Islamic identity in opposition to its Western one, while its rhetoric about the two sides—i.e., the “Muslims” and the “imitators”—became ever-more intense and polarizing. Using its control of the state, the AKP augmented years of grass-roots organizing and political infrastructure building by adopting a top-down Islamization model. Among other things, and as will be discussed later, the AKP has leveraged its control of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which includes government-funded mosques and imams, as an instrument for contesting long-held Kemalist and civil-secular norms and imposing the party’s own social preferences and political line on the public. Party leaders have justified these interventionist policies in society on the basis of their “pro-Islamic” principles; not only did they have a bone to pick with the upholders of the “February 28” order, but they have claimed to be correcting or rooting out what they deemed to be the errors and corruptions in Turkey’s westernized society.

The AKP government also became an outspoken supporter of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings that enveloped several Middle Eastern countries. While some hoped the uprisings would lead to a more plural and democratic regional order, the Erdogan regime clearly saw them as an opportunity to expand its own influence and to foster a new Islamic order in the Middle East that would be led by Turkey. In particular, Erdogan personally championed the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi, the group’s candidate for president of Egypt in 2012. Meanwhile, he promoted the AKP as a role model for other Muslim countries.
In his speeches, he explicitly addressed the transnational Muslim community (ummah), and he further expressed his pan-Islamist ideals in his diplomacy with other Muslim countries. Simultaneously, as anti-government protests enveloped Syria and the Assad regime violently suppressed them, the Erdogan government began to support and bolster militant opposition groups in Syria. The AKP government, for instance, provided support to militant Islamist groups, including the al-Qaeda affiliates Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, that were fighting against the Assad regime and also Kurdish groups. In Libya, meanwhile, Turkey involved itself along with Qatar in a proxy war by supporting Islamist militias and factions under the flag of the “Libya Dawn” coalition. The AKP regime has also been alleged to have links with Ansar Al-Sharia, the terrorist organization blamed for the 2012 Benghazi attack against the United States Consulate.

In late May 2013, large-scale protests inside Turkey itself became a watershed in the AKP’s modus operandi and domestic agenda. The Gezi Park protests switched Erdogan’s attention—and his threat perception—from the Kemalist “deep state” to the Turkish people. He began to perceive dissident political groups as a significant threat to his own power. Instead of addressing the concerns of the protestors, Erdogan and AKP officials claimed Gezi Park represented a “street coup” against a “pious” government and the “rise” of a “New Turkey.” In fact, the Gezi Park protests represented a strong public reaction to what the protestors saw as their elected government’s increasingly autocratic, religious and chauvinistic policies and rhetoric. Since then, the AKP regime has only become more anti-pluralist and intolerant—and far harsher and violent toward its political opponents and critics.

Soon after, on December 17 and 25, 2013, two separate investigations by the Turkish National Police—i.e., Turkey’s national gendarme, akin to the U.S.’s Federal Bureau of Investigation—exposed massive corruption operations involving some of Erdogan’s prominent cabinet members, bureaucrats, and family members. Erdogan was incensed. Despite an abundance of solid police evidence, Erdogan declared the corruption investigations an attempted “judicial coup,” and then purged the investigators and prosecutors from their positions, arresting some of them.

On July 15, 2016, when the infamous failed military coup was launched, Erdogan was quick to act. He called the coup “a gift from God”—presumably because it revealed a vast conspiracy against his “pro-Islamic” government—and used the uprising as a pretext to initiate a sweeping crackdown. Erdogan declared a state of emergency, and then purged more than 170,000 public servants and detained more than 70,000 political dissidents—academics, journalists, judges, and military and police officers whom Erdogan viewed as a threat to his power.
His government subsequently bypassed parliament and enacted controversial decrees that suppressed basic democratic rights. Simultaneously, the AKP pushed through a dramatic restructuring of the Turkish system of government. The constitutional referendum of 2017 granted President Erdogan sweeping new powers that undermine legislative and judicial independence and give the president unrivaled authority over state institutions, including military and law enforcement. All this has fortified Erdogan’s autocratic rule.

As the Erdogan regime has accumulated more power, its “pro-Islamic” agenda has become more and more manifest. Today, the AKP’s foreign policy strongly emphasizes the “unity of Ummah [i.e., the Muslim Nation],” and its officials routinely question the ability of secular states to govern anywhere in the wider Islamic World. Not only has the AKP’s rhetoric become more anti-Western, but Erdogan and others have deliberately fomented popular resentment and anger toward Europe, Israel, and the United States to galvanize support for their program. This ongoing transformation has pulled Turkey away from its modern pro-Western orientation and toward a future that is emphatically both more authoritarian and Islamist.

**Turkish Islamism and the Islamic Revolution**

ONE OF THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL GEOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE RISE OF Erdogan and the AKP regime has been Turkey’s increasing rapprochement with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Previously, the pro-Western Turkish regime and the Islamist regime in Iran had been diametrically opposed, and relations between the two countries were tense and rife with challenges. However, during the second half of the AKP’s rule, ties and cooperation between Turkey and Iran have significantly improved. Despite some divergent interests (in Syria, for instance) between the two, elements of Turkey’s ruling AKP are clearly inspired by and sympathetic to aspects of Iranian Islamism’s revolutionary agenda at home and in the region.

Since the 1683 Treaty of Qasr-e Shirin between the Ottoman Empire and Persian Safavid Empire, Turkey and Iran have never had any direct military conflict over territory. Nevertheless, the proximity of the two countries has meant that developments in one has important effects in the other. In addition to periods of
cooperation and relative harmony, Turkey and Iran also have a long history of security competition and ideological rivalry. Given both countries’ multi-ethnic and multi-religious character, their rivalries have unfolded not just between the states that rule them but frequently also inside each country and at the sub-national level. As the scholar Nilufer Narli has observed, Turkey-Iran relations “have always been fragile and delicately balanced. Conflicts within ethnically or religiously divided groups in Iran or Turkey have had a reciprocal bilateral impact.”

During the early years of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and Reza Shah of Iran had a good and cooperative relationship due to similar worldviews and the Shah’s admiration for Ataturk’s sweeping efforts to reform and modernize Turkey. The Saadabat Pact in 1937, the Baghdad Pact, and the Central Treaty Organization in the 1950s, along with even further improvement in the bilateral relations during Adnan Menderes’ government and Muhammad Reza Shah’s reign led to an even deeper convergence of interests. Both Menderes and the Shah prioritized having a closer alliance with the West and the United States. This convergence fell apart after the 1979 Khomeinist revolution. This generated fundamental ideological antagonisms between Turkey’s Kemalist establishment and Iran’s new Islamist regime. Iran, for its part, increasingly saw Turkey as a rival because of the Kemalist establishment’s alliance with the West and also because of the country’s largely conservative (and anti-revolutionary) Sunni population.

Since then, Turkey has been a major focus of Iran’s efforts to export its revolutionary Islamist ideology and agenda, and this has included several components. First, revolutionary Iran sees Shiites, Alawites, and Nusayri communities—including those inside Turkey itself—as natural constituencies that give Iran a ready-made sphere of influence throughout the Middle East. Second, the Iranian regime also sees Sunni Islamist movements that have been inspired by the 1979 Revolution as political allies, and it has supported these groups in Turkey against the Kemalist establishment. Third, Iran’s efforts to export the Islamic Revolution also recognizes the utility of backing—financially, logistically, and politically—groups that may not share the regime’s own revolutionary goals but which still oppose its principal rivals. Thus, since 1979, Iran has used a variety of tactics to develop its influence and interfere in Turkish domestic politics, including by supporting a host of Islamist and other groups, allegedly playing a role in the assassination of several secular Turkish intellectuals, and by supporting Kurdish separatism.

Not surprisingly, Turkey’s pro-Western and secular political and military leaders quickly came to regard revolutionary Iran as a major security threat. However, in contrast to the Kemalist establishment, the reactions to Iran’s revolution among
the wider Turkish population was decidedly more mixed. Turkish Islamists in particular were inspired by the Islamic Revolution in important ways.

Turkish political Islamism has long been influenced by revivalist movements and ideologists from elsewhere, including the pan-Islamic revivalist Cemaleddin Afghani (Jamal al-din Afghani) and particularly the leaders of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyed Qutb, as well as Syed Abul A’la Mawdudi, the founder of Pakistan’s Jamaat-e-Islami. Iran’s revolution had an electrifying effect on political Islam in Turkey, inspiring it with a new call to action and to seek greater organization against the secularist Kemalist order.

Significantly, fifteen years before the revolution, in November 1964, the Shah’s regime had exiled Khomeini to Turkey, where he stayed until October 1965. While in Turkey, Khomeini as a spiritual and revolutionary leader acquired a substantial following—including Erbakan and others in his National Outlook movement. In 1972, they founded the National Salvation Party to encourage large-scale Islamist mobilization against “westernized” Turks and Western influence. Erbakan and his followers hailed the Islamic Revolution as a victory over secularism and the Western world.27

Most important, the Iranian revolution provided Turkish Islamists with a significant new model—a “comprehensive blueprint” and a “political theory”—for establishing an Islamic government and society in Turkey.28 Instead of gradually converting society to their aims through ideological outreach and grassroots organizing like the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkish Islamists began to focus more on seizing control of the state. After 1979, in fact, hundreds of Turkish university students traveled to Iran, where they studied the fundamental principles of the Islamic Revolution and developed revolutionary theories of their own. They also established extensive personal networks29 that have evolved and exist to this day.

In short, the Iranian revolution triggered a deep transformation within Turkish Islamism, one that generated new discussions about Islamism’s goals and methods, including the need for more radical and effective measures—all with an eye toward realizing a successful “revolution” in Turkey itself.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Iran continued to expand and deepen its influence activities in Turkey through pro-Iranian groups30 and individuals, such as Nurettin Sirin and Burhan Kavuncu, who promoted Khomeinist ideals.31 In 1995, Burhan Kavuncu, the leader of the Yeryuzu Group, an influential Iran-affiliated organization, explained why his followers must support the Islamic Revolution’s spread around the world. He stated that while Turks should continue to embrace revivalists like Afghani, Qutb, Hasan al-Banna, and Mawdudi, they should also venerate Khomeini because of his superior teachings. For Kavuncu,
Brotherhood ideologists like Sayyed Qutb neglected social problems, whereas Khomeini’s doctrine of Islamic Unity (Tawhid) and his revolutionary ideals dealt explicitly with social and economic issues and prioritized them. Moreover, Khomeini emphasized the transnational political unity of Sunni and Shia Muslims, a pan-Islamic aspiration that resonated deeply with not just Islamists but also Turkish religious conservatives who (unlike Wahhabis, for example) do not typically harbor strongly anti-Shia views.

Necmettin Erbakan, who died in 2011, and the political parties he created—including National Salvation, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), and later the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi)—did more than anything else to build deep and staunch Turkish support for the ideals of Islamic Revolution. In 2007, on the 28th anniversary of the Khomeinist revolution, Erbakan stated that the “revolution was exemplary,” and expressed his hope that it “will be the core of the bliss to the whole world.”

The links Erbakan established between Turkish Islamism and revolutionary Iran were substantial. In 2015, at a workshop convened in Tehran on the topic of Erbakan’s views on Islamic Revolution, Muhammedrza Bagheri, one of Ayatollah Khamenei’s deputies, explained that Erbakan adored Iran and believed that Ayatollah Khamenei was the authoritative leader of the worldwide Ummah/Muslim Nation. Indeed, Khomeini’s doctrine on the “Unification of Ummah”—i.e., the unification of Shiites and Sunnis against the West—inspired not only Iran’s “export of revolution” to conservative Sunni countries, but, particularly since Erbakan, this pan-Islamic mantra has inspired Turkish Islamism. Like Khomeini before him, Erdogan has repeatedly declared, “I am neither a Sunni nor a Shia. I am a Muslim.”

During the “February 28” secularist era, such Islamist and pro-revolution sentiments met with a lot of scrutiny from the Turkish authorities, and they remained largely on the periphery of political and intellectual life, embedded in National Outlook and Islamist party cadres. Now, with the rise of Erdogan/AKP, the old order has been turned on its head, and the pro-Iran and pro-Islamic Revolution views of Erbakan—once considered beyond the pale in a secular and religiously conservative society—are now far more common throughout Turkish life.

Indeed, official and public sympathy for revolutionary Iran became more visible during Erdogan’s tenure as a prime minister, and this has only deepened during his presidency. Today, there are many groups and organizations in Turkey which publicly promote pro-Islamic Revolution and/or pro-Iranian views, including Quds-Der (Quds Association), Conqueror Raiders (Fatih Akincilar), Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), the Akabe Group, Turkish Hezbollah and its political
Moreover, under the AKP, pro-Iranian Islamists have also have acquired critical positions in government and the state apparatus. As Kemal Kirisci of the Brookings Institution has written, Erdogan’s own “Islamist roots and discomfort towards secularism has made him much less inhibited by the theocratic nature of the Iranian regime.” In 2014, when Erdogan visited Tehran, he said that “Iran feels like a second home”—a statement which sums up the president’s affections for the Islamist regime in Iran, and also one that reveals just how much Turkish politics have been transformed by the AKP.

Enabling Iranian Power and Influence?

Despite some key areas of disagreement between the AKP regime and the Islamic Republic of Iran—most notably, over Syria—Erdogan’s government has, in fact, catalyzed significant improvements in Turkish-Iranian relations. This has included enhanced cooperation between the two governments in the energy, commercial, diplomatic and also military realms. Following his meeting with the Turkish Joint Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar on August 16, 2017, the Iranian Joint Chief of Staff Mohammed Baqeri observed, “There have been no such visits between the two countries for a long time, but considering regional developments and security issues—border security and the fight against terrorism—there was a need for such a visit.” The Iranian Joint Chief of Staff was accompanied by the head of the ground forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. During the visit, according to the Turkish daily Hurriyet, new cooperation deals were signed, including joint military training and exchange of students at military schools. These are quite significant and unprecedented agreements, considering the access that Iranian military agents might gain in Turkey and within the Turkish military structure.

This increasing Turkish-Iranian cooperation, it can be argued, has been partly driven by shared interests, such as preventing Kurdish independence from Iraq, as well as both Ankara’s and Tehran’s pragmatic calculations to deconflict and de-escalate while the wars in Syria are still raging. But it has also been driven by the AKP’s ideological affinities for the Islamist regime in Iran and many of its aims. Thus, instead of actively balancing against Iran’s Islamist regime, or at least
keeping it at arm’s length (as Ankara tried to do for the first two decades of the Islamic Republic’s existence), there has been a clear pattern of the AKP enabling the growth of the Islamic Republic’s power and influence. In fact, Erdogan’s and the AKP’s many comments criticizing and questioning the U.S.’s military presence in the Middle East\(^\text{46}\) (including in Iraq and Syria)\(^\text{47}\) signal not just their fundamental disagreement with U.S. policy, but a potential convergence of attitudes between the AKP\(^\text{48}\) and the Iranian regime, whose “Islamic revolution” aims to roll-back all U.S. influence from the region.\(^\text{49}\) Could this resentment toward the U.S. become the basis for greater collusion or rapprochement between the AKP regime and Iran—all to the detriment of the U.S.’s interests?

For years, Turks and Turkey-watchers in allied Western countries have been alarmed by the increasing presence of Islamists, including some with alleged ties to the Iranian regime, in critical positions of power in the Ankara government. In the most notorious case, Hakan Fidan, Erdogan’s close confidante with well-established pro-Iranian sympathies,\(^\text{50}\) became the head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, or MIT, in 2010.\(^\text{51}\) According to Israeli intelligence sources, Fidan “played a central role in tightening Turkish ties with Iran.”\(^\text{52}\) Another report claims that Fidan, who allegedly has “shared sensitive information with Iran,”\(^\text{53}\) was involved in deliberately blowing the cover of an Israeli spy ring working inside the Islamic Republic.\(^\text{54}\)

Ankara’s policy choices have also revealed a pattern of enabling Iran. Among other things, elements of the Erdogan regime have pursued closer Turkish ties with organizations facilitating weapons shipments to Iran’s proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah, the release of members of pro-Iranian terrorist organizations as in the case of the Turkish Hezbollah, and the covering up of official investigations into Iranian-led groups operating inside Turkey itself.

When Erdogan was prime minister, his government enacted laws to facilitate the release of several high-profile members of Hezbollah in Turkey who had been charged with heinous crimes against Turkish civilians. For decades, Hezbollah in Turkey (a largely Kurdish Islamist movement) had targeted members of both the Kurdish separatist PKK movement and also Turkey’s secular government. Turkish Islamists care little about intra-Kurdish fighting, but they have displayed sympathy with Iran-backed groups that opposed the Kemalist establishment. In 2011, the AKP drafted an amendment to Penal Code Article 102 which led to the release from prison of several leaders and members of Hezbollah in Turkey before they had served their full sentences.\(^\text{55}\) Subsequently, several of these terrorists fled Turkey for Iran where they joined the leader of Turkish Hezbollah, Isa Altsoy.\(^\text{56}\) This same amendment to the penal code has since enabled other Iranian agents
in Turkey who were charged and sentenced to terrorism offenses to have a retrial; they were released later on.\(^{57}\)

Agents of Iran are known to be working under diplomatic cover in the Islamic Republic’s Embassy in Ankara and its consulate in Istanbul.\(^{58}\) They have been, according to a number of recent investigations by Turkish authorities, particularly successful in recruiting Turkish assets. In April 2011, an investigation launched by Istanbul’s Public Prosecution Office (case file 2011/762) uncovered an elaborate Iranian espionage network and covert operations in Turkey, including intelligence gathering and plans for carrying out attacks against a nuclear research facility, Israeli interests, and the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul.\(^{59}\) This is a unique case which reveals, among other things, Iran’s robust efforts to develop country-specific plans to expand its influence, clients, and power inside Turkey to challenge its pro-Western institutions and orientation.

For years, Iran has recruited Turkish nationals or used her own agents to coerce or assassinate not just dissidents who oppose the Islamic Revolution but also Turkish intellectuals who have defended Turkey’s secular pro-Western orientation. Significantly, the targets on which the espionage network collected intelligence were either foreign or critical Turkish entities, which could indicate long-term planning in terms of the timing of the attacks. If such attacks had happened, Turkish terrorists might have been blamed without the knowledge of a larger Iranian conspiracy. More importantly, such attacks could have put Turkey in a difficult position with Western countries which could have further isolated Turkey in favor of the Iranian regime. In any case, in mid-2013, the Turkish National Police investigated “a cell structure” called Salam Tawhid (Salam Tevhid, or Islamic Peace and Unity) that led to the indictment of 251 individuals, including a number of Turkish nationals who had been recruited by the IRGC’s Quds Force.

One of the leading figures named in the indictment of the Salam Tawhid/Quds Force cell was Hakki Selcuk Sanli. In the 1990s, Sanli was sentenced to twelve years in prison for his involvement in the assassinations of secular Turkish intellectuals.\(^{60}\) He was released in 2004. An Iranian citizen, Ali Akbar Mir Vakili, was also a key figure in the Salam Tawhid organization. Mir Vakili had a history of smuggling weapons and coordinating activities for the IRGC’s Quds Force in support of Iran’s proxy wars in the Middle East. According to VsQuds, a website known for leaking sensitive information about Iranian war activities in the Middle East, Mir Vakili “carried out a series of special missions for Quds Force.”\(^{61}\) Importantly, Mir Vakili is also named on the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control’s “Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List.”\(^{62}\) According to the Treasury Department, Mir Vakili was acting on
behalf of a company that the U.S. government has accused of “providing material support, including weapons to [Lebanese] Hezbollah on behalf of the IRGC.”

Another figure named in the indictment is Sefer Turan, who has a very interesting background. Once the coordinator of TRT Arabic, a state-run news outlet, and an advisor to then-Prime Minister Erdogan on Middle East affairs, he later became a chief advisor to President Erdogan. He has published columns in the periodical Tawhid (Tevhid) and the Salam (Selam) newspaper, both of which have been the primary publications of pro-Iranian groups in Turkey. According to the national police indictment, Turan had also met with Ali Mir Vakili during his visits to Turkey.

Through all this, Turkey emerged as a major operational hub for illicit Iranian financial activities designed to evade U.S. sanctions imposed on Tehran because of its nuclear ambitions. The Iranian government has used Turkey’s financial and banking system for transactions with actual and fictitious corporations. A well-known 2017 court case in the United States revealed evidence that Erdogan and his government knew about the sanctions-busting scheme. In fact, the level of the AKP’s and Erdogan’s enabling of the Iranian regime was made clearer by the aforementioned National Police investigations of 2013. Both the December 17 and December 25 investigations uncovered in great detail a sophisticated bribery, money laundering, fraud, and gold smuggling scheme that involved critical figures in the AKP government and their family members. Furthermore, the December 25 investigations uncovered a more complex scheme involving Erdogan’s family, his most-trusted politicians, state officials, and businessmen. Both investigations also established close ties between these Turkish figures and Iranian agents.

Jonathan Schanzer of the Foundation of Defense for Democracies aptly described the illegal activity as “the biggest sanctions-evasion scheme in recent history.” Subsequently, with the leak of wiretaps that recorded Erdogan telling his son to dispose of money hidden at a family house, the stakes of the corruption case became even higher for Erdogan, his party, and his family, according to Jessica Michek and Selim Sazak of the Bipartisan Policy Center. Indeed, the December 17 and December 25 police investigations put Erdogan in a very difficult political position at home and internationally. The AKP’s diehard followers saw the party as an agent of a new Islamic order, and they saw Erdogan as the new leader of the Islamic world. The police investigations, however, uncovered that the Erdogan regime was not very different from other corrupt rulers in the Middle East. Erdogan’s inner circle had received bribes amounting to millions of dollars from a Turkish-Iranian dual national named Reza Zarrab in exchange for enabling and facilitating the evasion of sanctions against Iran.
The evidence obtained by the Turkish police and prosecutors in these investigations was subsequently used in a federal criminal case in the United States. The United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York indicted Reza Zarrab (who was apprehended by U.S. authorities in Florida in 2016) and his associates Mehmet Zafer Caglayan, Mehmet Hakan Atilla, and Suleyman Aslan. The U.S. Attorney’s indictment charged them with “conspiring to use the U.S. financial system to conduct hundreds of millions of dollars-worth of transactions on behalf of the Government of Iran and other Iranian entities, which were barred by United States sanctions; lying to U.S. government officials about those transactions; and laundering funds in connection with those illegal transactions, including millions of dollars in bribe payments.” During his testimony in the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York in 2017, Reza Zarrab claimed that when “Erdogan was prime minister…the Turkish leader personally ordered transactions that would launder billions of dollars to Iran in violation of U.S. sanctions.” In a related and more recent indictment—published in October 2019 by the U.S. Department of Justice—Halkbank, a Turkish state bank, was charged for its participation in the scheme to bypass sanctions on the Islamic Republic. The indictment accuses the Halkbank of using illicit methods to transfer about $20 billion worth of otherwise restricted Iranian funds to Iran. And according to the indictment, the corruption scheme does not include dates before 2013. There are other corruption schemes—or rather a continuum of the same scheme—after 2014 through 2015, according to the indictment.

Clearly, Erdogan and his inner circle have exploited the situation created by the anti-Iran sanctions—but, to what end? Is the AKP regime intent on enabling Iranian power? It is fair to argue that the Turkish officials who have received bribes may simply be petty “meat eaters”—i.e., corrupt officials who illicitly misuse their power for personal gain. In fact, Erdogan himself has been the subject of corruption investigations involving bribery, embezzlement, and misconduct going back to the time when he was Istanbul’s mayor. Thus, it might be argued that base greed, rather than deep sympathy for the Iranian regime, was the main motivation behind Turkish officials’ illegal activity. But, whether it is greed or ideological sympathy—or a combination of both—AKP corruption has not just enabled the Iranian government. It has also set in motion profoundly disturbing developments inside Turkey itself that have received far less attention.

Erdogan’s responses to the Salam Tawhid scandal and to the December 17 and 25 anti-corruption investigations were similar. He immediately halted further police inquiries and purged all the officials involved in the investigations. In fact, after firing police chiefs, prosecutors, and judges, Erdogan and his inner circle have
not hesitated to take part in other corruption schemes intended to facilitate Iran’s evasion of sanctions, while they have also lobbied the U.S. Government for the release of Reza Zarrab. Erdogan and his most loyal politicians and media outlets have since blamed all these investigations on a conspiracy by the “Gulenists”—i.e., the followers of Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim cleric now living in self-exile in the U.S. who was formerly allied with Erdogan but has since broken with him. In the aftermath of the two 2013 anti-corruption operations, Erdogan declared all-out war on the “Gulenists.”

Subsequently, after more politically-charged purges of the police and judiciary, as well as the enactment of new laws to restructure the Turkish internal security forces, the Erdogan regime has set about to transform the state apparatus. It has replaced all politically suspect groups or individuals with cadres that are more sympathetic and amenable to its goals.

Since then, Erdogan has appointed AKP-affiliated judges and prosecutors to the Chief Prosecutor’s Office in Istanbul. These individuals have not only closed the earlier corruption investigations, but have instead opened fictitious investigations against purged police chiefs and their lieutenants, who have been imprisoned since July 22, 2014. Despite the long efforts by law enforcement to uncover the Iranian espionage and terrorist network in their country, Erdogan and his ministers have relentlessly tried to discredit the investigators and to cover up the links between his inner circle and these criminal conspiracies. This has led, naturally, to allegations that Erdogan and the AKP are trying to keep something important to them hidden. In the view of journalist Abdullah Bozkurt, the investigations “exposed Erdogan’s secret ties to IRGC generals and uncovered how the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT), run by pro-Iranian figure Hakan Fidan, worked with the Iranian regime.”

This is a compelling argument—but is it, in fact, the case? It is plausible that the Tawhid Salam and 2013 corruption investigations were, from the perspective of Ankara, separate. The purges of National Police and subsequent cover-up attempts may well have been simply about Erdogan’s own interests including regime self-preservation. In any case, a government committed to the rule of law would make it a priority to find out. The AKP, however, has responded by blaming all the investigations on a conspiracy. In this, the controlling regime’s clear goal has been to stop the investigations and to discourage anyone who might dare to engage in similar quests in the future. As a result of the government’s efforts, 251 suspects—twenty-eight of whom were alleged Iranian Quds Force operatives—were cleared of charges in the most comprehensive espionage and terrorism investigation in Turkish history. For any Turkish citizen—and their allies—
committed to national security and rule of law, this is scandalous. However, Erdogan has shown disdain for the idea that the law applies to him, and he has since waved off the entire Tawhid-Salam affair as “fabricated” and “fake” news.

Erdogan’s Establishment of an Iranian-Like Regime

The AKP’s transformation of state institutions and its implementation of authoritarian measures became increasingly apparent after 2013. But this only accelerated after the abortive military coup of 2016, heralded by Erdogan himself as a “gift from God.” In a number of important ways, the evolution of the AKP’s oppressive regime since then has mirrored what happened in Iran after 1979, when the Khomeinist regime consolidated its power. Like Erbakan before them, it appears the AKP government has taken some inspiration from the revolutionary regime in Iran, which has managed to bend Iran’s society and state to its will. In any case, as Iran scholar Alireza Nader has observed, the massive purges of state institutions and the military that Erdogan ordered immediately after the coup do “suggest the Turkish state is moving toward authoritarian Islamist rule of the sort that Iran introduced in 1979.”

In Iran, the 1979 revolution led to the mass executions of military officers who were loyal to the Shah, and the creation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a force ideologically dedicated to safeguarding the Islamic Revolution. In Turkey, Erdogan used the 2016 coup attempt to justify the purge or imprisonment of pro-Western officers from the Turkish military. As of December 27, 2019, a total of 18,630 officers were purged from the Turkish Armed Forces, according to the Turkish Ministry of Defense, thus effectively ending what “once [had been] a mighty pillar of a secular [country].” In the meantime, the AKP regime has revamped formal “security structures to ensure loyalty and to maintain political control,” according to scholar Howard Eissenstat. Not only has it installed AKP loyalists in the military and national police, but it has fundamentally changed the way new officers are educated to emphasize ideological indoctrination in line with AKP’s own agenda.

Simultaneously, as Eissenstat and other scholars have documented, the Erdogan regime has created a “network of informal security structures” inside Turkey that
“include military contractors, political party clubs and [a] newly militant and mobilized AKP base.”

This irregular and Iranian-like network of loyalists and paramilitary groups—what Mahmut Tanal, an MP of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), describes as a “party police force”—has since been further empowered and emboldened by government decrees. Today, the network effectively helps Erdogan and the ruling party to control the streets, intimidate and oppress the Turkish people, and carry out covert operations against dissident political groups.

This, too, mirrors what happened in post-1979 Iran, where the Basij, or people’s militia, was created as a civilian auxiliary unit of volunteers to protect the revolutionary regime. Since the establishment of the Basij, many of its members have been recruited to serve alongside the IRGC on behalf of the Iranian regime and its current supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Erdogan now appears to be moving in the same direction. After firing or imprisoning thousands of professional and well-trained police and military officers, he then started to replace them with new officers recruited from paramilitary forces, such as Ottoman Hearts and SADAT, members of AKP youth organizations, and different Islamic sects who are supporters of the AKP.

The founder and president of SADAT International Defense Consultancy, Adnan Tanriverdi, has recently resigned from his role as President Erdogan’s adviser amid a backlash due to his remarks at a conference in December, 2019 in which he said his company was “paving the way for the coming of the Mahdi.” (The Mahdi is a messianic figure that some Muslims believe will redeem mankind before the world ends.) This statement caused an uproar in parts of Turkey, and although the full reasons for Tanriverdi’s abrupt resignation are not clear, it could signal a tactical retreat by the Erdogan regime meant to ease pressure on it. In any case, as Erdogan’s chief military advisor, Tanriverdi has in recent times been actively involved in shaping AKP policy on the future of the Turkish military—including recruitment. According to Suat Cubukcu, purging thousands of police and military officers has enabled Erdogan “to recruit some members of pro-government paramilitary forces in state institutions and give them formal titles and ranks.”

Meanwhile, the AKP regime has also virtually eliminated independent media in Turkey and has established instead an elaborate pro-AKP media network, which it has leveraged to advance its larger political agenda. The businessmen in Erdogan’s inner circle have purchased over 90 percent of the media in Turkey through an elaborate “pool” scheme—i.e., a bribery system—in exchange for lucrative future government contracts, including Istanbul Airport and other mega infrastructure projects. With these media outlets secured by party loyalists,
the AKP regime has managed to manipulate the public and effectively silence the opposition.100

One clear consequence of AKP control over the media has been the resurgence of anti-Americanism in Turkey. The party media, for instance, has deliberately reported U.S.-related news in conjunction with emphatically negative, pejorative, and offensive editorializing about the United States, according to a recent study conducted by one of this article’s authors.101 Just as Khomeini adeptly exploited Iranian grievances against the United States to rally the masses around the Islamic Revolution, Erdogan and the AKP media have extensively and consistently whipped up Turkish grievances and fomented public animosity against the United States, the European Union, Israel, and other countries to galvanize broad-based support for his leadership and agenda.102 Again, like the Iranian regime, which portrays the U.S. as the “Great Satan” and the source of every evil affecting Iran and the Islamic World, the AKP and Erdogan in particular routinely blame and scapegoat the United States for Turkey’s internal and other problems.103

Given the AKP’s constant propagandizing, the increase in anti-Americanism in Turkey has been unprecedented. According to a BBC World poll in 2017,104 Turkey had the highest increase in anti-American sentiment in the previous three years and scored one of the highest levels of anti-Americanism in the world. Similarly, a 2018 poll from The Center for American Progress reported that 83 percent of Turks had unfavorable views about the United States.105 Another survey by the Turkish national newspaper Turkiye Gazetesi showed that 81 percent of Turks do not consider the United States an ally or friend of their country.106

Certain U.S. policy decisions, such as support for the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK)-affiliated People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria (a decision that the Obama Administration came to after the AKP government failed to intervene against the Islamic State), or the more recent F-35 fighter jet crisis, have contributed to a general backlash in Turkey. However, Turkey’s AKP-controlled media has shown no mercy to the United States. At the same time, Russia and Iran have in fact been two of the major actors prolonging the conflict in Syria and pushing flows of Syrian refugees into Turkey. Yet, significantly, there is little critical news coverage, if any, about Putin or Russian policy in Syria, and very few reports in the AKP press about Iran’s role in the conflict.

In our judgment, the Erdogan regime’s incendiary anti-Westernism is motivated by both political opportunism and its Islamist ideological agenda.107 Like Erbakan before, the Erdogan/AKP regime is intent on dividing Turkish society between what it deems the “imitators” of the West and the “true Muslims,” and then exploiting the resulting polarization for its own gain. This strategy, too, appears
to emulate the Iranian revolution’s playbook. The Islamist regime in Iran acquired popular support and consolidated power among the rural and religiously conservative poor by stoking their frustration with the Shah’s pro-urban and elite-centered policies. The Khomeinist regime then used the popular anger it helped to generate to further weaponize religious sentiment against the United States.

Likewise, Erdogan’s many-faceted strategy for philosophically transforming Turkish society—which has focused on rearing up and empowering a new “pious generation” that is loyal to the AKP’s agenda—seems ominously similar to the Iranian regime’s efforts. As mentioned earlier, reforming the Diyanet, or Directorate of Religious Affairs—a government body that oversees mosques and the appointment of imams—has been a central focus of the AKP’s “top-down” bid to impose its principles and politics on society. Under Kemalist rule, the Diyanet was effectively set up to manage Islamic affairs in ways that supported the secularist government. But under AKP rule, allies of Erdogan, including Diyanet’s former president, Mehmet Gormez, and his successor, Ali Erbas, have allowed the ministry and Islam itself to be politicized by the ruling party. The number of personnel in Diyanet has increased 29 percent, while the budget in the 2018 fiscal year exceeded the initial projections by 62 percent. A majority of new Diyanet personnel are graduates of Imam Hatip High Schools—which Erdogan considers the grassroots of his ideology—and they are organized around religious associations which have effectively become an extension of AKP regime structure. Erdogan, himself, describes the associations in the Diyanet as an army.

In 2019, the Diyanet’s official budget, according to different estimates, was between $908 million and $1.87 billion, which is more than the budgets of several ministries. Nil Mutluer, in her article in The European Journal of Turkish Studies, argues “Diyanet has become one of the most important political symbols and representatives of the “yeni milli” (new nationalism) … that the AKP seeks to instill and implement.” Through Friday prayers, sermons and religious gatherings, the AKP’s Diyanet has come to act as an indoctrination agent, social control mechanism, and political propaganda machine, both domestically and regionally.

Moreover, the AKP regime’s plans for raising a “pious generation” have encouraged and incentivized parents to enroll their children in Imam Hatip (imam preacher) High Schools (though without the intended effect, according to a recent survey). On the other hand, some parents, the majority of whom were Alawites, according to Hurriyet Newspaper, claimed that they were forced to enroll their children in those schools against their will. The government, moreover, has provided millions of dollars in grants, municipal funds and lucrative tax exemptions to Islamist and Islamic foundations, and then has used these Islamist foundations for
grassroots recruitment into state institutions. The goal of philosophical transformation among the country's youth has led the Erdogan government to patronize a host of youth-oriented AKP-linked Islamist and Islamic foundations, whose programs are clearly opposed to secular democracy. These include the Social Solidarity Association, the Youth and Education Service Foundation (TÜRGEV), the Turkey Youth Foundation (TÜGVA), the Society for Islamic Knowledge, the Archers' Foundation, the Women and Democracy Association, the Turkey Technology Team, the Ensar Foundation, and the Asitane Culture Arts and Education Foundation.

TÜRGEV, as but one example, received almost $100 million donations from abroad, according to an AKP government official. Erdogan's AKP has used these foundations to carry out grassroots recruitment for positions in the state. Hiring individuals in government and public institutions who are active in Islamist and AKP-affiliated Islamic foundations and associations has become a common practice.

Meantime, the Erdogan government's efforts to impose its ideological agenda have reached far beyond Turkey itself. The AKP government has engaged routinely in long arm operations among the Turkey-origin Diaspora in Europe using the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD), and the Turkish-Islamic Union for Cultural and Social Cooperation in Austria (ATIB). These associations have acted as propaganda machinery for the AKP as well as the long arm of Turkish intelligence.

For example, according to the German Minister of Interior, the imams in mosques registered under DITIB spied on Turkish-origin diaspora on behalf of the MIT. Investigations by Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in North Rhine Westphalia revealed that DITIB imams had reported 28 Turkish dissidents to the Turkish Embassy. German authorities also uncovered "increased attempts by the Turkish state to exert influence over...the Turkish diaspora...and attempts were undertaken by, Turkish diplomatic missions in Germany as well as by institutions like DITIB and UETD."

After 1979, Iran's revolutionary regime rapidly became infamous for extensively targeting its opponents in other countries—including in Turkey. One example was the killing and kidnapping of anti-Iranian Revolution figures who fled Iran and sought refuge in Turkey. Previous governments in Turkey have accused the Iranian regime of assassinating secular Turkish intellectuals, including Cetin Emec (a journalist), Turan Dursun (a writer), Muammer Aksoy (head of the Ataturk Thought Association), Bahriye Ucok (a female lawyer who campaigned vigorously against requiring females to wear a veil), Ugur Mumcu (a prominent...
investigative journalist),[^134] and Ahmet Taner Kislali[^135] (a prominent intellectual). All of these victims had two things in common: openly defending a secular system in Turkey and criticizing the Islamic revolution in Iran. Iran used Turkish citizens to carry out all of these assassinations.[^136]

Like the Islamist regime in Iran, the Erdogan regime has also been implicated in kidnappings, disappearances, and acts of torture on home soil—even in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. Moreover, abductions abroad[^137] by Turkey’s National Intelligence Agency (MIT)[^138] have become the *modus operandi* of the state. Under Hakan Fidan’s direction, extra-judicial operations such as abductions, intimidation, threats, and killings by the MIT have occurred frequently. A 2018 report in *The New York Times* revealed that more than 80 people had been abducted in 18 countries. According to the public prosecutor of Germany, in the last 10 years, MIT has been investigated 23 times. Seventeen of the investigations occurred in the last two years.[^139] The MIT has focused its efforts on targeting the opposition—including Gulenists, Kurds,[^140] and secularists—in Germany.[^141]

Efforts aimed at targeting and spying on the opposition, however, are not limited to Europe. Significantly, the United States also has been the site of Turkish intelligence operations.[^142] Paralleling the AKP’s same policies in Europe and with Erdogan’s blessings, the TÜRGEV and Ensar foundations jointly established the TURKEN Foundation in New York City in 2014. Erdogan’s son, Bilal Erdogan[^143] is one of the co-founders of TURKEN and his daughter, Esra Albayrak[^144] is on the Board of Directors. President Erdogan has attended annual dinners organized by TURKEN when he also attended the United National General Assembly meetings. America is a free and open society, so the AKP’s cultural activities are permitted. However, given the Erdogan regime’s track record in Europe, Turkey’s long-arm intelligence and coercive operations might also increase in the United States.[^145]

The AKP Regime and its Foreign Proxies

The Erdogan regime’s international conduct has paralleled revolutionary Iran in other disturbing respects—most notably, its evolving support of Islamist proxies, including armed militias in Syria and Libya. During the Kemalist era, Turkey deliberately tried to keep its distance from the Middle East and
avoided entanglements there. The outbreak of the Arab Spring—and particularly the wars in Syria—fundamentally changed this. As discussed earlier, the Erdogan regime has provided direct diplomatic and other support to political parties (notably the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi in Egypt) and proxy groups during and after the Arab uprisings.

In Syria, what began as Turkish support for the anti-Assad rebellion has rapidly evolved in alarming ways. Now, in addition to providing arms to anti-Assad and anti-Kurdish Islamist militias, the AKP regime has also started sponsoring and directing jihadist groups to fight on its behalf in Syria (against Kurdish groups, for instance) as well as in Libya. Although Turkey’s network of irregular units is far smaller than Iran’s, still the Erdogan regime appears intent on replicating the Iranian “Quds Force” and on building a far larger Turkish network of proxies.

The Erdogan regime’s support for radical groups and efforts to develop proxies of its own is clearly driven by political opportunism as well as by a larger ideological agenda. Clearly, foreign adventures have been useful politically for Erdogan, allowing him to generate crises that rally nationalist support and justify strong-man rule in the face of looming external threats. In 2019, for instance, the Turkish military’s incursion into northeastern Syria against PKK-affiliated Kurdish groups gave the Erdogan government a political boost with certain ultra-nationalist and anti-Kurdish constituencies at home. Ideologically, however, Erdogan’s rise to power has been substantially enabled by Islamist groups. Internationally, he has not only aligned with Islamist groups, but showed the ambition to create an Islamist network that would carry him to his own foreign goals. Turkey, according to its constitution, is still a secular country. However, that secularism is under threat, and the Speaker of the Parliament, Ismail Kahraman, has expressed that the principle of secularism should be removed from the constitution.

The authors of this piece and their colleagues have conducted three different research studies on the political, social, and economic impact of the Syrian conflict on Turkey and the region, including one that was funded by the U.S. State Department. One of the main findings of these studies was that, starting in 2011, the AKP government deliberately turned a blind eye or failed to address several critical issues that enabled the free flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) through Turkey to the Syrian conflict. Since then, the Erdogan regime’s relationships with armed Islamist groups has evolved, moving to tacit enabling, active support, and, most recently, direct patronage and command of armed proxies controlled by Ankara.

During the early years of the wars in Syria, thousands of foreign fighters, coming from more than ninety countries, transited through Turkey on their way to join al-Qaeda or Islamic State (ISIS) to fight—initially—against the Assad regime.
With the help of Turkish recruiters and border facilitators, foreign fighters primarily entered Syria via the Istanbul airport through six crossing points on the Turkish border. These border crossings accounted for 93 percent of all entries into Syria of ISIS-affiliated foreign fighters, according to one study that analyzed ISIS personnel records.\(^{152}\)

Although Turkey had itself experienced terrorism for decades, AKP officials exhibited a marked unwillingness to address the “jihadist highway” that was growing inside their country. As a result, jihadist groups expanded not only in Syria, but they were also able to establish inside Turkey organizational networks that began to recruit Turks from more than 60 cities in almost every region of the country. Our own research identified at least 17 different groups in Turkey headed by Turkish citizens who have recruited more than 2,200 Turks into ISIS or al-Qaeda-affiliated groups.\(^{153}\) These recruiting operations were named after their leaders or the locations where they were based. Some of the names of these networks are as follows: Samanpazari Group (a small district in downtown Ankara); Halis Bayancuk Group (aka Istanbul emir); Kemal Yasar Group; Murat Gezenler Group; Reyhanli Group (the largest district of Hatay on the Syria border); Eyup Baksı Group; Mustafa Dokumacı Group; and İbrahim Subaşı Group.\(^{154}\) These groups used certain front associations and organizations to recruit fighters, such as Islam Tea Coffee in Adiyaman, Islah-Der in Bingol, and IHH (İnsan Hakk ve Hürijyetleri İnsani Yardım—Human Rights and Freedoms Humanitarian Relief Foundation) in Van and Kilis.\(^{155}\)

As these Turkey-based terrorist networks established themselves and grew their operations, Turkish law enforcement understood it could not ignore the problem. However, the AKP-led central government actively intervened in attempts by law enforcement to disrupt terrorist organizations. Police did conduct some operations against individuals suspected of being members of ISIS or al-Qaeda affiliated groups. Yet most of these suspects were released after only a brief detention.\(^{156}\) This led Turkish opposition parties, journalists, and academics to raise serious concerns about whether the police were merely conducting window-dressing operations against jihadist networks.\(^{157}\)

Our own research lends credence to these accusations against the AKP government. According to police, military, and intelligence officials that we interviewed, as well as people on the Turkey-Syria border and in southeastern Turkey, AKP officials pressured them specifically not to conduct operations against individuals affiliated with al-Qaeda and ISIS. In fact, the former heads of the anti-terrorism and intelligence departments in Van—one of the largest cities in eastern Turkey—say they were fired by AKP officials simply because they conducted operations against al-Qaeda cell structures in the city. Since then, the AKP government has
carried out since 2014 purges of thousands of experienced counterterrorism police officers; they were deemed to be “Gulenists.” Meanwhile, the government and its subsequent appointments of inexperienced officers, who are fully loyal to the party, have combined to significantly diminish the country’s ability to conduct counterterrorism operations.

By 2014, the Erdogan regime had moved from tacitly permitting terrorist recruitment and logistical operations inside Turkey to actively providing material support to jihadist groups battling the Assad regime in Syria. This included financial and military support to terrorist groups, opening its border to facilitate the mobility of foreign terrorist fighters, permitting illegal oil trade, and allowing wounded fighters to be treated in Turkish hospitals.\(^{158}\)

According to our own research, the AKP government’s main conduit to these Syria-based jihadist groups was the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) led by Hakan Fidan. A provincial AKP-affiliated governor on the Turkey-Syria border whom we spoke to said that Hakan Fidan, the head of MIT, was responsible for delivering weapons and ammunition to the “wrong” people (a reference to ISIS and al-Qaeda).\(^{159}\) The governor also claimed that he had informed then-Prime Minister Erdogan about the MIT chief’s transgressions, but that Erdogan had not taken any steps to stop Fidan. These allegations appear to be supported by the infamous case in 2014 of “the MIT trucks.” In January of that year, Turkish national police and gendarmerie officers stopped and searched three trucks crossing the border from Turkey into Syria. The trucks were found to be carrying weapons and ammunition; they were also driven by MIT officers.\(^{160}\) AKP officials subsequently claimed that the military equipment was intended for Turkmen living in northern Syria.\(^{161}\)

As yet, there has been no clear determination of the intended recipients of this materiel. However, evidence does suggest that the shipments were intended for extremist groups in Syria. Turkmen groups never received any arms and ammunition from Ankara, according to a Turkmen Ketiba commander whom we interviewed. What’s more, following the 2014 MIT trucks incident, the AKP government imprisoned the officers who stopped the caravan and the prosecutor who gave the order to do so.\(^{162}\)

These Turkish-jihadist ties only deepened as the United States, first, made clear in 2013 that it would not intervene militarily to remove Assad from power and, then, in 2014 began to work with Syrian Kurds to fight ISIS. Increases in both the futility of the opposition cause and U.S.-Kurdish cooperation in Syria drove Erdogan to then prioritize the fight against the potential establishment of a PKK-aligned Kurdish statelet as his primary objective in Syria.

In 2014, Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey’s prime minister at the time, dismissed
growing international concerns about ISIS and also al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliates as “just a group of angry men.” The overriding reasons for this official insouciance, it appears, were political and geopolitical. Erdogan, who had originally encouraged Assad to accommodate the demands of Syrian protestors, turned sharply against the Syrian leader once the civil war began, demanding his ouster. Later, when Assad’s security forces withdrew from the heavily Kurdish northeast to confront threats in other parts of the country, Ankara quickly grew alarmed at the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish enclave that was controlled by groups affiliated with the Kurdish terrorist group inside Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Erdogan saw arming radical Sunni groups inside Syria as a means to fight not just Assad but also the Syrian Kurds.

This was not, however, merely a security objective. Erdogan and his government officials saw their involvements in the Syrian war as an important political opportunity. In a leaked recording of a 2014 conversation between Ahmet Davutoglu (then the foreign minister), Hakan Fidan, and other high-level government officials, Fidan is heard saying, “Now look, my commander, if there is to be justification, the justification is, I send four men to the other side. I get them to fire eight missiles into empty land. That’s not a problem. Justification can be created.”

Such a “false-flag” strike on Turkey from elements in Syria—if it happened—would have provided Ankara with the “justification” to send Turkish soldiers to occupy northern Syria. It would likely also have helped the AKP consolidate power at home and galvanize Turkish public sentiment around the need to protect the Turkish nation and heritage against threats inside Syria. Although Fidan’s scheme was never implemented, his leaked remarks did illustrate the intentions of at least some of the “revolutionaries” shaping AKP policy. Indeed, these intentions are not limited to the Syrian conflict. Fidan’s statement reflects the AKP regime’s long-term interest in enlarging its influence throughout the region. Recently, Turkey encouraged Syrian jihadists to become a fighting force in Libya. In this, it appears the AKP regime is intent on establishing its own ideological influence through a regional network of proxies, similar to what Iran has done in Lebanon through its sponsorship of Hezbollah.

As it happened, Erdogan did abandon an internal peace process with the PKK and restarted military operations against the PKK inside Turkey in 2015, just before parliamentary elections. In 2016, he then launched an offensive into Syrian Kurdish territory, declaring victory just before a constitutional referendum. The close timing between these military operations and critical elections is not coincidental.

By 2015, however, Turkey began to experience blowback from its enablement of terrorist networks along, and inside of, its own borders. One Turkish Salafi group,
Dokumacilar, based in the province of Adiyaman, actively recruited fighters for the war in Syria. This group was responsible for the 2015 suicide bombing attack in Suruc, Turkey, where 32 people were killed.\(^{165}\) Another major incident, the double 2015 suicide bombings in Ankara, were the deadliest terrorist attacks in the history of the country with a death toll of more than 100 civilians.\(^{166}\) These attacks were perpetrated by two brothers, Yunus Emre Alagöz and Şeyh Abdurrahman Alagöz,\(^{167}\) who were both recruited by Mustafa Dokumaci, the leader of Dokumacilar group.

Foreign commentators began to blame the AKP’s refusal to take ISIS seriously as examples of “willful blindness.”\(^{168}\) Others believe that something deeper was at work. In fact, a classified report from the European Union’s official intelligence body (EUINTCEN) that was obtained by the independent Ahval News website\(^ {169}\) speculates that elements in the AKP were complicit in the Ankara bombing attack. The report states that “the modus operandi of the attack (suicide bombers) points to Da’esh. Given the circumstances (arriving buses with demonstrators not searched, police almost absent at the huge demonstration), there is a reason to believe that in this case, forces within the AKP commissioned the Da’esh operatives.”\(^{170}\)

In any case, after these attacks on Turkish soil and the dramatic spread of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the AKP government has faced increasing political pressure at home, as well as from the United States and the European Union, to do more against ISIS and other jihadist groups inside the country and out. As a result, the Erdogan government eventually joined the international coalition against ISIS in 2015, allowing U.S. air forces to use Turkish bases for their anti-ISIS operations and making efforts to close the border to ISIS transit and smuggling. Even so, the Erdogan regime’s engagement with ISIS and al-Qaeda-aligned forces inside Syria has contributed to greater distrust between Turkey and the United States. Revealingly, the 2019 U.S. Special Forces operation to kill the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, took place very close to the Turkish border, but was launched from Erbil in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and not from the much closer Incirlik Air Base in Turkey.\(^ {171}\)

Indeed, even as Turkey was coming under Western pressure to join the fight against ISIS, the AKP regime was deepening its support for other radical movements. Starting in 2016, Ankara shifted from providing direct assistance for al-Qaeda-aligned elements within the Syrian opposition to recruiting these forces to operate under direct Turkish control and direction. In Syria, during the initial phases of the conflict, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established in July 2011 as a cohesive fighting force against the Assad regime forces. At the time, the FSA was being trained and equipped by the U.S.\(^ {172}\) In the coming years, however, FSA became
fragmented and decentralized. According to field interviews that Suleyman Özeren and his colleagues conducted in 2013, the FSA did not have a centralized command structure back then. Later, however, when the Obama Administration decided to pull U.S. support from the FSA, some of the groups within the FSA became hired proxies, predominantly, for Turkey and Qatar.

Now, Turkey has created Syrian National Army (Ceys-ul Vatani), another version of the FSA. The SNA is actually composed of some of the groups formerly with the Free Syrian Army as well as former members of al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates. Turkey supplements its sponsorship and use of irregular units with both its national military, primarily air support, and mercenary forces. Meantime, the recruitment of proxies has also been giving the Erdogan regime a new ability to exert regional influence—something that Erdogan has long desired, but which has largely eluded him.

In all likelihood, the AKP regime will want to continue to support the SNA because it has been very useful for Turkey in conducting military incursions during the Euphrates Shield operation in 2016; the Olive Branch operation in Afrin in 2018; and the ongoing Peace Spring operations in northeastern Syria. Just like Iran, the AKP regime appears to be intent on creating its own “Hezbollah,” similar to Iran’s proxy. Even after a potential deal in Syria, Turkey could keep these forces under its control as an alternative proxy group to use against the Syrian Democratic Forces and the YPG in northeastern Syria. Turkey has also supported Islamists in Libya by providing them with funds and arms. Recently, the Erdogan regime has encouraged foreign fighters in Syria to fight in Libya on behalf of AKP interests. It is argued that these fighters are being promised Turkish citizenship after six months of deployment.\(^{173}\)

Against this backdrop, the AKP and Erdogan continue to use anti-Western and anti-American rhetoric,\(^{174}\) which aligns them with extremist groups’ narratives.\(^{175}\) Turkey’s younger population is especially susceptible to the nationalist and religious sentiments espoused by extremist groups. The AKP frequently accuses Western countries of illegal occupation of Muslim territories and blames those countries for every injustice that occurs in the region. This, in turn, encourages vulnerable Turkish youth to join the fight in Syria. The AKP government has done little to stem such rhetoric and its effects. Instead, it remains focused on its mutual interests with jihadist groups in the region. With its sponsorship of extremist groups, use of proxies to fight its battles, and radical rhetoric at home, the Erdogan regime is coming more and more to resemble the revolutionary Iranian regime. The more this deepens, the more the Erdogan regime will, like Iran, become a state exporter of regional jihadism, instability and misery.
Conclusion

Over his decade and a half in power, Erdogan and the revolution he has wrought inside Turkey has increasingly mirrored Iran’s tactics domestically and internationally. This transformation makes Turkey neither a better partner to the U.S. nor a more determined adversary of Iran. Instead, Erdogan—like the Iranian theocracy—has stoked instability. Turkish democracy is more fragile, its social contract more contested, and its security more precarious than in any time in earlier decades. As Turkey reaps the discord that Erdogan has sown, Erdogan’s project to transform Turkey is going to face ever greater challenges.

Erdogan promised more democracy and freedom in the early years of his governance; however, his prolonged tenure has brought an unprecedented and bitter revolution that has led in the opposite direction. Erdogan has undermined secular governing institutions by exploiting religious discourse and pursuing policies to attract both nationalist and religious popular support. To cement his control over Turkey, Erdogan transformed the entire state apparatus—including intelligence, military, police, judiciary, and religious authorities—through legislation, abolishing existing institutions, establishing new structures, purging civil servants and installing political loyalists in their place. While restructuring formal institutions, Erdogan formed an irregular and Iranian-like militia structure with private security contractors and paramilitary organizations, such as SADAT and Ottoman Hearts, that helps him to control the streets and silence opponents.

Turkey’s drift toward an Islamist-authoritarian system and alienation from democratic principles has had a huge impact on Turkey’s foreign affairs as well. As Erdogan became more authoritarian at home, Turkey has distanced itself from traditional Western allies and filled the void by improving relations with other autocratic countries in the region, namely with Iran and Russia. Turkey has also become a major enabler and sponsor of jihadist groups. Once a model country for its constructive foreign policy, Turkey, under Erdogan, has turned out to be a major sponsor and facilitator of jihadism in Syria and Libya.

As Erdogan moves further toward a national-Islamist and authoritarian revolution along Iranian lines, there are several critical obstacles before him. First, the social and political issues that elevated Erdogan to power—but that he has since failed to address—have become his Achilles’s heel. Amid growing problems, such as high youth unemployment, poverty, authoritarianism, and corruption, Erdogan’s “silent revolution” is beginning to lose power, at least among the younger...
population. The deepening domestic crisis has bolstered the hopes of Erdogan’s political opponents—as seen in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election, which the AKP lost, twice—as well as the rise of new parties formed by former AKP politicians.

Second, Turkey’s overextended and dangerous foreign policy initiatives including proxy warfare and military engagements in countries like Syria and Libya could backfire. Among other things, the Erdogan regime’s foreign adventures could, because they are driven in large part by ideological and political motives, turn out to be spectacular failures, which would diminish Erdogan’s power at home. More worrisome, they also risk importing the instability that rages along Turkey’s border, and which is stoked by Erdogan’s actions, into Turkey itself. Whether ISIS cells operating inside Turkey, increased PKK violence, or new refugee flows, Erdogan could become the victim of his own thirst for power and influence.

Meantime, Erdogan also risks increasing Turkey’s estrangement from its traditional Western allies, particularly as the United States considers a range of sanctions for Turkey’s pro-Russian and anti-Kurdish actions while the European Union grows concerned with Turkey’s Libyan gambit. Third, against all odds, people in Turkey still see the West and the European Union as an alternative hope. The belief that Erdogan will one day pass from the scene provides resilience to the many different segments of Turkish society. While Erdogan has sought to reach out to the new generation through grassroots youth organizations and aimed to generate his version of a “pious generation,” it seems that his message may not resonate among the youth. As we witnessed in Gezi protests, Turkish youth is more interested in being part of the free world.

However, as Erdogan runs into more challenges and loses his popular support, he will likely resort to more authoritarian measures to keep a grip on power. He may also double-down on the AKP’s revolutionary Islamist agenda—with disturbing implications for the search for order in the Middle East, for the security of Europe, and for the future of Turkey itself.

NOTES

6. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
14. Menderes Çınar, Ibid.
17. Muhterem Çınar, Ibid.
22. Nilufer Narli, “Cooperation or competition in the Islamic world: Turkish-Iranian relations

23. Nilufer Narli, Ibid.


26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Some of these networks include Islamic Movement (İslami Hareket), Yeryuzu (The Earth), Malatyalilar Group, Salam, Tawhid.

30. Such as Islamic Movement (İslami Hareket), Malatyalilar Group, Yeryuzu (The Earth), Salam, Tawhid.


35. Khomeini used to state “La Şiiye la Sunniye Vahdeh Vahdeh Islamiye,” which means “No to Shia, No to Sunni, Unified Unified Islam.”


38. Huda-Par is the abbreviation of Hur (free) and Dava (cause). But Huda is a Persian-origin word which means ‘God,’ so, Huda-Par also means “Party of God” which is another way of saying Hezbollah.

40. Kemal Kirisci, Ibid.
44. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
70. Jonathan Schanzer, Ibid.
*Erdogan: “They fabricated an organization named Salam,” referring to Salam Tawhid investigation.


90. Ibid.


100. Suleyman Ozeren and Suat Cubukcu, “Erdogan’s One-Man Rule Owes Its Existence to Corruption,” unpublished report on how Erdogan regime has been succeeding in controlling the media and therefore controlling the domestic politics.


102. Suleyman Ozeren and Suat Cubukcu, Ibid.

103. Ismail Onat, Suat Cubukcu, Fatih Demir, & Davut Akca, Ibid.


115. According to a survey conducted by the pollster Konda, “The percentage-point change for many of the questions is not dramatic: Respondents identifying as “pious” slid from 13 percent in 2008 to 10 percent in 2018, and those choosing “religious” dipped from 55 to 51 percent. Figures for “nonbeliever” and “atheist,” which barely registered in 2008, are now at 2 and 3 percent, respectively.”


119. TURGEV was founded by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and currently his daughter Esra Albayrak is a member of the Executive Board.

120. Erdogan’s son, Bilal Erdoğan is a member of the High Consultation Committee of TUGVA.


132. Kirisci, Ibid.
134. Ibid.
136. Ibid.


147. Among other things, Erdogan has a close relationship with Yasin Al-Qadi, who is designated a terrorist by the U.S. and U.K. treasuries because of his financial support to Al-Qaeda. Erdogan has voiced his disapproval of Al-Qadi’s terrorist designation, and he once said, “I believe in him [Al-Qadi] as I believe in myself.” (See Richard C. Morais and Denet C. Tezel, “The Al Qadi Affair,” Forbes, January 24, 2008, https://www.forbes.com/2008/01/24/turkey-yasin-al-qadi-biz-cz_rm_0124alqadi.html#185e12e0666a.) Erdogan also visited Mohammed al-Fatih Hassanein at his home.
during his trip to Sudan in 2017. Hassanein, who is a former Sudanese diplomat, founded Third World Relief Agency (TWRA) in 1987 and is known to have links with extremist and armed groups. His agency was raided by the Austrian police in 1994 as a part of an investigation into arms smuggling. He fled to Turkey and continued his activities there with the help of Erdogan, who was then the mayor of Istanbul. He has appeared in the Turkish media in recent years, declaring that Erdogan is the leader of all Muslims (See Abdullah Bozkurt, “Turkey becomes a magnet for Islamist extremists under Erdoğan’s rule,” Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), January 11, 2018, https://stockholmcf.org/commentary-turkey-becomes-a-magnet-for-islamist-extremists-under-erdogans-rule/). Moreover, the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) organized an event in Turkey in 2016 with representatives from 25 countries. The event was hosted by Erdogan’s AKP. IUMS is led by Youssef al-Qaradawi, a radical imam who has endorsed suicide bombings (See Barnett, Antony, “Suicide bombs are a duty, says Islamic scholar.” The Guardian. August 28, 2005, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/aug/28/uk.terrorism). In another example, Erdogan helped with the acquittal of radical imam Mehmet Dogan (aka Mullah Muhammed), who is the leader of a group called “Tahşiyeciler.” Dogan has publicly declared his allegiance to Al-Qaeda, and his group was raided by police in 2010 based on its alleged affiliation with Al-Qaeda. (See Penaskovic, R., & Sahin, M. (2017). Peacebuilding in a Fractious World: On Hoping Against All Hope. Wipf and Stock Publishers). Dogan was acquitted from all charges in 2015 by Erdogan’s loyalist judges. Finally, Erdogan uses the Aid and Solidarity Association for the Poor (Fukara-Der) as a front organization to logistically support proxy organizations abroad. The association is known to help the members of jihadist groups including Al-Nusra and their families at the Syrian border by supplying “humanitarian” aid. (See Bulut, Uzay, “How Islamic ‘Aid’ Organizations in Turkey Feed Jihadists in Syria,” Gatestone Institute, March 6, 2019, https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/13838/aid-organizations-jihadists-syria).


151. Suleyman Ozeren, Suat Cubukcu, & Emirhan Darcan, “The Genesis and Spread of


154. Ibid.


164. Nick Tattersal, “Turkey calls Syria security leak æ ‘villainous,’ blocks YouTube,” Reuters, March 27, 2014,


170. Ibid.


173. Elizrael (2020, Jan 6). Sources inside the Turkish-backed Syrian factions tell me that in exchange for fighting in Libya, fighters are being promised Turkish citizenship after 6 months of deployment. Multiple commanders in the factions received Turkish citizenship & passports over the past month [Twitter post], Retrieved from https://mobile.twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1214199744433659904.


The Syria Effect: Al-Qaeda Fractures

By Charles Lister

In late 2010 and into 2011, as the so-called “Arab Spring” swept across North Africa and the Middle East, a consensus emerged in the West that the unprecedented wave of pro-democracy protests spelled the likely end of jihadist movements like al-Qaeda.¹ That was not, however, the view within al-Qaeda. From South Asia across to North Africa, the group’s senior leaders applauded the sudden and organic proliferation of public expressions of frustration, disenchantment and the resulting political instability. Here was an ideal opportunity to present al-Qaeda and its Islamic vision as an alternative to the region’s established dictatorial regimes.

Weeks into the protests, the organization’s then-deputy leader Atiyah Abd al-Rahman wrote to Osama Bin Laden proposing that he “send his brothers to Tunisia and Syria and other places” to immediately exploit the new opportunities being presented.² Soon thereafter, in private conversations with his family, Bin Laden himself is recorded to have said that the regional “chaos and the absence of leadership in the revolutions is the best environment to spread al-Qaeda’s thoughts and ideas.”³ Bin Laden was killed in an American raid in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad just weeks after speaking those words, but the opportunities provided to al-Qaeda by the collapse of multiple ruling regimes across the Middle East into crippling insecurity far outweighed the loss of its charismatic leader. Whether in Mali, Tunisia and Libya, or in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, al-Qaeda was presented with political vacuums and thus room to maneuver—and the prospect...
that hundreds—even thousands—of young recruits would look to join the jihadist movement to express their anger and thirst for change.

Fast forward to late 2019. It is quite clear that al-Qaeda was not defeated by the Arab Spring uprisings. Instead, since 2011, al-Qaeda has expanded its operations into new countries, it has formed new affiliates, and it has recruited many thousands of new fighters. At the same time, a more detailed investigation of the past eight years reveals a more complicated picture. In opportunistically taking advantage of new or worsening areas of instability in the Middle East, al-Qaeda affiliates ended up pursuing campaigns of an increasingly local nature. And by necessity, they saw their operations, and in many cases their identity, become increasingly distant from al-Qaeda’s senior leadership (AQSL). At the same time, sustained counter-terrorism pressure on AQSL compounded this trend of localization by minimizing AQSL’s contact with its affiliates, and thereby catalyzing a parallel trend of decentralization within the jihadist movement.

In recent years, the localization of al-Qaeda affiliates and the decentralization of the al-Qaeda movement have been most clearly and dramatically illustrated in Syria. Al-Qaeda’s original affiliate there, Jabhat al-Nusra, became so deeply embedded in the hyper-localized dynamics of the Syrian conflict that its communication and coordination with AQSL was overtaken by its need to respond to local dilemmas. By 2017, Jabhat al-Nusra had rebranded twice and effectively severed its ties of loyalty to AQSL, thereby removing as many as 15,000 fighters from AQSL’s global roster.

The loss of Jabhat al-Nusra, until then arguably al-Qaeda’s most successful affiliate, and the manner in which it was lost, sent shockwaves throughout al-Qaeda’s global movement and particularly within AQSL. In earlier years, Jabhat al-Nusra’s success in Syria had presented al-Qaeda with an unprecedented opportunity to overcome its past setbacks and improve its prestige within the world’s jihadist movement and broader Islamist milieu. But this opportunity was swiftly lost when Jabhat al-Nusra went its own way. Jabhat al-Nusra’s de facto break with AQSL was a deeply controversial move that sparked a bitter debate within al-Qaeda’s global movement. Moreover, the jihadist movement’s internal divisions, allegations, and inadequacies were revealed for all to see.

Today, Ayman al-Zawahiri appears to be torn between reverting back to Bin Laden’s model of al-Qaeda as the “elite vanguard” of global jihadism and continuing to try to take advantage of affiliate localization while trying to re-assert more control over their strategic decision-making. Trying to have it both ways is unlikely to prove successful for Zawahiri and AQSL, particularly in a climate in which questions continue to be asked about what al-Qaeda has come to represent.
“New” Thinking

As the Arab Spring was getting underway, senior al-Qaeda leaders were in the midst of intensifying internal deliberations over the reasons why the jihadist movement had until then failed to build and sustain a credible and popular Islamic State. As al-Qaeda in Iraq’s (AQI) brief attempt at establishing the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in 2006–2007 had made clear to many jihadist leaders, a strategy tailored in absolutist ideological terms that imposed itself aggressively upon society was virtually guaranteed to fail. Whether it was AQI’s penchant for horrific brutality and indiscriminate violence, or its prohibition of tobacco and the sale of cucumbers for their sexually-suggestive form, al-Qaeda’s ideological zeal antagonized the local Iraqi population and ultimately contributed to undermining the al-Qaeda project. Some key jihadist leaders concluded this zealous strategy of imposing Islamist rule was not viable. Indeed, when radical movements demand strict adherence to behavioral norms, or when ideological expectations of battlefield and political success are not met, then militant groups face inherent challenges attracting recruits and keeping and controlling their allegiance. Winning the hearts and minds of local populations, even for jihadists, is a sensible policy.

This was not an entirely novel idea for the likes of al-Qaeda. In fact, the group was born out of the “Arab Afghan” experience of the 1980s, when the mujahideen fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. There, Abdullah Azzam and some others under him had pursued a jihadist effort that was focused on serving a uniquely local (i.e. Afghan) and defensive struggle against an invading power that utilized both military and non-military means. Through organizations like the Maktab al-Khidamat, Azzam had sought to better coordinate the role of foreign volunteers in the Afghan arena, and to unite otherwise disparate and rival factions so as to further the overall cause. Much of Azzam’s foundational thinking in this regard underpinned the ways al-Qaeda sought to present itself in the midst of the growing regional instability during 2011 and 2012.

Excerpts from a letter sent from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader Abu Musab Abdual Wadud (aka. Abd al-Malik Droukdel) to his sub-commanders in Mali in early 2012 provides a valuable window into the new thinking that had begun to take root within AQSL:
The current baby is in its first days, crawling on its knees, and it has not yet stood on its two legs. If we really want it to stand on its own two feet in this world full of enemies waiting to pounce, we must ease its burden, take it by the hand, help it, support it until it stands... One of the wrong policies that we think you carried out is the extreme speed with which you applied Shariah... Our previous experience proved that applying Sharia in this way... will lead to people rejecting the religion and engender hatred towards the mujahideen.6

Droukdel’s guidance proved too little, too late for al-Qaeda’s campaign in Mali. The movement ended up behaving in such an extreme manner that its ability to hold territory and govern in a sustainable way was severely limited.7 Moderated conduct was more effectively implemented in Yemen by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s (AQAP) front group Ansar al-Sharia in the form of less extreme restrictions, better services and a clearer Yemeni face aimed at garnering buy-in from the local population.8 But even then, this more pragmatic guerilla strategy, implemented in 2011 and 2012, was insufficient, as ultimately, the real al-Qaeda face still shone through. Nevertheless, the same evolved thinking about localizing jihad continued to inspire AQSL. Thus, in September 2013, in Zawahiri’s General Guidelines for Jihad decree, the al-Qaeda emir directed the movement’s affiliates worldwide to avoid targeting civilians, Muslims, public areas and even members of “deviant sects”9—a reference to Shia Muslims.

The Syrian Experiment

WHEREAS MALI AND YEMEN HAD NOT PROVEN TO BE SUCCESSFUL ARENAS FOR testing al-Qaeda’s new thinking and its ambition to grow deep and sustainable roots “among the people” in a local conflict environment, Syria ended up proving to be its most successful experiment. It was there that al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra began to embed itself militarily, socially, politically, or religiously among the local factions of the Syrian revolution. Its name, meaning the Support Front, was designed to present Jabhat al-Nusra as an intrinsically local movement, one that was complementary to pre-existing revolutionary efforts. From mid-2012, Jabhat al-Nusra drove the formation of local and regional alliances with mainstream
armed opposition groups and other jihadist factions, and thus it began to bridge the divides between ideological and non-ideological armed groups. By late 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra had also entered into governance activities, where despite its comparatively extreme ideological outlook, its drive against corruption and willingness to pay for the subsidizing of staple foods and services won it substantial popular support.\textsuperscript{10}

Through a strategy that encompassed “controlled pragmatism,” “strategic patience,” “localism” and “incrementalism,” Jabhat al-Nusra sought to become part and parcel of the Syrian revolution.\textsuperscript{11} Of course, its ultimate objective was to infiltrate and ultimately control the revolution, and, to this end, it attempted to establish itself as the would-be leader of a comprehensive and representative Islamic State. In that sense, Al-Qaeda’s traditionally elitist attitude remained firmly in place, but the mechanisms for achieving that control were now markedly different. Jabhat al-Nusra’s governance activities and willingness to engage with a diversity of local actors which had less or even no overt Islamist character won it some political support. Still, arguably, its military primacy on the battlefield was its greatest asset.

Virtually every single major opposition victory in Syria from the Winter of 2012 until mid-2015 was won in part because of Jabhat al-Nusra’s role at the front. To remain relevant and to achieve their own success, mainstream opposition groups relied on their involvement in multi-faction campaigns that included Jabhat al-Nusra, and, more often than not, was also led by it. America’s CIA-led covert program of assistance to vetted opposition factions—which became best known for its provision of sophisticated BGM-71 TOW anti-tank guided missile systems—even ended up playing a crucially important role. Consciously or not, it provided rear-guard and stand-off support to Jabhat al-Nusra-led shock ground offensives.\textsuperscript{12}

Taken together, Jabhat al-Nusra’s “service” to the Syrian struggle had secured it a prime place in the Syrian equation by 2014–2015. That success thrust Jabhat al-Nusra into a position of leadership, and it enjoyed a certain amount of popularity and credibility within the broader anti-regime milieu. However, the group fell short of achieving al-Qaeda’s ultimate objective: establishing total control over the whole of the Syrian opposition movement. Transitioning from an “elite vanguard” to leader of a unified mass Islamist jihad required more than battlefield successes or networking with Syria’s many factions. Instead, Jabhat al-Nusra needed to secure a broad-spectrum operational and ideological merger with Syria’s diverse opposition factions, and this would require translating the group’s “credibility into popularity, popularity into support, and support into loyalty.”\textsuperscript{13}
And yet, the core obstacle to the establishment of an al-Qaeda-led Islamist “unity project” in Syria—as Jabhat al-Nusra’s internal discussions had repeatedly concluded, and as a host of conservative but independent Islamist clerics had long insisted—was the al-Qaeda name and the distrust it continued to engender among Jabhat al-Nusra’s diverse military partners. After intense and divisive debate within Jabhat al-Nusra, the decision was taken in July 2016 to sever “external ties.” This was a coded reference to Zawahiri and to the al-Qaeda leadership outside Syria (but not necessarily al-Qaeda leaders inside Syria). It was further decided to rebrand Jabhat al-Nusra as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), i.e., the “Front for the Conquest of the Levant” to make the group appear more organically Syrian.

Subsequently, three successive unity negotiation processes were swiftly initiated with Jabhat al-Nusra’s long-time military partners in northern Syria. All three ended in failure.14

The unavoidable conclusion was that the controversial decision—or gamble—to rebrand to JFS had backfired. Meanwhile, the organization felt pressured and increasingly sidelined by declining international interest in an anti-Assad struggle, by ongoing U.S.-Russian talks over countering al-Qaeda in Syria, and by increasing levels of mainstream opposition engagement in nationwide ceasefire negotiations. In response, JFS went on the offense. In January 2017, JFS launched coordinated assaults on multiple opposition rivals—including its long-time Islamist ally Ahrar al-Sham. In so doing, JFS coerced four armed factions to unite with it into yet another formation: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).15

For some within Syria’s conservative Islamist circles, HTS represented the jihadist merger and unity that al-Qaeda had sought all along. But for most ordinary Syrians, it was vivid illustration of Jabhat al-Nusra’s ideological zeal at the expense of a “united front” and Syria-wide political consolidation. It also revealed the limits in Jabhat al-Nusra’s strategy of localism. Having been formed through aggression against another Syrian Islamist group, HTS antagonized others, and burned many of the bridges with other Syrian opposition groups that Jabhat al-Nusra had built in earlier years.16 Since its formation, HTS has fiercely protected its own interests whenever necessary, and it has effectively sealed its place as de facto governor of northwestern Syria. There, HTS has embraced and continued to adhere to a path of what I have coined “controlled pragmatism”—including by empowering a technocratic “Salvation Government” to run civil affairs and provide services to the people; forming a political office that seeks to engage in dialogue with foreign governments; engaging closely with Turkey and its National Intelligence Organization (MIT); and loosely abiding by international ceasefire arrangements.
Rebranding Fallout

THE SYRIAN EXPERIMENT HAS PRODUCED A COMPLEX AND LARGELY TROUBLING set of “lessons learned” for al-Qaeda. Jabhat al-Nusra’s strategy of “localism” and “incrementalism” in Syria may have been in line with the strategic instructions of senior al-Qaeda leadership, but its decision to rebrand to JFS and then to HTS proved to be deeply controversial among jihadists. At the moment of JFS’s formation, almost half of Jabhat al-Nusra’s shura council either defected or refused to accept new leadership positions in the new organization. Dozens of al-Qaeda veterans in Syria have since quit JFS and HTS in furious protest over its perceived “dilution” of Islamic principles and engagement in nationalistic practices. Even worse was its willingness to cooperate with the Turkish government, which al-Qaeda views with outright hostility. Today, al-Qaeda and its loyalists around the world no longer consider HTS to be part of the al-Qaeda movement, and AQSL remains engaged in a very public and visceral campaign criticizing HTS’s treachery and illegitimate path. The most pertinent lesson of all concerned al-Qaeda’s localism strategy: although it may have been successful in establishing Jabhat al-Nusra as a leader of the anti-Assad opposition in Syria, it also paved a path toward greater decentralization within al-Qaeda, and to an eventual and perhaps inevitable split between AQSL and its Syrian affiliate.

Indeed, Jabhat al-Nusra’s evolution into HTS revealed AQSL’s severely limited capacity to control its network of affiliates around the world. Having encouraged its affiliates to localize and to work on establishing deeper roots and greater credibility “among the people,” AQSL had set in motion a process that it has not been able to control. As the Syrian case demonstrated most dramatically, when an affiliate’s willingness to embrace a strategy founded upon “controlled pragmatism,” and driven solely by local goals and dynamics was met with some success, building on that any further necessitated decisions based on explicitly local considerations. For a preeminent group like Jabhat al-Nusra to function successfully in a fluid, “hyper-local” conflict environment like Syria, strategic-level decisions had to be made virtually every day. But as a consequence, each decision made distanced the Syrian group further from AQSL. Moreover, the structural mechanisms and processes put into place by AQSL to prevent its affiliates from operating too independently or taking steps toward leaving al-Qaeda altogether have also clearly failed.

For example, al-Qaeda’s decision to maintain three deputies under Zawahiri
(and Bin Laden before him) was intended to ensure a clear system of consultation “up the chain” on significant matters affecting the transnational organization. In the Syria case, one of al-Qaeda’s three global deputies, Ahmed Hassan (Abu al-Khayr al-Masri), was in Syria while Jabhat al-Nusra debated its first rebrand and its severing of “external ties.” Having spent considerable time in Syria, living the realities of Jabhat al-Nusra’s local jihad, Abu al-Khayr “blessed” the proposed rebrand to JFS. However, he did not consult at the time with his two fellow deputies—Sayf al-Adel and Abu Mohammed al-Masri, who were both based in Iran and only later made their objections clear within internal communications. Thus, they had no opportunity to raise the issue with Zawahiri in time. As such, the move to establish JFS broke al-Qaeda’s chain of command. Weeks later, when this complaint was made clear within closed al-Qaeda channels and in a string of public, tit-for-tat “testimonies” published by loyalists of HTS and al-Qaeda, Abu al-Khayr was forced to reverse his “blessing.” But by then it was too late.

Another crisis accompanied the very public uproar following the breakdown in al-Qaeda senior leadership’s control over Jabhat al-Nusra and its subsequent evolution into JFS and then HTS. In the eyes of al-Qaeda and its loyalists, Jabhat al-Nusra’s transition to JFS was a betrayal. But the organization’s second rebrand into HTS represented the end of the group’s allegiance to the al-Qaeda cause. In fact, even Abu al-Khayr had not been consulted about it.

Within days of HTS’s creation in January 2017, al-Qaeda’s most prominent ideologues went into attack mode, and Jabhat al-Nusra’s pre-JFS deputy Sami al-Oraydi publicly quit, accusing HTS’s leadership of “the greatest form of disobedience...of the mother organization.” Oraydi’s phraseology was particularly telling—he had, in fact, employed the exact same wording in 2014 when condemning ISIS’s rebellious break from al-Qaeda.

There followed a bitter public spat that pitched a wide array of al-Qaeda leaders and ideologues against HTS’s leadership, which was headed by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani’s chief aide, Abdulrahim Atoun (Abu Abdullah al-Shami). Through March and April 2017, Oraydi issued a series of written attacks on HTS, accusing it of “legal trickery.” This was quickly followed by a statement from Zawahiri ordering jihadists to avoid “nationalism” and to re-pledge their loyalty to global jihad—a clear reference to HTS, which Oraydi swiftly leapt on to note that Zawahiri’s position on the matter of condemning HTS actions was “as clear as the sun.” The al-Qaeda versus HTS rhetorical war continued throughout the summer and the fall of 2017. In October of that year, Zawahiri issued another statement condemning those he said had committed “violations” and broken “binding” oaths—another clear reference to HTS.
Then HTS began arresting al-Qaeda loyalists. At this point, Oraydi issued five consecutive “testimonies” detailing what he described as HTS’s “rebellion” and which resulted, he said, in a full break from al-Qaeda. Senior HTS figures, including Atoun, launched a rhetorical counter-attack. This included leveling accusations at Zawahiri himself for being misinformed or confused, and further claiming that, between November 2013 and September 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra (and briefly JFS) had been unable to contact Zawahiri at all. Abu al-Harith al-Masri, an HTS shura council member, went as far as to claim Zawahiri’s distance from the Syrian reality meant he had lost any semblance of legitimacy or authority over the situation there.

The total breakdown of the relationship came in November 2017, when HTS arrested Oraydi along with multiple leading al-Qaeda figures, including Abu Abdul Karim al-Khorasani (a member of al-Qaeda’s global shura council), Iyad al-Tubasi (Abu Julaybib) and Abu Khallad al-Mohandis (Sayf al-Adel’s father-in-law). Days later, another Zawahiri statement was released in which al-Qaeda’s leader, for the first time, directly condemned HTS’s “violation of the covenant” and its engagement in a campaign of “killing, fighting, accusations, fatwas and counter-fatwas.” Regarding HTS’s formation, Zawahiri was clear: “As for the creation of new entities without unity, in which absurd schisms are repeated... this is what we have refused.”

Al-Qaeda in Syria, Reborn

While the creation of JFS sent shockwaves throughout the al-Qaeda loyalist community within Syria, it was the subsequent formation of HTS six months later, in January 2017, that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Within two weeks, a high-level gathering of al-Qaeda veterans was convened in Idlib. According to two sources who attended that meeting, no consensus emerged as to how to respond beyond public and private expressions of condemnation.

It was not until November 2017, in response to HTS’s arrest of Abu Julaybib, Oraydi, Abu Abdul Karim al-Khorasani and others, that al-Qaeda began to actively mobilize as a counterweight to HTS. Upon his release from HTS custody, Abu Julaybib—one of Jabhat al-Nusra’s seven founding members—issued a public statement declaring defiantly, “If you think by jailing us the idea of al-Qaeda is over, then you are delusional.” He furthermore re-pledged his allegiance
to the al-Qaeda cause. Then, in a public statement condemning HTS’s arrest campaign, Abu Hammam al-Suri announced that an organized effort was underway to gather al-Qaeda loyalists under a single umbrella.

Nearly three months later, on February 27, 2018, al-Qaeda’s re-emergence in Syria became a reality, with the creation of Tanzim Huras al-Din (Guardians of Religion, HaD). This small jihadist outfit was led from the outset by two prominent Syrians, Abu Hammam al-Suri and Sami al-Oraydi. HaD’s emergence came just one week after a Zawahiri statement had called on loyal jihadists in Syria to unite and refocus on a guerilla war (not to control and govern territory, like HTS). The implication of this sequence of events was impossible to ignore: al-Qaeda was back.

As news of HaD’s creation spread, al-Qaeda voices worldwide began issuing public calls for jihadists to join the group. Two months after HaD’s formation, in April 2018, its leaders negotiated the formation of a military alliance known as Hilf Nusrat al-Islam with the jihadist faction, Ansar al-Tawhid. By August 2018, HaD had attracted pledges of allegiance from at least sixteen small jihadist factions in northwestern Syria, bringing its force level to approximately 2,500 full-time fighters. In October 2018, HaD led the expansion of Hilf Nusrat al-Islam into a military force of much more significance which effectively united almost all al-Qaeda aligned factions—HaD, alongside Ansar al-Tawhid, Ansar al-Din and Ansar al-Islam—under one collective umbrella, known as Ghorfat Amiliyat Wa-Hardh al-Mu’minin (Incite the Believers Operations Room). In pulling together this al-Qaeda alliance, HaD was not just protecting itself in the form of a broader support structure, it was also doing precisely what Zawahiri had repeatedly instructed his loyal followers in Syria to do: unite behind the military struggle.

For the most part, the territorial presence and military operations of both al-Qaeda-aligned militant umbrellas remained largely separate—based primarily in northwestern regions of Idlib and in Latakia—from frontlines shared by less hardline Islamists and other opposition factions elsewhere in Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo. Following the bitter breakup with al-Nusra-JFS-HTS, HaD and its al-Qaeda aligned allies had emerged as a largely geographically distinct gathering of armed factions based in northeastern Latakia’s Jabal Turkman and Jabal al-Akrad regions, and across the governorate border in the Jisr al-Shughour and Badama area of western Idlib.

However, when the Syrian regime and Russia launched their all-out military offensive on northwestern Syria in late April 2019, a debate ensued within HaD: should they assist HTS and other opposition groups by reinforcing their front-
lines in northern Hama? Given Zawahiri’s public directives indicating the importance of Islamist “unity” and sustaining the armed struggle against the regime, Abu Hammam and Oraydi emerged as tacitly supportive of operating wherever necessary.

By mid-May, a detachment of HaD militants had travelled south to the Hama frontlines, where they began independently launching consecutive raids across enemy lines. However, they avoided joining wider opposition operations. HaD’s ability to operate in close proximity to frontlines heavily influenced by HTS also brought to the forefront once again the controversial issue of HaD’s access to stocks of weapons and ammunition, which were heavily controlled by HTS.\(^\text{39}\)

The debate over HaD’s role on HTS-opposition frontlines spilled out into the open in late June of 2019, when HaD leader Abu Hammam al-Suri expelled two prominent HaD clerics, Abu Dhar al-Masri and Abu Yahya al-Jazairi, for having issued non-HaD-sanctioned rulings forbidding fighting in northern Hama. Some alleged Abu Yahya had gone as far as pronouncing *takfir* on HTS, thereby excommunicating them from Islam and labeling them apostates and legitimate targets for attack.

Abu Hammam’s dismissal of Abu Dhar and Abu Yahya sparked an uproar within HaD. The group’s internal judicial court, led by Abu Amr al-Tunisi, issued a petition signed by more than 300 members on June 23 demanding an arbitration involving Abu Hammam and his deputy, Sami al-Oraydi. However, neither Abu Hammam nor Oraydi turned up at the planned arbitration on June 25, leading the court’s chief, Abu Amr, to issue a furious five-minute audio statement accusing HaD’s leaders of “nepotism.” Abu Amr was swiftly expelled from HaD, and this led another senior HaD leader, Abu Yaman al-Wazzani, to declare in exasperation “the jihadist project over.”\(^\text{40}\) Later that day, a HaD statement confirmed that Wazzani and another fellow critic, Abu Musab al-Libi, had also been expelled from HaD.

Tensions persisted through the Summer of 2019, albeit less intensely. But in a mysterious twist on June 30, 2019—just days after the above-mentioned crisis—Abu Amr al-Tunisi, Abu Yahya al-Jazairi and Abu Dhar al-Masri were all killed, along with three other allied “hardliners” (Abu al-Fid’a al-Tunisi, Abu Dujana al-Tunisi and Abu Ibrahim al-Shami) in a U.S. airstrike that targeted a meeting of HaD detractors in rural Aleppo. That was the first U.S. strike in northwestern Syria in more than two years\(^\text{41}\) and it was followed up two months later by another on August 31, 2019, targeting HaD’s ally Ansar al-Tawhid. Al-Qaeda veteran Abu Khalad al-Mohandis was also killed in an IED attack that targeted his personal vehicle in Idlib city on August 22, 2019.
A eulogy for Abu Khallad authored by Syria-based al-Qaeda loyalist Abdullah Ibrahim Ali al-Hijazi subsequently revealed that he had quit HaD some time before his death after his attempts to heal internal HaD rifts had been blocked by an “inflexible” Oraydi. Intriguingly, his death was swiftly blamed on “traitors”—a likely reference to jihadists (HTS or perhaps even allies of HaD leaders, Abu Hammam or Oraydi) who took issue with his positions.

Notwithstanding persistent internal disagreements over how absolutist HaD and al-Qaeda’s posture should be in Syria, the re-emergence of American counter-terrorism attention on al-Qaeda’s activities in Syria was noteworthy. On September 10, 2019, the U.S. government designated HaD as “al-Qaeda in Syria” and identified Abu Hammam, Oraydi and Abu Abdul Karim al-Masri as specially designated terrorists, offering $5 million each for information leading to their location. Al-Qaeda’s determination to re-energize its presence in Syria through HaD had clearly—finally—attracted the attention of the U.S. government, and rightly so. According to several well-connected Islamist sources speaking separately to this author since early-2019 about separate incidents, HaD figures have repeatedly and publicly argued in favor of resuming external attacks on Western/American targets. Despite facing intense opposition from many, HaD figures nonetheless felt confident and comfortable enough to discuss an issue—that of attacking the West—that, until recently, would only have been discussed in secretive rooms in tight, loyal circles—if at all.

When ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a U.S. Special Forces raid in the small village of Barisha in northern Idlib on October 26, 2019, questions were raised about how such a figure could have found even a temporary safe-haven in an area surrounded by enemies. On paper, the rural area around Barisha was under HTS authority—but it was also a well-known stronghold for al-Qaeda loyalists. One person from the area interviewed by opposition media shortly after the raid had purportedly identified the owner of Baghdadi’s compound as a HaD operative known both as Abu Mohammed al-Halabi and Abu al-Bara’a, but subsequent on-the-ground investigations revealed the individual to be Salam Haj Deeb, a long-time ISIS operative, not a HaD member. Likewise, the New York Times published an article on October 30 claiming to reveal a secret ISIS mission to co-opt HaD and acquire its protection in return for money. However, in a subsequent Editor’s Note published on November 15, the New York Times admitted that the October 30 article’s author had misrepresented the process of verifying the documents upon which the claims had been based and in fact, an independent document expert had since judged them to have been fraudulent.

In reality, Baghdadi appears to have embraced a strategy of hiding in plain
sight, perhaps motivated in turn by a desire to be closer to family members who had fled to Turkey. Ultimately, that strategy failed.

**An Era of Bitter Competition**

From the outset, the emergence of HaD as a tangible and credible entity served to further deepen the animosity between it and HTS. HTS instantly issued a formal demand that HaD hand back all weapons belonging to HTS defectors who had joined HaD—an ask that, given the threat of a military response from HTS, was eventually granted. HTS sought to consolidate its primacy in northwestern Syria, whether through military arrangements tacitly done in coordination with Turkey, or through political and social service initiatives pursued through its Salvation Government.

Meanwhile, HaD and its leadership figures sought to undermine HTS’s legitimacy. When the U.S. government added HTS to its list of designated terrorist organizations on May 31, 2018 and when Turkey added HTS to its own terrorist list on August 31, 2018, HaD and al-Qaeda loyalists worldwide leaped at the chance to condemn HTS. They claimed the U.S. designation was conclusive evidence that HTS’s attempt to present itself as something different had demonstrably failed. In response, HTS periodically cracked down on HaD, most notably in October 2018 when senior Egyptian leaders of the group were arrested en masse and in November, when seven HaD-linked commanders were detained.

That latter incident was linked to a bitter dispute over the custody of a young girl named Yasmine whose mother lived in France and whose father, a French jihadist, had been killed in Syria. Before dying, he had demanded his daughter not be sent back to her “non-Muslim” mother. Since then, Omar Diaby, a French al-Qaeda-linked commander, had purportedly “abducted” Yasmine in an apparent plot to extract a ransom from her mother in Europe. In response, HTS arrested Diaby and six accomplices, sparking a crisis that nearly led to a military conflict. That dispute ended when a group of Islamic scholars in Idlib ordered that the girl be released to her mother in France, while Diaby reportedly remained in HTS custody for “other issues.”

However, the greatest source of conflict between HaD and HTS was the issue of Turkey and its role in supporting armed groups and the ongoing conflict in northwestern Syria. For Turkey and its leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan,
the situation in northwestern Syria and its implications for Turkish national security made it a crucially important *domestic* political issue. The small pocket of territory housed at least three million Syrians, half of whom were already displaced. Erdogan’s domestic political standing was already under severe pressure due to the existing Syrian refugee population inside Turkey of more than 3.5 million. Therefore, a dangerous and delicate relationship with HTS was perceived inside the Erdogan government, and particularly within Turkey’s MIT intelligence service, as a necessary evil.

In January, Abu Hammam and Oraydi issued a scathing public statement accusing HTS of making plans to form a military council alongside the Turkish-controlled Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions. This would, among other things, facilitate the re-opening of the M5 highway connecting Turkey and HTS-controlled areas in interior Syrian territory held by the Assad regime. Soon thereafter, a second statement was issued by HaD leaders Khalid al-Aruri and Abu Mohammed al-Sudani reiterating the same allegation. After that news broke, the senior HTS figure Abu Yaqazan al-Masri quit HTS on February 3, 2019 in protest, and Zawahiri, on February 5, released a video message decrying HTS's ceding of the Syrian jihad to “secular Turkey” and the dilution of the Sharia in HTS’s actions and decisions. After HaD and HTS engaged in deadly armed clashes in Aleppo’s southern countryside on February 7, 2019, the groups signed a joint agreement avowing they would cease public attacks on each other, though these continued sporadically throughout the remainder of 2019, particularly once Turkish troops began patrols inside Idlib on March 9, 2019.

Once Assad’s regime forces initiated major offensive operations targeting northwest Syria in late April 2019, HaD’s recriminations escalated even further. They accused HTS of being dependent on Turkey and responding insufficiently to regime bombardment. On August 14, rare comments attributed to Sayf al-Adel were published by al-Qaeda channels. He blamed HTS for destroying the Syrian jihad and being part of a Turkish plot against al-Qaeda and the struggle in Syria. Ten days later, after HTS and allied groups lost the town of Khan Sheikhoun, HaD and al-Qaeda’s global network launched a tirade against HTS and ridiculed the group.
Future of Al-Qaeda

As Al-Qaeda’s experiences in Syria since 2011 have demonstrated, the natural response to the 2010-2011 Arab uprisings and ISIS’s dramatic rise in 2014 was to “turn local” and seek to win hearts and minds. But the consequences of succeeding in that approach posed a direct challenge to Al-Qaeda’s capacity to control its affiliate once it began to thrive. Jabhat al-Nusra’s evolution into HTS proved a humiliating development for Al-Qaeda and its senior leadership (AQSL), which appeared within that context as aged, distant and almost irrelevant to the realities of the rapidly moving, fluid and hyper-localized conflict ongoing in Syria.

AQSL’s response to this realization in recent years has been to revert back to the original model for Al-Qaeda espoused by Bin Laden as a “vanguard” — i.e., an elite, battle-hardened and relatively compact force to confront enemies both near and far. This would be done without unduly compromising their abilities by expending resources heavily on territorial control, governance and population management. However, AQSL has also been unable to fully ignore the opportunity presented by ISIS’s territorial defeat in Syria and Iraq, and the chance to position Al-Qaeda as a more durable and successful alternative for prospective jihadist recruits. AQSL, in fact, appears cognizant of this opportunity from time to time — attempting to draw a fine line between a Bin Laden-era level of extremism and an HTS-like minor moderation.

This awkward balance was exposed for all to see in June 2019, following the death of deposed Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohammed Morsi. At that time, two of Al-Qaeda’s most influential ideologues and long-time friends—Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al-Filistini—fell out bitterly over what Morsi had represented to them. As Cole Bunzel detailed extensively in Jihadica, Abu Qatada had swiftly taken to the internet to mourn Morsi’s death:

May God have abundant mercy on him and accept him among the righteous... [This is] an appeal to every Muslim on this earth to beg pardon for him and to ask God to have mercy on him, for he died unjustly. Not for a moment did I doubt that he had a heart sincerely devoted to his religion and his ummah.

Maqdisi shot back instantly, condemning Qatada outright for lavishing praise on Morsi, a figure who “chose the path of democracy.” As Maqdisi insisted,
“We do not love him” and it is “not permissible for us” to do so, as that would be to condone “heresy warranting takfir.”

Therein followed a public and unusually acrimonious dispute in which Abu Qatada emerged as a prominent advocate for an “inclusivist” and “big tent” approach to building the jihadist movement and Maqdisi consolidated his status as al-Qaeda’s chief “exclusivist” ideologist. The debate between Maqdisi and Qatada had been ongoing for several years, but their dispute over Morsi revealed their differences in its clearest terms. In response to the experience of HTS in particular, Abu Qatada had come around to the idea that a more popular and inclusive jihadist project was the right way forward. But Maqdisi embraced the opposite lesson, insisting instead the jihadist project needed to turn inwards and adhere to much stricter operational and ideological limitations in accord with their interpretation of Islam.

Intriguingly, however, despite al-Qaeda’s long-held hostility to the Brotherhood, Maqdisi turned out to be in the minority in the wake of the Morsi spat, while AQIM figures, the Taliban (to whom al-Qaeda owes its ultimate allegiance) and a host of other al-Qaeda aligned figures all sided with Abu Qatada. A June 27 statement by al-Qaeda’s General Command mourning Morsi’s death and calling on God to “pardon him and forgive him” put a fairly swift end to the debate. It revealed, however, the glaring difference of opinion at the heart of its thought-leader network.

The al-Qaeda General Command statement should be understood as a continuation of Zawahiri’s relatively new attempts to walk the line between ultra-extremist (or exclusivist) and controlled-extremist (or inclusivist) trends within an increasingly disparate international movement. The mere existence of such differences also illustrates the extent to which AQSL no longer controls its networks in the same way al-Qaeda did in the early 2000s under Bin Laden. By trying to balance between the two trends, Zawahiri may in fact be further degrading his own position of leadership, creating another source of disconnect and more vacuums into which detractors—ultra-extremist or less so—will step.

Ultimately, al-Qaeda and AQSL will continue to struggle so long as its leadership is perceived—justifiably—as uninspiring and too distant from the realities of fast-moving and especially localized conflicts, whether in Syria, Mali, Yemen, the Maghreb or elsewhere. Jihadism in general appears headed increasingly down the path of localization, in which both al-Qaeda and ISIS are stepping into previously untouched local conflict dynamics, whether between nomadic herdsmen and settled farming communities in West Africa, or tribally and geopolitically-influenced hostilities in parts of Yemen.
AQSL’s missives and instructions to the al-Qaeda movement at-large have clearly reverted back to Bin Laden’s elite vanguard strategy, but al-Qaeda affiliates do not appear to be following suit. The localist strategy remains the guiding principle of affiliate operations. For example, al-Qaeda in the Maghreb’s decision to celebrate the use of peaceful protests in Algeria and to express “hope” that non-violence would be sufficient to achieve change in Algeria does not sound like an al-Qaeda that is switching back to Bin Laden’s ultra-extremism days.51

None of this necessarily suggests the threat posed by al-Qaeda is likely to significantly lessen. What it does imply is that the nature of that threat will diversify and present counter-terrorism actors with increasingly complex policy dilemmas. Groups like HTS may have zero interest in pursuing any objective beyond Syria’s nation-state borders, but as the case of the Taliban in 2001 demonstrated, jihadist safe-havens can be of invaluable benefit to smaller and more potent organizations who do seek to strike targets further afield. By controlling territory and nation-state border crossings, and by running rudimentary governance systems, groups like HTS also have the potential to become semi-recognized governing actors. It is possible that with Turkish support HTS could come to operate more like HAMAS—a scenario that would transform northwest Syria into more of a safe-haven for terrorists and also risk legitimizing the “jihadist-lite” approach embraced by the likes of HTS. Given the current nature of the Russia-Turkey relationship, this “Gaza-fication” scenario is increasingly emerging as the most likely medium-term outcome of the struggle surrounding Idlib.

In today’s environment, al-Qaeda’s further decentralization is inevitable given increasing factionalism and intra-jihadist competition for preeminence. At the same time, the incentives to form tight-knit, ultra-extreme groups of experienced and committed jihadists remain potent. So, too, does al-Qaeda’s desire to pursue spectacular terror operations on high-value targets—including Western countries. The emergence and consolidation of groups like HaD is justifiably ringing alarm bells. And they are unlikely to be the last to emerge from within the al-Qaeda movement, which will continue to want to revitalize itself through action.

NOTES


15. Ibid.


20. In which “hyper-local” is taken to refer to a dynamic that is both intense and specific to an especially local environment and/or community. The conflict in Syria has proven to be consistently “hyper-local,” given the multi-dimensional but deeply local nature of conflict dynamics across the country being directed overwhelmingly by locals, driven by local concerns, local knowledge and local actions.


23. Ibid.


26. Ibid.


29. Ibid.


31. Ibid.

32. This meeting included Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, Sami al-Oraydi, Abu Julaybib, Khalid al-Aruri (Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni) and Abu Hammam al-Suri (Jabhat al-Nusra’s former military leader).


37. In addition to Abu Hammam and Oraydi, HaD’s leadership included most Jabhat al-Nusra leaders who had defected from JFS and HTS (including Abu Abdulrahman al-Maki, Abu Julaybib, Bilal Khuraisat and Faraj Ahmed Nanaa) as well as globally-prominent al-Qaeda figures like Khalid al-Aruri and Abu Abdul Karim al-Khorasani.

38. For example, Shaibat al-Hukamah, via Telegram, April 5, 2018.

42. “Syria jihadist group Hurras al-Din slammed in eulogy to top militant,” BBC Monitoring, August 26, 2019.
47. “Syria-based jihadist groups HTS, Hurras al-Din, end dispute,” BBC Monitoring, November 26, 2018.
The Origins of Boko Haram—and Why It Matters

By Bulama Bukarti

Nigeria’s population of an estimated 200 million people is plagued by an alarming level of violence, which is driven by a toxic mix of brutal extremist groups, criminal gangs and a cropland crisis. These feed into one another, and each is little understood. A key player in the present carnage is Boko Haram, a notorious organization which claims to fight in defense of Islam.

Over the last decade from 2009–2019, Boko Haram has waged a campaign of mass violence and wrought havoc in Africa’s Lake Chad region, which comprises northern Nigeria, southeastern Niger, far-northern Cameroon and western Chad. The Boko Haram movement has killed a conservative estimate of 18,000 people, displaced millions, and caused a large-scale humanitarian crisis. In 2014, it was recorded as the world’s deadliest terror group, killing 6,600 in that year alone. Boko Haram is particularly notorious for its violence against children. Indeed, the movement was first catapulted into the attention of western media in April 2014 by its kidnapping of 276 girls from their school dormitory in Chibok village, north-eastern Nigeria. It uses girls as sexual and domestic slaves and as human bombs, targeting civilian locations including markets, hospitals, IDP camps and places of worship. It has also conscripted thousands of boys into its...
army and forces them to kill in order to keep themselves alive.\(^4\) Boko Haram has established itself as a formidable force and, judging from security force fatalities of 750 in 2019 which is the highest since the violence began, it now appears to be stronger than ever.\(^5\)

Boko Haram originally formed in 2003, and today the movement is split into three different factions. These include Jama’atu Ahl al-Sunna lid Da’wati wa al-Jihad (JAS), which is popularly called Boko Haram, and which is led by Abubakar Shekau. Shekau has been the group’s sole leader from 2009 until its first split in 2012 when members disgruntled by Shekau’s indiscriminate killing of civilians formed Ansaru al-Musulmina fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru).

Then, in August 2016, after Shekau defied ISIS’s announcement of his deposition,\(^6\) yet another rift emerged resulting in the Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP) as a declared affiliate (wilayat) of the ISIS “caliphate” movement. JAS and ISWAP, with a combined estimated 5,000–7,000 fighters, are active in the Lake Chad region where they continue to attack military formations, kill civilians, raid and torch villages, and engage in abductions.\(^7\) Ansaru is based in northwestern Nigeria and has not claimed any attack since 2013, although it still releases messages intended to recruit and radicalize the public. It was recently reported that JAS and ISWAP fighters are defecting to Ansaru due to military pressure in the Lake Chad region. This raises the threat of renewed violence from Ansaru.\(^8\)

By its own account, Boko Haram and its rise since 2003 has been inspired by ideologues, events and groups across the world including by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. And yet, despite several books and over 500 reports and articles written about it since its emergence, very little is known including by Nigerians themselves about the group’s origins. That is so because existing literature regarding the group is primarily based on unverified media reports, penned by researchers who spent very minimal time in the field, and by a narrow selection of interviewees whose reports have sometimes been tainted by bias.

While Boko Haram continues to wreak bloody havoc, debates over its genesis and links to other so-called jihadi groups continue. These have divided scholars into two broad camps. First, scholars such as Alex Thurston, Adam Hijazi and Kyari Mohammed see Boko Haram as a “home-grown” group, one that was birthed by systemic and structural local factors while treating the role and influence of al-Qaeda and international jihadism on the group as “marginal” or secondary.\(^9\)

Second, other researchers led by Andrea Brigaglia and Jacob Zenn de-emphasize the importance of local factors and promote the role of international jihadi organizations, principally al-Qaeda, to the rise and evolution of Boko Haram.\(^10\)
At the heart of this debate, which has recently fallen into *ad hominem* attacks, is a violent episode that occurred during 2003–4 in Kanamma, a desert village in north-eastern Nigeria. This episode concerned a commune that formed part of the nucleus that would become Boko Haram.

Over the years, that episode has become a landmark in Boko Haram’s history. Virtually every author writing about the genesis of the group has dedicated some time to it. However, the scholarly and journalistic analysis of this event is replete with contradictions, confusion and exaggerations. Scholars dispute each other’s statements, sometimes inadvertently. Accounts of what happened are profoundly different, indicating a general lack of clarity and knowledge about the incident. This is because virtually all writers rely on second-hand information—mostly unverified media reports which have, in turn, relied on more second-hand information without critically assessing the sources’ reliability. It is thus a classic case of “little evidence, much confusion.”

What can be said without controversy is that at some point in 2003, a group of mostly young people from Maiduguri and elsewhere in northern Nigeria went to a northern part of Yobe state in the northeast, near the border with Niger. There, in the remote desert, they established a puritanical separatist community which defined itself in opposition to the “corrupting influence of city life.” Toward the end of 2003, the group clashed with police, looting vehicles and weapons. The commune was subsequently dismantled by the military, with some members killed and others arrested. The commune members that remained contained part of the seeds of Boko Haram.

Given the ongoing debate and misunderstandings surrounding this episode, it is important to understand this event not only for its academic and historical value, but also because it contributes to an understanding of how Boko Haram began, which has practical policy implications today. Among other things, understanding how Boko Haram began remains vital for the sake of successfully defeating the movement. It is essential, also, for the sake of noting early warning signs among similar groups—and preventing them from becoming as established and capable as Boko Haram is today. Drawing on primary data, including extensive fieldwork in northeastern Nigeria and primary internal documents in Hausa, Kanuri and Arabic, this paper re-examines the Kanamma episode with a view to setting the record straight. It finds that the Kanamma commune was not an al-Qaeda training center, as some have speculated, nor was it a pacific religious community, as suggested by others. While this paper contends that there was no operational linkage between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in 2003 when the Nigerian group was founded, there is evidence of ideological connection between
the duo from the very beginning. Understanding this is important for properly analyzing the Boko Haram phenomenon and helping policymakers design effective strategies to deal with the group and the crisis in Nigeria.

Little Evidence, Big Claims

A survey of the scholarly literature about Boko Haram reveals a great deal of confusion over almost every single detail of the 2003–2004 Kanamma episode. The fact that it happened in the first place and the time period in which it transpired are perhaps the only exceptions. Authors disagree with one another regarding not only the interpretation of events but on specific facts and figures: what was the population of the commune, for example. While Manuel Reinert, Andrew Walker and others claim it comprised some 200, David Cook estimated the “Kanamma Group” at between 800–1000. Other details are similarly contradictory, such as the number of casualties in the clash, who directed it, what led to the violence, among other things. The reader is left with the difficult task of sorting through a deluge of irreconcilable narratives.13

When the Kanamma commune grabbed its first headlines in early 2004, it was labelled the “Nigerian Taleban” (sic) implying it was somehow related to the Afghan Taliban. The portrayal of the commune in the predominantly Christian-run media of southern Nigeria was particularly instrumental to this branding, and this was later adopted by Western media.14 The label could merely have been a device to relate what was going on in Nigeria with the then-current “global war on terror,” or simply something to sell newspapers. But it might also have been deployed for mischievous or stereotypical motives. Nigerian media is not immune to the religious polarization and divisiveness that has characterized the country and its politics since its independence in 1960. Southern Nigerian media has consistently sought to portray the North as an Islamist population that cannot coexist with others. Perhaps that is why when Boko Haram appeared in its current iteration in 2009, its leader was called “The Leader of Nigerian Taliban” before the current nomenclature was adopted.15

As a result of this newspaper reporting, serious attempts to link the Kanamma commune with the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan began to appear. David Cook, for instance, suggests that there may have been members of Boko Haram in Afghanistan during the Kanamma episode, even though he also questions that
same possibility in the next sentence.\textsuperscript{16} Citing news media published years after the episode, Freedom Onuoha takes this theory further. He states that the Kanamma commune occupied public buildings for several days, “hoisting the flag of Afghanistan’s Taliban movement over the camps,” and that the group inscribed “Taliban” on their vehicles and called their camp “Afghanistan.”\textsuperscript{17}

Building on this, some academics began to speculate that in actuality Boko Haram began as an al-Qaeda project.\textsuperscript{18} They misinterpreted the Kanamma episode as a clash between the Nigerian police and an al-Qaeda training camp established in northern Nigeria with funding from Osama Bin Laden. Thus, they concluded that al-Qaeda played a significant role in the founding of Boko Haram.\textsuperscript{19}

What Actually Happened

During extensive fieldwork, I interviewed multiple local sources in Kanamma as to what actually happened.\textsuperscript{20} Their account reveals a pattern with only slight variations. The following narrative is based on these accounts.

In the evening of Sunday, December 21, 2003, a group of some seventy persons (about fifty men and twenty women and children) arrived at the southern outskirts of Kanamma. The group cleared a forested site between two bodies of water next to Bakurna Barde’s farm and spent the night there. The following day, around eleven of them (eight men, three women) went to the village market to purchase provisions. Before they returned to their camp, they went around to youth haunts, calling on residents to abandon their “dirty temporal life” and join the group in the practice of true Islam and the establishment of an Islamic state that would enforce the sharia legal system. Female members entered houses and made the same invitation to women in purdah.

That same night, some members of the commune attacked the Kanamma police outpost with machetes, bows and arrows, and catapults, as well as one pistol.\textsuperscript{21} They killed a police officer named Liman Umar, from Sokoto state, and seized his rifle. From there, they raided the house of Alhaji Komfasa, the chairman of the local government, who escaped by scaling a fence. The commune members fled by stealing a four-wheel drive car. They proceeded to Geidam, about thirty-five kilometers away, and looted the local government secretariat and the police station there.

On December 25, police officers were mobilized to the site of the commune but returned without any casualties on either side. It appears that there was, in...
fact, no violence at all that day; the police could not access the camp due to its
defensive position between two bodies of water, and its only entrance was barri-
caded with sandbags and a trench in anticipation of a counterattack.

On December 31, soldiers and tanks were deployed from 241 Recce Battalion
in Nguru (about two hundred ten kilometers away). The troops entered the camp
in the early hours of January 1, 2004, and at sunrise passed through Kanamma
in a truck carrying about twenty bodies, including that of Baalai, said to be the leader
of the commune, as well as women and children. Dispersed fighters were later spotted
by villagers, walking either west or southward. Some of them went through
Kanamma where they received treatment for minor wounds (largely incurred in
the bush) before leaving. Several respondents stated that the commune, now be-
ing theorized as an “al-Qaeda training camp,” actually only lasted in Kanamma
for about ten days from December 21, 2003 to January 1, 2004. Meanwhile, the
actual fighting was over within hours. This signals that this incident is hugely
exaggerated, and also sharply contradicts the suggestion made by Brigalia that
Kanamma existed for years.

Residents stated that they were later informed that the same group had previ-
ously established a commune on the outskirts of another village called Tarmowa,
about sixty-three kilometers from Kanamma. The local government chairman,
Alhaji Komfasa—whose house they had raided on December 21, 2003—had
asked them to vacate their encampment in that town. However, Boko Haram
scholars appear to be unaware of Tarmowa. They only refer to Kanamma, where
the violent clash occurred. This is because virtually all of them rely on Nigerian
journalistic accounts which, in turn, rely on anonymous unverified sources. It
may be that the activities of the commune in Tarmowa are confused with what
transpired in Kanamma.

Inside the Tarmowa Commune

BY 2003, THERE APPEARED AN IDEOLOGICAL CRACK IN THE RANKS OF THE GROUP
that would later become Boko Haram. This crack formed into two main camps,
one led by Muhammad Ali and the other by Muhammad Yusuf. The break was
over two related issues. The first was whether a Muslim is permitted to live in
Nigeria, which is viewed by the group as dar al-kufr (abode of unbelief). The
second issue concerned timing for the launching of a jihad.
On the first issue, Ali believed it was not permitted for a Muslim to live in Nigeria. He argued the country was dar al-kufr, as the government does not rule by sharia law (hukm bi gyari ma anzal Llah) by permitting adultery, gambling, alcohol, etcetera. Therefore, the only option left to the group’s members was to do hijrah to a “pure” place—in the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad—and prepare for jihad.

On the other hand, Yusuf contended that it is permissible for Muslims to live in the land of disbelief provided they do not obey man-made laws and institutions, and that they disassociate from the country’s secular system (al wala wa al-bara’). In addition, they must publicly announce their dissociation (izhar al-din). Articulating this position, Yusuf argued,

You must openly say this system is false; Islamic law is the only truth; that this constitution is false and it is disbelief (kaafirci in Hausa); those who are employed under the government are working for falsehood and disbelief; the military system is false and it is disbelief; the police system is false and it is disbelief; working as a judge in this country under the constitution is false and it is disbelief. If you openly say these and everyone knows you with these [views], then you can live in the country. Otherwise, you must emigrate...²⁵ (emphasis added by author).

Yusuf went on to say that it was, in practical terms, more beneficial for members to stay in cities, so that they could recruit and radicalize. He argued it was necessary for the group to oppose and harden themselves against Muslim scholars, politicians and public servants, mainly police and the military, who defended the “un-Islamic system.” In keeping with some traditional jurists, Yusuf held that it was necessary to first “establish proof”—i.e., to preach against “un-Islamic” society and to attempt to call it back to Islam—before initiating jihad against them (iqamatul hujjah). Ali disagreed.

Thus, the second issue was over the appropriate time to declare a jihad in Nigeria. Ali contended that Nigeria was ripe for a jihad and that all pre-conditions were fulfilled in 2003. To Ali, their group had done enough preaching to convince people to repent and implement the Sharia, and that anyone that did not repent should just be fought. Yusuf argued otherwise. He thought there was need for more time to recruit members, to mobilize more grassroots support and to procure weapons.

All of this culminated in the split of Boko Haram into the Ali and Yusu camps.²⁶
The Ali camp migrated to Tarmowa, a desert village about five kilometers from Geidam in northern Yobe state. Members mostly arrived in cars at Geidam around mid-2003, then boated to the outskirts of Tarmowa village. The new compound started with two people (apparently an advance team sent to find a suitable place) and gradually swelled to around seventy, including women and children. They erected huts and a *jumu‘aat* mosque from tree branches and leaves, and they dug a well. Families slept in huts while single men slept inside the mosque. When I visited the site in the company of several of my sources in February 2019, I saw the well which, to this day, contains water. I also identified the spot where the mosque stood.

On Fridays, some locals joined the commune for prayers. Commune members went on preaching tours to surrounding villages such as Zaji-Biriri, Zai and Bestur, and as a result, about a dozen youths joined them. They condemned western-style education, democracy, as well as the traditional emirate system (which was deemed un-Islamic), and called on traditional rulers to relinquish their positions and submit to Islamic government. A couple of months after their arrival, they started fishing in a nearby river, and engaged in paid labor and petty trading to earn a living. Some worked on farms for a fee while others traded in neighboring village markets such as Geidam, Bayamari and Dapchi. Women and children were in charge of cooking and domestic chores.

According to Abu Harun, a member of the commune who went there with his wife and four children (one of whom died in the attack on the camp in Kanamma), the commune did not name itself “Taliban” or “Afghanistan” but was called *Dar al-Hijrah* (the abode of fleeing); members called themselves “*muhajirun*”—i.e., the emigrants. The tag “*muhajirun*” is, of course, a homage to the early Muslims who migrated from their home in Mecca where they were persecuted for their faith, to Medina. It is also another indication of the religious/ideological undertones of the group and an attempt by them to play the victim and attribute their movement to early Islam.

Abu Harun claims that they did not have arms nor conduct military training. They only engaged in physical exercise such as boxing and martial arts. Residents whom I spoke with, who passed around the site including at night, stated that they did not notice any military training, nor did they ever hear gunshots. Members got armed with machetes, catapults and so forth after they received an eviction notice from the local authorities.

Except for one dispute, which led to a fight with one Kachallah Ngubdo, there was never an incident between the commune and the local communities. Members accused Ngubdo (a hunter) of invading their privacy because he passed
near their site at night when hunting. The dispute was settled by the traditional ruler of Besbur, who directed the commune to return Ngubdo’s hunting weapon and amulets to him, with which they complied. Contrary to multiple published accounts, residents said there was no dispute between them and the commune over fishing rights. “There never was any dispute over fishing in this area. The river is free for everyone because it a gift from God for all of us” said Lawan Amadu, the traditional ruler of Zai village.

Around October 2003, efforts to evict the commune began, not because of a dispute with villagers, but because of the local authorities’ apprehension about the commune’s intentions. Local authorities saw the commune as an attempt to create a separatist community—effectively “a state within a state.”

The site was under the administration of the defunct Bukarti Development Area, which inaugurated an ad hoc committee to persuade the group to vacate the site. The committee paid several visits, with a view to convincing the commune to leave. The group, however, insisted on staying and explained that the land belonged to God, and they did not constitute a threat to anyone. They explained to the committee that they were fleeing from urban life because it distracted them from reciting the Quran, praying and fasting.

When the committee’s attempts to encourage the commune to leave failed, the matter was reported to the Yobe state government, which got the police involved. Around the second week of December 2003, the Yobe state police command gave the commune a seven-day ultimatum to vacate. On the expiration of the ultimatum, the group packed up and left the site on trucks. Before they left, they announced to villagers and distributed pamphlets stating that they had been denied the right to practice their faith, and thus were going to fight. They claimed that were launching a jihad and invited residents to join them. From Tarmowa, the group left for Kanamma.

Setting the Record Straight

As we’ve seen, Boko Haram was inspired by ideologues, events and groups across the world including Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. In fact, Yusuf’s sons recollect that their fathers’ tipping point for founding Boko Haram was the success of the 9/11 attack, which occurred while Yusuf was on pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, when Boko Haram decided to unleash full-blown violence in
2009, after about two hundred members of the group were killed during July of that year, the group requested technical and financial support from al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghrib (AQIM), which acquiesced. Shekau later thanked AQIM for training and financial support.\(^{35}\) This is an indication that post-2009, al-Qaeda and Boko Haram have developed operational linkages. However, there is no credible evidence that operational connections between the two existed before 2009 and particularly during 2003—that is, at the time of Boko Haram’s founding, when claims about its links to transnational jihadism were first being made.

For now, let us proceed to examine the two major premises upon which the theory linking Kanamma to al-Qaeda was built; the involvement of Ali, who reportedly received a grant from Bin Laden to start a cell in Nigeria, and reports that the commune’s residents kept “the Nigerian security busy in a fire exchange that lasted over several days.”\(^{36}\)

On the first premise, Abu Harun confirms that Ali was involved in the camp and was the head of the splinter group. But he did not stay at Tarmowa or Kanamma. He lived in Gashua, about a hundred and forty-seven kilometers away, and only occasionally visited the commune. Ali was not on site when the camp was attacked by the military, nor was he among those killed there. He later joined some dispersed members after escaping from a police attempt to arrest him in Gashua, which took place immediately after the camp was dislodged. He then headed to the Mandara Mountains in Borno state, but was killed along the road.\(^{37}\)

The account linking Ali to Bin Laden and al-Qaeda is not supported with credible evidence. Ali’s alleged meeting with Osama Bin Laden in Sudan, his training in Afghanistan and receipt of a $3 million grant from him in 2000 to start an al-Qaeda cell in Nigeria, was first reported by the International Crisis Group in 2014 (ten years after Kanamma).\(^{38}\) This claim is based on a single interview with an anonymous Boko Haram member. It is not clear where and how that purported member got his information: Was he with Ali in Sudan or was he informed? Was he a party to the transfer of funds or did he hear about it from Ali, Bin Laden or a third party? Was he a member in Kanamma or did he remain with Yusuf after the split? Or did he join Boko Haram later?

The report does not answer any of these germane questions, nor does it even indicate whether its source ever met Ali at all. Little wonder then that the report itself qualifies its claims about Ali and his connections with al-Qaeda with “reportedly” and “allegedly.” In fact, these terms were used fifty-one and twenty-one times respectively in the report, indicating that the information should be taken with a pitch of salt. Curiously, however, instead of this claim being treated with the caution that it rightly deserves, it gradually started being presented by others as
established fact. The caveats ("reportedly" and "allegedly") were surreptitiously edited out or tweaked by scholars passionate about the theory.\textsuperscript{39}

On the second premise, as can be seen above in the eye-witness account of what transpired in Kanamma, the commune did not hold its own against security forces for days as claimed by some Boko Haram scholars. Soldiers from Nguru invaded the camp in the early hours of January 1, 2004 and, by sunrise the same day, they were back in Kanamma with bodies of those killed and prisoners. Thus, the attack on the group lasted hours, not days, much less weeks.

As explained above, an attempt to evict them on December 25, 2003 ended without an encounter because the police could not access the commune. Similarly, there are no reports of weapons other than \textit{armes blanches} seized from the camp. If rifles and other assault weapons were recovered, one might expect Yobe State Government’s press release on the incident to have indicated so.\textsuperscript{40} On the contrary, the government stated that the group was not a training camp.

On the other hand, unlike separatist religious communes like \textit{Darul Salam},\textsuperscript{41} (a revivalist group of about 3,000–4,000 who lived in Mokwa, north-central Nigeria until they were dislodged by police in 2009 without violence) Kanamma was not the pacifist commune as presented by some writers. Boko Haram has made clear from the get-go that its ultimate aim was to launch a jihad to rid its area of secular systems and governments, and to replace them with a puritanical Islamic government. For instance, in Yusuf’s “History of Muslims”—an important lecture that Kassim says should be regarded as Yusuf’s “political and religious testament”\textsuperscript{42}—Yusuf explained,

\begin{quote}

The only thing that will stop them [that is Nigerian government and Christians] from insulting the prophet or killing Muslims is jihad . . . [but] we must first and foremost embark upon preaching towards Islamic reform. Then, we will have to be patient until we acquire power. This is the foundation of this preaching towards Islamic reform [\textit{da’wa}]. It was founded for the sake of jihad and we did not hide this objective from anyone...

\end{quote}

As highlighted above, members of the Kanamma commune subscribed to this ideology. In fact, it was their zealously to implement it that led to their break away from Yusuf and their subsequent migration. They went to Tarmowa to fulfill one of the pre-conditions of jihad and to prepare for it. They lived in peace with local communities, and did not target them when they raided government buildings and police outposts in Kanamma and neighboring villages,\textsuperscript{43} not only
because they were a secondary target, but also because they saw them as a “recruitment pool.” If anything, efforts to eject them only drew them into a fight they were not prepared for. Nevertheless, the fact remains that they were the ones who instigated the violence, which points to their ultimately violent intentions.

**Conclusion**

IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, THERE IS NO CREDIBLE EVIDENCE OF ANY OPERATIONAL link between the Kanamma commune and al-Qaeda, and theories linking the two are, at best, speculative. And Kanamma is just one example of the contradictions and occasional confusion regarding landmark events in the existing Boko Haram literature. This is partly due to the fact that very few field studies have been conducted on the group, and those few have been limited in scope. Scholars mostly rely on unverified secondary accounts. While this can be forgiven in 2012 to 2015, when the areas where Boko Haram originally emerged were extremely dangerous for researchers, the situation has improved since 2016. This presents a real opportunity for scholars and journalists to do a better job at understanding the sources of Boko Haram.

Furthermore, as our sojourn to better understand this phenomenon continues, scholars who study Boko Haram should allow the facts and evidence on the ground to direct them, rather than seeking evidence that supports their preconceptions. Holding on to previous positions, while tweaking sources or ignoring reliable evidence to defend them will only exacerbate disagreements, some of which have recently degenerated into *ad hominem* attacks among Boko Haram scholars. Worse still, while the fight against Boko Haram is ongoing, such controversies detract from the effort to supply policy makers with the knowledge and context they require to design effective strategies for countering the violence.

Understanding early Boko Haram—an aspect of which was treated in this paper—has practical policy implications. First, it will give policymakers a fair idea of the conditions and circumstances that led to the rise and evolution of Boko Haram and thus make them better placed to confront them. Second, appreciating the origins and early links of Boko Haram—or lack of them—and similarly-inspired groups will help governments to choose the best approach to dealing with the group. For instance, if Boko Haram started as a domestic group with local grievances and agenda, policy solutions to the group, developed by the Nigerian
government and other concerned parties, will markedly differ from decisions made if Boko Haram started as an al-Qaeda-linked representative in Nigeria. Third, and last, comprehending the real story of Boko Haram’s emergence and increasingly dangerous operations can help to expose early warning signs about similar groups in the future. This is essential if policymakers are to have any chance of preventing marginal groups possessed of local grievances but inspired by transnational jihadist ideas from transforming into large-scale armies that terrorize and threaten to undo entire nations.

NOTES


11. See Adam Higazi et al, “A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa’ida” and Jacob Zenn Responds to his Critiques...


13. David Cook, an associate professor of religion at Rice University, was one of the first scholars to write on the Kanamma episode. He states that the commune, located about a mile from Kanamma, consisted of about sixty persons. On December 29, 2003, in their effort to obtain weapons, they raided government installations, including police stations, and killed 30 people in the process. David Cook, “Boko Haram: A Prognosis,” The James Baker III Institute of Public Policy, December 16, 2011, p. 10, (accessed 14/09/2019). This culminated in a Nigerian army crackdown on their camp which ended up killing or capturing all but seven of them, Ibid, p. 9.

Anna Borzello, a BBC journalist who visited Kanamma and interviewed locals, confirms Cook’s details but reports that only one person, a police officer, was killed by the commune. In the same vein, Kyari Mohammed echoes Cook but writes that the group also wreaked havoc in five different local government areas between December 21, 2003 and January 1, 2004. He does not provide casualty figures, nor does he cite the population of the commune, simply saying it was “a tiny group of people.” See Kyari Muhammad, “The Message and Methods of Boko Haram,” in Montclos Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (ed.), Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria (African Studies Centre 2014) 9, p. 10.

Andrew Walker, the author of a book about Boko Haram titled Eat the Heart of the Infidel, mentions the group’s attacks on police stations and government buildings, but reports that the group overpowered a squad of police officers and took their weapons after a dispute over fishing rights. See Andrew Walker, “What Is Boko Haram?” (United
States Institute for Peace, June 2010), p. 3, (accessed 15/09/2019). He further states that the group consisted of about two hundred members, seventy of whom were killed at Kanamma.

Statements by Manuel Reinert, a researcher at the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA-Nigeria) and Lou Garçon, an anthropologist, fall somewhere between Cook and Walker. Like Walker, they assert that the population of the camp was 200 and that conflict originally erupted over fishing rights. But, like Cook, they state that the group attacked police stations and government buildings. Furthermore, they put the number of the militants killed in the uprising at “several,” thereby contradicting both Cook and Walker.

Rafael Serrano, a research analyst at University of South Florida, and Zacharias Pieri, a political sociologist, agree with Walker on seventy casualties from the militants’ side, but contradict him on the commune’s total population. They assert that the figure, “amounted to the majority of the sect members in Kanama,” thus implying a total population under a hundred and forty.

Confusing matters still further, Cook estimated the total population of the Kanamma Group—a name which he uses synonymously with Boko Haram—at “around 800–1000 members,” although he has suggested elsewhere that number should be taken seriously. [Cook, “Boko Haram: A Prognosis,” p. 10].

Virginia Comolli states that there were members of the commune from Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Virginia Comolli (2015). Boko Haram: Nigeria’s Islamist Insurgency (UK: C. Hurst & Co., Ltd), p. 47.

She cites Walker for this assertion, but Walker did not make such a claim in the article cited by Comolli, and no other account even remotely supports her claim. [She cited Andrew Walker, “What Is Boko Haram?” (United States Institute for Peace, June 2010), http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/SR308.pdf.]

In several accounts of Boko Haram’s early days, questions of leadership are also contradictory. Various authors have mentioned at least three different people as the leader of the commune. Cook states that the commune was led by Muhammad Yusuf, who would become Boko Haram’s founder and first leader. Even though Kyari Mohammed quotes Cook repeatedly, he also contradicts him by reporting that Yusuf “was neither an active physical participant nor a prominent figure” and that it was one Muhammad Ali who led the commune [Ibid, p. 12].

John Azumah, an ordained Ghanaian minister and scholar of Christianity and Islam, confirms Ali as the leader and asserts he was killed in Kanamma. [Azumah, “Boko Haram in Retrospect” p. 40]. Jacob Zenn agrees that Ali died in Kanamma but states that he was considered a “co-leader” along with Yusuf. International Crisis Group (ICG) claims Ali was a key player in the commune, but that it was led by Shekau (JAS’s

ICG alleges that Shekau and Aminu Tashen-Ilimi broke from Yusuf, whom they accused of “being too soft,” to establish the commune. [International Crisis Group, “Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province,” p. 9].

Yusuf’s sons, meanwhile, do not mention Shekau as leader of the commune. See Aymann Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Cutting out the tumour from the Khawarij of Shekau by the allegiance pledge of the people of nobility by the two brothers, the sons of Sheikh Abu Yusuf al-Barnawi, may God protect them,” (Trans., Aymann Jawad Al-Tamimi, August 5, 2018), http://www.aymennjawad.org/21467/the-islamic-state-west-africa-province-vs-abu (accessed May 2, 2019).


As with the other issues highlighted above, existing literature presents a confusing picture of the origins and links of the Kanamma Commune. Three different groups are particularly mentioned: the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the group that would become Boko Haram.

Bøås presented the Kanamma commune, which he terms the “Taliban groups (sic),” as a different group from Boko Haram, while Mohammed notes that the two shared the same ideology and that the remainder of the Kanamma militants joined Boko Haram. Abdulbasit Kassim, a PhD candidate at Rice University on intellectual history of Islam in Africa, on his part, suggests that the Kanamma militants splintered from the group that would become Boko Haram. [Abdulbasit Kassim, (2018) “Boko Haram’s Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism,” in Jacob Zenn (ed.) Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines_Chapter-6.pdf accessed on 29/12/2018, 9–32, p.11, (accessed 15/09/2019)].

All these three prepositions continue to appear in Boko Haram literature. We shall look closely at two of them now.

This conjecture about the Kanamma commune’s link to al-Qaeda began in 2015 (thir-
teen years after the fact) by Andrea Brigaglia, who challenged earlier suggestions that the commune was "extremely puritanical, but substantially pacific community." [Ibid, 194].

He speculated that it was an al-Qaeda training camp with "international connections" established as an "appendix" of mainstream Salafis (read, Ahl as-Sunnah) to train fighters for deployment to Afghanistan and Iraq. Relying on reports that clashes between the commune and Nigerian troops lasted several days, he argued that members were both trained to use firearms and were armed. Otherwise, they would not have been able to engage security forces for days.

This claim contradicts both the Yobe State Government’s conclusion that “the site was not a training camp but a separatist commune,” and the U.S. Embassy’s determination that it was not tied to al-Qaeda. [Thurston, “Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement,” p. 93; “Nigerian Taliban most likely not tied to Taliban nor al-Qaeda,” WikiLeaks; Walker, “Eat the Heart of the Infidel,” p. 151.]

Even though Brigaglia was compelled by watertight primary evidence to recant the foundation of his hypothesis in a recent article, Andrea Brigaglia (2018), Slicing Off the Tumour: The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by the Islamic State, Politics and Religion Journal, (S.l.), v. 12, n. 2, p. 19–224, Nov. 2018. ISSN 1820-659X, 207, https://www.politicsandreligionjournal.com/index.php/prj/article/view/320, 2017 (accessed 01/01/2019), he appeared adamant to both have his cake and eat it. He retorts “although the embryonic Jihadi community led by Ali had not been able to establish a training camp at Kanamma as I had previously hypothesised, this was obviously their intention, which was averted thanks to the collaboration of the top leadership of the Salafi community with the security.” [Ibid.].

Brigaglia further claimed that the history of Boko Haram—written by Yusuf’s sons and published by ISIS—supports his claim that the Kanamma commune was “loosely or organically” linked to al-Qaeda, even though nothing in the text even remotely suggests that. In fact, the authors dismissed allegations that Boko Haram was linked to al-Qaeda in its early period as “spurious distorted accusations with no truth to them.”

In yet another article, Brigaglia triples down on this theory even as he backtracks from another premise upon which it was built. He submitted that Ali had “allegedly received a promise of funding from Osama Bin Laden.....” However, the money never arrived and “so training in the camp never started.” [Andrea Brigaglia, “The ‘Popular Discourses of Salafi Counter-Radicalism in Nigeria’ Revisited: A Response to Abdulrahim’s Review of Alexander Thurston, Boko Haram,” Center for Contemporary Islam, The CCI Occasional Papers, No. 2, March 2019, p. 12, (accessed 15/09/2019)].

Yet he also claimed, rather puzzlingly, that his hypothesis that the Kanamma commune was meant to be a training camp for al-Qaeda, "stands stronger" in 2019 than when he formulated it in 2015. [Ibid.]
Despite Brigaglia’s twists and turns on this issue, he has been frequently cited as an authority on the Kanamma episode. Kassim praised Brigaglia’s first article linking the commune to al-Qaeda as, “The best treatment of the Kanamma episode” and his argument “brilliant.” See Kassim, “Boko Haram’s Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism,” footnote 75, p. 10.


Zenn copiously cited Brigaglia with approval and concluded that “other documentary sources” are “increasingly corroborating Brigaglia’s hypothesis,” [Ibid, 177.] which Brigaglia himself has almost completely recanted. Zenn tweaked, perhaps inadvertently, Brigaglia’s “several days” to “several weeks” as the duration it took Nigerian troops to dismantle the camp, even as he paraphrased him. See five academics who condemned his theory on al-Qa’ida’s link with Boko Haram and his treatment of sources in Jacob Zenn, “A Primer on Boko Haram Sources and Three Heuristics on al Qaida and Boko Haram in Response to Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston,” Perspective on Terrorism, Vol. 12, Issue 3, (accessed 15/08/2019).

16. Cook, “Boko Haram: A Prognosis,” p.9. It should be noted that Cook cited one Muhammad Iysa of Lagos State university for the sentence in which he questioned the possibility of some members being with the Afghan Taliban. This could have been a mistake on his part. But even if we assume Cook wanted to cite Iysa for the claim itself, he does not clarify the position of his source, his source’s relationship with Boko Haram or where he claimed to have got that information from and reduces the weight of his informant’s allegation to mere speculation.


20. Interviewees in Kanamma include Alhaji Umar Goni (Traditional ruler and Chief Imam) Bakurna Barde (a farmer), Bintumi Kanamma (civil servant). Focused group discussion was conducted with Alhaji Goni Ibrahim (civil servant), Goni Kulu (farmer), Alhaji Mayami (trader) Amadu Tanja (farmer) and Kyari Huwu (trader). Interview conducted February 3, 2019.


22. Brigaglia, “The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram,” p. 198. All participants of the focussed group discussion agree that in the commune was dismantled in a few hours.


24. Kassim mentions Zaji Biriri, one of the villages close to Tarmowa but says same is in Tarmuwa Local Government Area. See Kassim, “Boko Haram’s Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism,” p. 10. It appears that Kassim or his source conflated Tarmowa village which was in Bukarti Development Area (now Yunusari Local Government Area) with Tarmuwa Local Government.


26. The second point has been brilliantly and extensively discussed by Kassim. See Kassim, “Boko Haram’s Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism,” pp.9–13.

27. Interview with Modu Lawan, village head of Zaji-Biriri, about 2 miles from the site, who was member of the local committee that paid two visits to the site to persuade members to leave the site.


29. Interview with Lawan Amadu.


32. Interview with Kachallah Ngubdo, Bukarti, 3/02/2019.
33. Telephonic interview with the chairman of the ad hoc committee, Alhaji Ibrahim Toshiya, 10/2/2019.
34. Al-Tamimi, “Cutting out the tumour from the Khawarij of Shekau...”
37. Interview with Abu Harun, Kano, 10/02/2019.
39. See, for instance Zenn, “Where will Boko Haram go next after ten years of moving around?” Ibid.
41. For explanation on Darul Islam, see Abdul Raufu Mustapha and Mukhtar U. Bunza “Contemporary Islamic Sects & Groups in Northern Nigeria,” in Abdul Raufu Mustapha (ed.) Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria” (Rochester, NY, James Currey) 2014, pp. 54–97, p. 77.
The Crisis of Governance and Constitutionalism Facing modern Arab governments and politicians has been compounded by an underlying ideological crisis. The ad hoc political order of nation-states that formed in the Arab Middle East after the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and the process of Western decolonization has been crumbling amidst popular revolutions and elite discontent. The secular and revolutionary dreams of pan-Arabism that once inspired 20th Century nationalist politics have faded away. Arab countries and the world at-large have simultaneously grown suspicious of pan-Arabism’s main Islamic rival, the Wahhabi tradition of Saudi Arabia, given its ideological links with religious strife and contemporary Salafi-jihadism. Iran’s “export of revolution” has driven sectarian wars and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of human beings, most of them Arabs. In response, the desire for a restored caliphate inside the Sunni Islamist movement has grown—even as longstanding disputes among Islamists over the methods and
timeframe for achieving this “Islamic State” have intensified and become more violent. Meantime, popular electoral politics across the Arab Middle East have been deeply conflicted and torn between sharply divergent secularist, religious conservative, and Islamist trends. To alleviate tensions and reconcile competing trends, many have concluded a new, conservative and religiously-grounded concept of “Islamic governance” is necessary for stability and for fostering a durable political identity that might nourish it.

The Kingdom of Morocco—an important American ally—has consciously sought to provide a traditional Islamic solution to this modern crisis and an ideological alternative to the Islamist project. The kingdom has had numerous advantages in doing so, including not only a level of political stability unmatched in the wider region but also a rich and remarkable history as a leading center of Islam.

Since the founding of al-Qaraouiyine University in Fes in 859, Morocco has held an important role in shaping religious discourse and education throughout the Islamic world. Al-Qaraouiyine is widely considered the world’s first university; it has been home to such Muslim luminaries as Ibn Rushd, Leo Africanus, and Ibn Khaldun, in addition to Jewish and Christian figures such as Maimonides and Pope Sylvester II. Exemplary of the country’s history, Fes is also the location of the shrine of Moulay Idris, a popular pilgrimage site, and the zawiyat al-Tijania, which was the base from which the Tijaniyya, one of the most widespread Sufi orders, originated before spreading throughout Africa and beyond. Morocco is further dotted with notable zawiyat, from Ouazzane in the north to Tamegroute in the Draa Valley, religious communities that historically served as boarding schools for religious education, waypoints for traveling pilgrims, and centers of prayer and devotion. Whether one is in a Moroccan city or the countryside, it is hard to look to the horizon and not see at least one shrine dedicated to a Sufi saint.

Across the centuries, Morocco has served as a great connecting hub for religious as well as commercial exchange between North and West Africa, Iberia, as well as the wider Arabic-speaking world. The famous city of Marrakech, for instance, served as the major trading destination and rest stop north of the Sahara, where merchants brought their wares and pilgrims their books and ideas. Thus, in addition to influencing other parts of Islam, Morocco has also absorbed religious thinking and practices from other parts of Islam. Historically these different religious currents have been accepted under the broad and pluralist umbrella of Moroccan Islam.

King Mohammed VI, who has reigned since 1999, has sought to rejuvenate this rich history in a concerted effort to re-establish Morocco as an exemplar of Islamic governance, piety and thought in the modern era. This effort grew in
political urgency after the al-Qaeda bombings in Casablanca in 2003 and subsequent attacks in the kingdom in 2007. The monarchy responded to these attacks by enacting far-reaching security, political, economic, and, importantly, also religious and educational reforms as part of a comprehensive policy aimed at preventing Islamist extremism. This effort to secure the realm is infused by what the monarchy acclaims as a distinct “Moroccan Islam,” an expression of faith that has been widely described by Moroccans and others as moderate, open, and tolerant. The monarchy has attempted to revitalize and promote Moroccan Islam to strengthen social cohesion and rollback radicalism at home while also furthering its interests abroad. While al-Qaraouiyine University is no longer the authoritative source of religious scholarship in the Maghreb, the kingdom still seeks to position itself as a leading center of Islamic intellectual life and religious learning at home and around the world.

The promotion of a cosmopolitan “Moroccan Islam” as an antidote to the modern ideological crisis is a laudable initiative. Moreover, the kingdom’s new educational programs and comprehensive focus on preventing religiously-inspired extremism do provide an important model of responsible Islamic governance. However, this model is still a work in progress, and the kingdom’s broad effort to combat Islamist extremism does face some important limitations and looming issues. At home, Morocco still struggles with diverse forms of religious and political dissent; the monarchy’s ideals of “Moroccan Islam” are contested, and it is unclear what level of buy-in or religious influence the monarchy really has among the wider Moroccan public. The country also faces some fundamental governance challenges, including widespread bureaucratic mismanagement and the accommodation of foreign migrants, which adversely affect its efforts to foster social stability. Moreover, aside from strong criticism of religious extremism, the only other noticeable tenets of the kingdom’s current religious vision are a commitment to a greater degree of religious ecumenism and general acceptance of Sufi practices. These positions are not universally supported by Moroccans, a large portion of whom continue to adhere to Salafist teachings that are characterized by intolerance and often radicalism. Despite official rhetoric about a unique and moderate Moroccan Islam, it has not yet gained much traction and influence among Moroccan Salafis and other groups, while Salafists charge that the government’s efforts to promote and impose religion is politically self-serving and oppressive.
Islamic Legitimacy and Moroccan History

Since the earliest days of Morocco as a unified political entity, the piety and theology of the country’s rulers have been central to their authority and legitimacy. Each successive ruling regime has combined its political project with new theological claims, and this custom-made theology has shaped the foundations of political authority. Islam arrived in Morocco in the late 7th century, gaining a stronger foothold under the rule of Idris ibn Abdillah (745–791), a great-grandson of Hassan ibn Ali (624–670) who was himself a great-grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. Sultan Idris, founder of the Idrisid Dynasty, Morocco’s first ruling dynasty, was made a religious leader by the Amazigh peoples in the area of Volubilis. This took place after Idris was accepted as a refugee from the revolution his family waged against the Abbasid Caliphate in 762. Idris and his son, Idris II (791–828), were able to unite Amazigh tribes throughout Morocco and were held in high esteem as effective rulers and pious Muslims. The initial Idrisid Dynasty would last from 789 until 974 and veneration of its founders continues to this day, with Moroccans making pilgrimages to and seeking blessings from memorial shrines in Fes and Moulay Idris Zerhoun.

Abdallah ibn Yasin (d.1059), co-founder of the Almoravid Dynasty (1040–1147), rose to prominence as a student of Waggag ibn Zallu, a strict and innovative Moroccan scholar of Maliki law in the 11th century. Ibn Yasin, who had a reputation for zealotry, preached and spread what he deemed proper Islamic teaching amongst Amazigh tribes, and assisted in providing leadership to the Almoravid political alliance that controlled Morocco and expanded its boundaries from 1040 until 1147. During this time, Maliki jurisprudence became central to Moroccan religious life and gained prominence throughout North Africa, West Africa, and Iberia. Then—as it is now—the Maliki school’s popularity was due, at least in part, to the deference it gave to established political authorities and its general reluctance to infuse or contaminate religious life with politics. Importantly, a community’s sociopolitical practices and norms, so long as they do not contradict religious obligations, are more broadly accepted in traditional Maliki thought than in other schools of Islamic jurisprudence. This does help to account for Morocco’s local or inborn tradition of pluralism and tolerance. It is this particular quality that helps make Maliki jurisprudence attractive to many emerging political and religious...
leaders in Morocco, in part because many of them seek to preserve their unique Moroccan and Amazigh cultural and religious traditions against the encroachment of Salafist and other anti-pluralist influences that originate in the Arab East.

After the Almoravids, the succeeding Almohad Dynasty (1121–1269) was initiated by Abu Abd Allah Muhammad Ibn Tumart (c.1080–1130), a religious reformer whose Zahiri theology was staunchly opposed to the Maliki jurisprudence. The Almohad theological vision sought to simplify and purify religious practice, emphasizing literal interpretation of the Quran and rejecting theological or juridical extrapolation. The Zahiri theology, while no longer common in North Africa, is most similar to the Hanbali school and its contemporary derivations expressed by Salafism. While many events in Ibn Tumart’s life are unconfirmed, it is reported that he studied under the famous Imam al-Ghazali (c. 1058–1111). Al-Ghazali, upon hearing that the Almoravids had burned his books, charged Ibn Tumart with correcting the theological errors and religious laxity of the Almoravids. However, upon returning to Morocco and engaging the Almoravid royal court in debate, Ibn Tumart was, in turn, accused of blasphemy for his rigid zeal—leading to mutual charges of heresy. In response, Ibn Tumart declared himself the Mahdi, asserting that his position of theological-political leadership was directly prescribed by God. By this, Ibn Tumart gained sufficient support to usurp the Almoravids and launch the so-called Almohad “revolution.”

Almohad rule lasted a century, until the Marinids (1244–1465) managed to seize domestic power while the Almohad rulers were focused on fighting against the Christian Reconquista in Iberia. Although the Marinids and their related successors in the Wattasid Dynasty (1472–1554) did not seem to make strong religious claims to legitimize their political rule, their ascendancy was marked by persistent resistance from Maliki-influenced Sufi groups, such as followers of Muhammad al-Jazuli (1404–1465) who were dissatisfied with Almohad fundamentalism and its stifling of alternative visions of Islam.

By 1554, the Saadian Dynasty, influenced by Sufism and reacting against the Almohads, took control of Morocco. They renewed the Idrisid lineage of descent from Hassan ibn Ali and the Prophet Mohammed, providing them with a claim to religious legitimacy that the Almohad dynasty did not have. In 1641, a prestigious scholarly family that established and ran the zaouia in Dila—a highly influential Sufi brotherhood steeped in Moroccan religious traditions—declared a new sultanate. Reigning for a short period, the Dilaï movement was quickly defeated by the nascent Alaouite Dynasty which asserted a claim to Prophetic lineage separate from and in competition with the Idrisid lineage. The Alaouite family line had been established in Morocco towards the end of the 13th century, when farmers in
the Tafilalt region sought a foreign imam with Prophetic lineage to bring his divine blessing (baraka) to their crops. The Alaouite Dynasty continues to reign today with King Mohammed VI under the authority of that lineage, divine blessing, and status of Commander of the Faithful. The Alaouite religious legitimacy is fundamental to the dynasty’s political authority and has allowed the regime to stay in power despite enormous challenges to its rule during the colonial era, after independence, and through the 2011 Arab Spring.

During the French Protectorate, when the monarchy’s effective political power had reached its nadir, religious authority and influence became the only power that King Mohammed V was allowed to exercise. In 1953, the French governor of Morocco, perhaps expecting the royal title constrained to a roi fainéant, forced Mohammed V into exile and to abdicate to Mohammed Ben Aarafa. Outraged, Morocco’s guiding ulama religious council insisted on the illegitimacy of the successor and succeeded in restoring Mohammed V to the throne in 1955. In the struggle for independence from France, the monarchy and the Istiqlal (independence) Party heavily relied on Islam to mobilize and organize the population and, after independence in 1956, the monarchy used its religious authority to consolidate political control throughout the realm. In its bid to shape a unified post-colonial Moroccan identity, the monarchy deliberately promoted a political form of Islam that combined Arab nationalism and Salafism. This formula ultimately gained traction in Morocco and beyond.

When Hassan II took over from his father Mohammed V in 1961, Morocco entered a period of turmoil often described as the “Years of Lead.” From the 1960s through the 1980s, Morocco saw conflict with Algeria and the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, violent internal upheaval, and multiple attempts to assassinate the king. In an attempt to weaken the influence of communist and anti-Royalist movements, Hassan II encouraged the growth of Salafism with the common expectation that Salafis were to remain loyal to the monarchy and abstain from oppositional politics. Due to the kingdom’s close ties with Saudi Arabia, Salafi religious leaders were well-funded and trained and able to further strengthen their role in Moroccan society. Similar to the acceptance of Salafism, independence was met with a growing focus on Arabization. This embraced some elements of pan-Arab ideology while encouraging the position of Arabic as Morocco’s patrimonial language contra French. Arabic, following the conventions of Modern Standard and Classical Arabic, was to be used in government and education rather than indigenous languages such as Tamazight (Berber) or the Morocco and Saharan dialects of Arabic. At the same time, the Sufi-leaning al-Adl wal-Ihsane (Justice and Benevolence) movement was banned from political life altogether.
This was due to the letter its founder Sheikh Abdesslam Yassine (1928–2012) wrote, “Islam or the Deluge (1974),” in which he challenged the monarchy’s religious legitimacy and argued it had betrayed Islam in exchange for money and Western support.

Despite the challenge of Yassine, the Crown’s efforts to reaffirm its religious authority largely succeeded. Indeed, religious authority may well have saved the power and life of Hassan II when, during a violent attempted military coup, he famously confronted a rebel commander and recited the opening of the Quran —causing the rebel to kneel and kiss the king’s hand. Given the significance of religious legitimacy for each successive ruler in the past, it is difficult to imagine a future in which the King of Morocco’s status as *Emir al-Mu’meen*—the Commander of the Faithful—is not at least equal in importance to any sovereign political title.

Since Mohammed VI’s ascension to the throne in 1999, the communist threat to the kingdom has disappeared, but the monarchy has faced many other challenges to its rule. It has attempted to deal with these challenges by relying heavily on not just on its political power but its religious authority and suasion. While a strict, intrusive security apparatus helped to keep Hassan II in power, the oppressive Years of Lead contributed to public resentment and distrust which Mohammed VI has sought to alleviate. He has implemented a general policy of reconciliation that has allowed for incremental liberalization in the social sphere and important efforts to improve the Moroccan human rights record.

The beginning of Mohammed VI’s rule was marked by protests from the Amazigh (Berber) and Hassaniya (Saharan) populations who were opposed to the crown’s earlier policies of Arabization and the relative status of Salafism and political Islamism. The activists demanded that education be available in indigenous languages, and believed the government generally neglected rural Moroccans. This movement generated some political splintering between those who identify primarily as Arab and others who regard themselves as Amazigh. But the movement did succeed in gaining recognition of Tamazight, a standardized Amazigh language, as an official national language—although in practice, this has not been widely implemented. The kingdom has also emphasized community-led development in rural and urban areas. Even so, some of the kingdom’s social reforms and policies on religion—particularly changes to the *Mudawana* family code, and the monarchy’s general opposition to Salafism—have infuriated religious conservatives. Mohammed VI has since been challenged by numerous protest movements, including a general agitation for democracy as well as religious activism inspired by Salafism and Islamism. Against these challenges, the
kingdom has undertaken to revive and promote a cosmopolitan Moroccan Islam—an Islam that is ecumenical and tolerant of cultural and religious difference—as a means of maintaining the governing regime, unifying the people within its realm, and driving forward positive social change.

Islamic Extremism in Morocco

UPON ASSUMING RULE, KING MOHAMMED VI BEGAN TO INSTITUTE LIMITED RELIGIOUS reforms with the aim of curbing Salafi influence. This shift in Moroccan religious policy deepened in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and was assisted by United States’ efforts to support its allies in countering violent extremism. Then, on May 16, 2003 coordinated bombings in Casablanca killed 45 (including the terrorists). This cemented the changes in the monarchy’s response to extremism and resulted in tense debates over the future role of Islam in Moroccan politics. However, the kingdom has long tried to maintain a difficult balance between reducing the influence of Salafism while keeping Salafis invested in the regime. Any buildup of resentment or alienation among Salafis or other marginalized religious groups risks stoking rejection of the monarchy and, by extension, radicalization.

King Mohammed VI subsequently launched an effort to develop a comprehensive strategy for countering violent extremism (CVE). This included strengthening the police—special counter-terrorism units now patrol most major urban areas—as well as the creation of a national investigative agency that aggressively prosecutes terrorists and those suspected of religious extremism. This has led to countless arrests and to the breakup of suspected terror cells throughout the country. The monarchical government has also implemented new social and community development initiatives, and dramatically reformed the country’s educational system with the construction of new universities that offer secular and vocational training along with Islam. Perhaps most striking, the king dramatically reorganized the administration of religious affairs and increased the government’s religious oversight. In effect, this effort made religious practice and doctrine subservient to political authority, giving a bureaucratic stamp of approval to Moroccan Islam and sharply curtailing any religious expression without such approval.

The government took control of all mosques in the country, placing imams on the
government payroll and requiring that they follow ministry rules and regulations in order to keep their positions. Today, religious leaders must be vetted and trained by the government while their sermons must either be approved by the government or scripted by it. Mosques are not permitted to be open or used as gathering spaces outside of prayer times. Preaching in the streets or outside formal venues, failing to abide by regulations, or otherwise exceeding the government-defined limits on religious expression can and often do result in arrest. Political parties are prohibited from having a religiously-focused platform, although implicitly faith-based politics continues.

This combination of policies has been effective in stemming domestic threats of terrorism, which have been rare since 2003. However, despite Morocco’s success so far in curbing internal violence, the government’s CVE efforts are struggling to cope with a number of new challenges. For instance, nearly 2,000 Moroccans fought in the Syrian Civil War and in Iraq on behalf of the Islamic State (ISIS) caliphate movement, and at least 200 of these militants are known to have returned to Morocco. Meantime, Moroccan nationals residing in Europe have also been involved in a number of terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, Spain, and elsewhere. Many of these attackers are either from or have strong connections to the northern area of Morocco surrounding the Rif mountains, which has also been a source of domestic strife and religious extremism. Violent extremism in both Europe and Morocco are linked, and joint efforts to more effectively limit the ideological appeal of Salafi-jihadism is vital for improved security in both the kingdom and in Europe.

The Kingdom of Morocco’s future stability is further challenged by rolling ideological conflict, including with religious ideologies which, while not tied to violent extremism, reject the authority of the monarchy in both political and spiritual realms. While the kingdom has emphasized tolerance of traditional Sufi practice and piety, it continues to politically restrict Al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Benevolence), a Sufi-inspired movement that is now Morocco’s largest Islamic social organization. It has hundreds of thousands of adherents throughout the country, both in the cities and the countryside, and among the poor and university students. Historically, Al-Adl wal-Ihsan has disavowed any political participation, on the grounds that the monarchy in general and the king’s status as Commander of the Faithful are theologically illegitimate. Needless to say, the organization has itself been illegal since its creation and its members are often arrested. Its founder, Abdessalam Yassine, spent nine years under house arrest and police have at times rounded up hundreds of affiliates. During the February 20 street protests—a nation-wide popular movement from 2011 to 2012 in support of democracy—
Yassine led a group of activist Sufis in large-scale anti-monarchy protests. Following Yassine’s death in 2012, Al-Adl wal-Ihsan reorganized and its leadership has since signaled a new interest in engaging with the political process. However, it is not likely the movement’s legal status will change so long as its members refuse to acknowledge the religious authority of the king.

In contrast to “political Sufism,” Salafist movements are more visible and engaged in Moroccan political life. After independence from France, the monarchy’s need to counter revolutionary Pan-Arabism and communism and its close relations with Saudi Arabia led directly to the spread and acceptance of Wahhabi-influenced Salafi beliefs throughout society. Today, many of these Salafist currents are represented by the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), Morocco’s largest opposition and Islamist political party. Founded in 1967 by Abdelilah Benkirane, PJD emerged out of the revivalist Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR) and other civic organizations inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. Members of the PJD hold strong and, at times, extreme Salafi beliefs.

Salafism and PJD politicians have an ambiguous relationship with the Crown. Though not royalists, PJD Salafis have often provided important but qualified support for the king when it strengthens their overall political position and influence, such as during the Years of Lead or, more recently, after the 2011 constitutional reforms. PJD support for the constitutional reforms, which devolved some powers to the legislature (and thereby to PJD lawmakers), was crucial in bringing an end to the February 20 protests and keeping the regime stable in the upheaval unloosed by the Arab Spring. Now that it has an important say in how Morocco is governed, the PJD’s biggest policy and legislative concerns are education and judiciary issues, and it has been very successful advancing its conservative Islamic agenda in both domains. The party is strongly committed to expanding democratic representation in Morocco, as it largely benefits from popular elections and its power is constrained by the monarchy more so than the ballot box.

The PJD has been strategic in its efforts to protect itself from the governmental and popular backlash that the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists have faced in other countries. Still, the PJD has been widely criticized by Moroccan royalists and secular democrats alike as dangerous. Because of the perception that Salafism is linked to domestic and foreign terrorism, Moroccans have called for the PJD’s dissolution and prohibition on multiple occasions, including after the 2003 Casablanca terror attacks and the 2013 ouster of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt. In comparison to the PJD, MUR has been less restrained in its activism and continues to be scrutinized by authorities for its alleged role in violent extremism. Overall, the PJD has been accepted into mainstream politics alongside its acceptance.
of the monarchy’s political authority and stances and, so long as the government caters to baseline Salafi interests, the party will continue to recognize the monarchy’s authority. This contrasts with al-Adl wal-Ihsan, which has rejected any compromise with the regime or recognition of its legitimacy. However, Salafi political movements and politicians have not been widely or consistently accepted in the political realm because secular parties fear that Islamists will use their power to curtail civil rights or support terrorism.

Individual Salafi politicians have fared similarly with periods of close ties to the monarchy as well as periods of disavowal or political exile. For example, Dr. Abdelkbir M’Daghri Alaoui served as minister of religious affairs, with a tenure noted for his conservative beliefs from 1985 until 2002, when he was pushed out of office for his reputation as a Salafi. While in power, Alaoui himself also blamed former Interior Ministry chief Driss Basri, later to be exiled, of promoting radical Salafism in the kingdom. Depending on the political context, these men, like so many others, have been variously embraced and rebuked by the regime—and by one another.

With its comprehensive strategy for curtailing extremism, the Moroccan government has been quite effective in preventing violent extremism in the kingdom. Its policies have had the further effect of reducing political tensions and buttressing the monarchy against many of its opponents. However, the kingdom also faces a tricky balancing act: the regime must, to some degree, integrate and co-opt Salafism and other dissenting groups—despite ideological disagreements between Salafism and the monarchy’s ideals of “Moroccan Islam”—in order to prevent alienation and resentment among Salafis that could lead to radicalization. A reasonable balance has been struck with the normalization of the PJD and its members. But outreach efforts must also be targeted at more radical Salafis of the MUR who, as “quietists,” refuse to engage in political activity or consider the PJD as overly compromising. Likewise, the monarchy has so far done little to engage with political Sufis, whether or not they are affiliated with Al-Adl wal-Ihsan. Both political Sufism and Salafism pose significant ideological challenges to the monarchy’s efforts to maintain itself and establish a cosmopolitan Moroccan Islam.
What is Moroccan Islam Today?

The more one speaks to Moroccans about their faith, the more one hears about the unique and exceptional character of Moroccan Islam. Indeed, the notion of a distinct form of Moroccan Islam is widely embraced and discussed throughout the country, though not always in a coherent way. King Mohammed VI frequently supports it, and the constitution and state policies of the monarchy are directed towards its promotion. Yet, it is not clear that a Moroccan form of Islam actually exists—certainly nothing akin to the “national religion” of Orthodox Christianity in Russia. The concept itself, as discussed above, is contested by an array of religious actors, including the monarchy.

Today, Morocco is comprised almost entirely of Sunni Muslims who overwhelmingly follow Maliki jurisprudence. However, although differences between different Sunni madhabs (schools of thought) are meaningful, adherence to the Maliki legal methodology neither makes Morocco unique nor says much about the character of its religious belief. It primarily dictates the types of justifications used to support unique religious ways of thinking and practice. While an open and tolerant religious teaching is actively promoted by the monarchy throughout its realm, this is hardly a national creed. Indeed, many of the religious ideas promoted by the kingdom as uniquely Moroccan include beliefs opposed by or not accepted by the majority of Morocco’s Sunni faithful. Many Sufis and Salafis, for instance, do not agree with or reject the monarchy’s claims to supreme religious authority. They also disagree with the kingdom’s social reforms, including in family law and national religious education, and with the monarchy’s various efforts to promote religious ecumenicism.

Moroccans praise the flexible and dynamic nature of Maliki jurisprudence as one of Moroccan Islam’s defining characteristics. The school’s use by various historical regimes in Morocco and elsewhere in Africa for centuries points to its adaptability to different cultural, political and governing arrangements. This dynamism can be a virtue and of great utility to modernizing and moderating religion. At the same time, it also makes it difficult to develop a coherent ideology around which a contemporary Moroccan Islam might be constructed. The long history of competing Moroccan rulers who co-opted and sparred over different Maliki-derived ideologies clearly demonstrates this. As one of the defining features of Moroccan Islam, the dependence on Maliki jurisprudence for religious identity also allows for the charge that the faith is constantly adapting to the needs
of politics, rather than being a stable and independent belief system. Nor is Moroccan Islam distinguished by its *ash'ari* theology. Asharism is the dominant orthodox theology among Sunni Muslims in Morocco and elsewhere, and it emphasizes measured deference to revelation over philosophical rationalism. However, this theology, which is hardly unique to Morocco, is criticized and rejected by many Moroccan Salafis, who are scriptural literalists, and who view Asharism as speculating too far beyond the text of the Quran.

Another issue raised by the kingdom’s promotion of Moroccan Islam concerns the idea of moderate Sufism and what that means. Presumably, this encompasses moderation in both the political and theological respects. Politically, just as some Sufis like al-Adl wal-Ihsan do not accept the monarchy or its religious claims to political power, there is also not a substantial effort by the monarchy to integrate these and other Sufis into the national political process. Theologically, Sufi devotion to saints and charismatic leaders has been controversial in Islam, particularly in the modern period. While Sufi devotion is valued and generally considered pious in the abstract by many Muslims, specific Sufi practices are often viewed from a more orthodox Sunni perspective as decadent innovation, or *bi'dah*, if not as heretical. The veneration of Sufi saints and their shrines has been particularly controversial. As surveys conducted by the Moroccan Institute of Policy Analysis indicate, Salafi Moroccans have little to no interest in engaging with any Sufi practices or religious orders. As such, the kingdom’s promotion of “moderate Sufism” as the approved expression of Islam will probably further alienate Salafis from national religious and political life. Meantime, for members of established Sufi orders or movements, including al-Adl wal-Ihsan, Sufism as promoted by the government will likely appear as watered down, compromised, or otherwise unappealing in contrast to their own practices. Without a strong and compelling appeal to either group, “moderate Sufism” as promoted by the Moroccan government will likely not receive buy-in from Salafi or from independent Sufi practitioners.

Overall, the government’s efforts to control religious affairs so far appears to have the effect of encouraging some Moroccans to look elsewhere—to religious authorities beyond the kingdom—for guidance. For example, the vast majority of Salafis in the kingdom avoid or ignore government-sponsored imams, religious television programming, and education programs run by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. By attempting, further, to monopolize the public sphere of religious life, the monarchy has pushed religious believers who do not agree with them to the margins. Salafism has spread in the Arabic-speaking world by claiming it is the antidote to modern heterodoxy and religious oppression, and this may be one reason for its continued appeal in Morocco. Arguably, the government’s efforts to
control Islam only compels Salafis to seek materials from the internet and beyond Morocco that correspond with their worldview. Simultaneously, those under Salafism’s sway are inclined to dismiss other religious arguments, including government CVE initiatives, as heretical innovation. This situation makes it easier, not harder, for Salafis to become less attached to Moroccan public life and, potentially, to form political factions and to radicalize.

To be sure, the monarchy’s vision of Moroccan Islam and its aspirational policies and rhetoric have proved useful to fostering stability and catalyzing needed reform. Indeed, a well-developed concept of Islam can inspire and create positive sociopolitical change, even if large parts of society do not fully accept it. But can it also become the basis for a modern and lasting social compact? Because of its currently ill-defined and contested nature, Moroccan Islam is not an ideology that can easily be extolled or embraced, certainly not by all believers. It does not, at the moment, have clear a teleology—i.e., no clear reason for its existence, or an argument about its ultimate political and moral goals. Instead, “Moroccan Islam” has been open to the charge from Islamists and others that it exists mainly to preserve the power of the monarchy itself. In the near term, the government’s rather limited idea of Moroccan Islam may gain traction with international media and diplomats, but its spurious and vacuous character needs to compete with other compelling forms of Islam and this runs the risk of making it less credible. The government portrays Islam in Morocco as akin to Catholicism in secular France, but, unlike France, the monarchy relies on its leadership of Islam for its political legitimacy. If the regime is not effective in making real the promises of its Islamic vision—including the realization of such “public interests” (maslaha) as the security and well-being of all in the realm—then before long Moroccans may increasingly come to doubt the monarchy’s religious legitimacy and its right to rule. Meantime, radical ideological movements both homegrown and from abroad are likely to exploit this situation for their own gain.

Promoting Toleration

MOROCCAN ISLAM IS OFTEN SAID TO BE UNIQUELY PEACEFUL AND TOLERANT OF other faiths. But this is a statement of theology and belief; Moroccan Islam is not the only religion to claim this, although its government promoters have taken significant steps to make these theological claims a reality. Among other things,
the monarchy has widely publicized its efforts at ecumenical outreach, its growing acceptance of Christianity practiced by foreigners within the kingdom, and its ongoing review of the representation of other religions in the country’s textbooks. In 2016, the monarchy was instrumental in convening several Muslim states and a couple hundred scholars to issue the Marrakech Declaration, which recognized the rights of religious minorities in Muslim societies. Despite this, Judaism has effectively disappeared from Morocco following mass migration to Israel during the 1950s and ’60s—a movement facilitated by both the governments of Israel and Morocco, particularly through Operation Yachin, in which Morocco was paid for each Jew who made aliyah to Israel. Christianity, meantime, is generally viewed by the public as a colonial vestige, with churches largely remaining for diplomats and French or Spanish retirees. In my experience, the presence of soldiers and police officers at churches throughout the country is intended less to protect the congregations inside than to keep Moroccans outside. Faiths other than Islam are generally restricted in Morocco, as both conversion and proselytization remain illegal, and native Moroccan Christians live hidden and, frankly, often in fear. Furthermore, government restrictions on both Sufi and Salafi movements raises doubt about just how open and tolerant Moroccan Islam really is or intends to be towards competing, more rigid streams of thought.

One highlight of the Moroccan monarchy’s efforts to promote religious ecumenicism and tolerance has been the creation of the Al-Mowafaqa Institute. The institute is Morocco’s first Christian seminary, serving both Protestant and Catholic churches. The institute may be intended to recognize and engage with the country’s growing West African population, which is predominantly Christian. However, West Africans largely come into Morocco either to receive practical education or to illegally cross into Europe, so it is not clear what they might seek to gain from the institute. Meanwhile, Al-Mowafaqa Institute focuses on inter-religious dialogue and academic religious studies, and this contrasts with the Islamic education available at public universities which focuses primarily on vocational training and preparing students for roles in the Muslim clergy or Ministry of Islamic Affairs. As such, the Al-Mowafaqa Institute presents a new opportunity to enrich the comparative study of religion and promote religious ecumenicism, but its secular and detached academic perspective may not appeal much to those aspiring to become Islamic religious leaders. As such, the institute’s potential to promote interfaith understanding and tolerance in society at-large appears to be quite limited. Significantly, the institute’s focus is on providing Christians with a cross-cultural understanding of Moroccan Islam, but it does little to promote religious acceptance of Christianity among Moroccan Muslim scholars.
Al-Mowafaqa Institute was one of the widely-publicized highlights of Pope Francis's 2019 Apostolic Visit to Morocco. Pope Francis and King Mohammed VI both spoke of their desire to improve relations between Christianity and Islam, and they declared their understanding of religious freedom as a fundamental human right. While this signals a growing tolerance of Christianity in Morocco, the Moroccan government understands freedom of religion to be free practice of a devotee’s faith, not the freedom to choose religion. Proselytization remains illegal in Morocco and Protestant Christian missionaries have been arrested and deported for efforts to convert Moroccan Muslims. The Catholic Church has respectfully adhered to the law and Pope Francis explicitly discussed the role of Catholics in Morocco to be that of living pious lives for their neighbors’ benefit—but not for the purpose of converting them to Christianity.

While the Pope’s overall visit was a diplomatic success for both the Holy See and Morocco, it was not without controversy. The King and the Pope signed an appeal that recognized the “unique and sacred character of Jerusalem/Al-Quds Acharif” and its “spiritual significance and its special vocation as a city of peace.” The appeal also called for “full freedom of access [to Jerusalem] to the followers of the three monotheistic religions and [the guarantee of] their right to worship.”18 This appeal, however, was criticized by numerous Moroccan religious figures, most notably Dr. Ahmad al-Raissouni, president of the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired International Union of Muslim Scholars and former head of the MUR.19 Additionally, an attempt at ecumenical prayer during an audience for the King and the Pope at the Mohammed VI Institute stirred widespread controversy and criticism in Morocco for its blending of the adhan (Islamic call to prayer) with the Catholic Ave Maria and Jewish sung prayer.20

Although tolerance of Christianity (and other faiths) is growing in Morocco, it remains acceptable only as a foreigner’s faith—Moroccans themselves are not allowed to convert. Because the monarchy’s rule is rooted in its religious authority and legitimacy, it is apt to move incrementally in its promotion of toleration, while religious freedom is likely to remain proscribed. By and large, the monarchy’s noteworthy efforts to promote inter-faith understanding and toleration have been supported by religious elites and other sectors of society. But criticism of the king’s efforts by important conservative and Islamist political figures has also been severe. Achieving broad-based social acceptance and buy-in for religious toleration and a cosmopolitan Moroccan Islam will be difficult for the kingdom to accomplish. Meantime, as the Christian population grows with increasing numbers of West Africans, enhanced religious cooperation and inevitable conversions to Christianity are likely to raise new religious issues and possibly tensions that will
not be easily resolved—and could spur a conservative backlash. Whether the current ecumenical disposition can be maintained or will shift toward the position of al-Raissouni and other conservatives remains to be seen.

Moroccan Religion and Education

Religious education has become the most salient issue in Moroccan politics today. It is a prism through which the country views the issues it faces and their potential solutions; it is both the key to current success and to future growth. Moroccan education has long been a political battleground with partisans seeking to dictate Moroccan culture and religion through classrooms: secularization and bureaucratization under the French protectorate, followed by the reactionary Arabization during independence, the more recent adoption of Amazigh and Moroccan cultural curricula, and the current debates over what constitutes Moroccan Islam. This history of politically-motivated pedagogy has made the kingdom’s debate about educational policy, and about religious education in particular, highly controversial. Changes or reforms that may seem minor have triggered controversy on kingdom-wide scale.21

Religion is fundamental to early education in Morocco. Especially in poorer cities and rural areas, most Moroccans begin their education at local mosques, in an analogue to pre-Kindergarten classes, where they are taught language and literacy skills through study of the Quran. As students grow older, they may continue to follow the traditional madrasa-style education of progressively studying and memorizing the Quran, or they may begin studies in the primary school system. Throughout all the years of their education, in both public and private schools, students are required to take Islamic studies classes that teach fundamental practices, beliefs, and theology. Despite kingdom-wide curricula and standards, religious education is extremely varied throughout the country and between schools. The gap between rural and urban schools is particularly striking; rural schools have far less resources, and far lower levels of classroom rigor, administrative oversight, and even teacher attendance. Although religious teachers are drawn from public universities’ Islamic studies programs where they receive a fairly uniform education, they are effectively free to teach classes however they wish, and according to their standards of belief. In rural communities in particular, teachers have greater opportunity to promote ideologies
beyond the state-authorized conception of Islam. According to Dr. Ahmed Abbadi, the head of Morocco’s Mohammedian League of Scholars, this presents an opportunity that Salafists have taken advantage of to promote their own ideological views. Moreover, while the option for zawiya-based religious education still exists as an alternative to primary and secondary schools, it is run under the purview of the zawiya’s Sufi order rather than government ministries. As such, the zawiya curriculum is even more variable than within public schools. Given the lack of educational oversight and variation in curricula, Moroccan students from different economic strata or from different regions of the country will develop very different ideas about Islam. As an example, wealthy students boarding at a zawiya will receive a deeply Sufi understanding of faith that hardly resembles the Salafism one may encounter in Casablanca’s poorest schools. These realities of religious education suggest the gulf between Moroccan religious beliefs will remain significant.

The monarchy has made a serious effort to promote kingdom-wide educational standards which reflect the ideals of Moroccan Islam, including greater interfaith understanding in primary education. In late 2018, the king also decreed that the Holocaust and the evils of anti-Semitism should be studied in all Moroccan high schools. However, despite these efforts to modernize religious studies, the quality and accuracy of education is heavily dependent on the pedagogy and materials of each individual school or teacher. Educational offerings in a Tangier suburb will likely bear little resemblance to that of Agadir, let alone a Sufi zawiya boarding school in the Atlas Mountains.

As the government has promoted standardized textbooks and other learning materials, there has been controversy over how moderate or modern Islamic education really strives to be. Recently, for example, a textbook approved by the Higher Council of Muslim Scholars described philosophy and philosophical rationalism as blasphemy and perversion, an opinion that was accompanied by a scholarly assessment of reason as inferior to religious revelation from the 13th Century conservative Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyyah.

Even more than primary education, higher education in Morocco is uneven and cause for considerable political controversy. In support of education reform or other social movements, Moroccan students are often called upon to strike, or they find their classes occupied and disrupted by student activist groups. The two strongest poles for this dynamic are the more radical supporters of both the Marxist Annahj Dimokrati (Democratic Way) and the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), a student branch of the larger Islamist party. The conflicts among student groups and between students and administrators occasionally lead to violence. In particular, the University of Sidi Mohammed ben Abdellah in Fes has seen multiple deaths and
severe injuries on occasions when the police have sought to stop protests that included fighting, burning of tires, and roads blocked with felled trees. In another instance, Marxists and Islamists fought with swords, knives, and other weapons over an event on political Islamism, leading to one student’s death. Even in universities, the administration of education has been insufficient to prevent extremist ideological conflict and violence. While there are some good universities, competent faculties in struggling universities, and remarkable teachers in dysfunctional faculties, few students would applaud the system. Although public university is free and most programs have non-competitive acceptance, resources and physical space are extremely limited.24

The founding of the Mohammed VI Institute in 2014 represents a bold strategic move to improve the quality of religious education and to unite several of the kingdom’s interests by developing a more uniform Moroccan faith that stands apart from and in opposition to radicalism and violent extremism. Secondarily, the institute aims to strengthen Morocco’s international standing and diplomacy. The institute educates about 3,000 students each year, with half of the student body drawn from Morocco and half from other nations, including France and many countries in Africa.

One of the institute’s most significant initiatives is the education of *morchidine* and *morchidate*: male and female Muslim leaders who are trained to provide spiritual guidance and service to others—particularly to marginalized communities and in non-formal settings. Intended as an auxiliary to government imams, these “street” religious leaders are not permitted to perform certain duties such as leading Friday sermons, but they are empowered to provide religious education and counseling—and to promote Moroccan Islamic values and norms—in homes and communities throughout the Moroccan realm and beyond.

The inclusion of women in the training program is significant; among other things, it provides an unprecedented opportunity to improve religious literacy among Moroccan women. This is a relatively new effort that the institute is expanding, with the training of about 100 female *morchidate* each year. In addition to teaching the theology and humanities needed for effective pastoral care, the institute also provides vocational training in fields such as agriculture, tailoring, and electronics, to provide alumni with ways to supplement their income and strengthen their community integration.25

It will take a few years to adequately assess the learning outcomes and full impact of the Mohammed VI Institute. In principle, the institute’s efforts to systematically train large numbers of community-based religious leaders have real potential to augment the government’s efforts to prevent violent extremism and
the spread of ideologies which it deems as malign. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, for example, has struggled to maintain its credibility among Salafis and Salafi-sympathetic Moroccans who view most state-sponsored Islamic initiatives with skepticism, and instead look to the internet and informal sources for religious guidance.\textsuperscript{26} Government efforts to rebut Salafism on social media and in the mosque are inherently reactive and defensive—and this often gives an advantage to web-based Salafi scholars. Deeper and proactive community engagement is necessary to curtail religious-based antipathy toward the monarchy and to help integrate marginalized religious actors. The fact that the institute’s outreach (along with other government programs) explicitly aims to help address the everyday economic and social problems affecting the Moroccan people suggest it could play a valuable role in helping the monarchy to establish a stronger political compact with its subjects. In time, it is possible Moroccan Islam could mature into a civil religion that helps to foster social cohesion and stability.

Given its high-level of regime support, the Mohammed VI Institute and connected initiatives do provide plenty of cause for optimism as Morocco undertakes to cope with the modern ideological crisis and provide a model of “Islamic governance” as an antidote to it. One of the greatest challenges the institute faces, however, is shared with the entire system of education: grand plans and well-funded flagship programs simply have not lived up to expectations. As the Secretary of Education Khalid Samadi stated in 2018, education in Morocco does not suffer from lack of funding but from poor management.\textsuperscript{27} Given these problems of mismanagement and past failures of implementation, some skepticism about the kingdom’s efforts to transform religious education in accord with its ideals of Moroccan Islam is warranted.

**Educator of the Faithful**

MOROCCO IS A MODERN NATION-STATE, BUT, SIGNIFICANTLY, THE KINGDOM ALSO embodies a religious idea whose proper realm, historically and in the view of the ruling Alaouite Dynasty today, extends well past its national borders to the Greater Maghreb and beyond. Indeed, there is a longstanding tension in the country’s political life between the political reality of Morocco as a nation-state and the kingdom’s religious understanding of itself as a world-leading center of Islam. As the kingdom has set about to revive and promote Moroccan Islam as an antidote to
religious extremism, its religious vision and sense of mission has fundamentally shaped its external relations and diplomacy.

There is a deep belief in Morocco that French colonization severed the kingdom from its historic and rightful territory and regional dominance. Since independence, rebuilding Moroccan prestige and influence in the Greater Maghreb has been a central concern for the monarchy, and it has made substantial efforts to expand its theological-political influence beyond its territorial borders. Other countries have, for one reason or another, been suspicious of Moroccan ambitions, but this has started to change as the kingdom has promoted its Islamic ideals of toleration, pluralism and the prevention of extremism through religious education and outreach. Across the centuries, different Moroccan kings have sponsored schools and other institutions to teach Moroccan Islam to foreign students. Today, foreign students in Moroccan universities and religious schools are usually drawn from countries in the Greater Maghreb, which is still a primary focus of the kingdom’s foreign policy efforts.

The Mohammed VI Institute, for its part, has made a substantial effort to recruit and educate foreigners from the Greater Maghreb as well as Senegal, Mali, and many other Sub-Saharan countries, in addition to France, Spain, and China. For accepted foreign students, the institute provides stipends, air travel, and housing along with a program of study that aims to be adaptable to students’ native languages, national heritage, and cultural contexts so that they can become effective religious leaders in their home countries. Unfortunately, foreign students have found that they are not always provided with the resources or course offerings that the institute promotes. This is particularly deleterious when foreign students are placed into unsuitable Arabic language classes rather than courses conducted in the students’ native languages or Moroccan history courses instead of studying the development of Islam in their home countries.

To be sure, while the Mohammed VI Institute is still a work in progress, it has already benefited the kingdom’s diplomacy and foreign relations in important ways. Moroccan-initiated cultural and religious exchanges throughout the Greater Maghreb have begun to strengthen regional bonds. The kingdom is also attractive for students from West African countries, for whom a scholarship to Morocco is increasingly regarded as prestigious. More practically, insofar as educational outreach continues, it should be expected that Moroccan influence and also strategic ties will deepen and Morocco's relative strength in the region will grow. The President of Mali and King Mohammed VI in particular appear to have developed a very close relationship. Moreover, closer ties with the relatively strong and stable Moroccan government could also be beneficial to the countries of the Sahel.
Of course, the kingdom has sent domestically-trained imams to preach in Mali for decades, with seemingly little effect on social stability there, so the future spread of Moroccan education and its graduates abroad is not going to be a panacea, as some may hope, against religious radicalism. However, the Moroccan government’s comprehensive model of preventing religious extremism through education and incremental governance reforms does have the potential to contribute to and inspire homegrown solutions to the extremism that plagues the Sahel and parts of West Africa.

Morocco’s training of imams and preachers from Europe, particularly France, also presents a crucial opportunity for improving the kingdom’s overall relations with Europe. The perception of Moroccan education as ecumenical and socially moderate while authentically Islamic (as opposed to, perhaps, an Islamic studies program at the Institut Européen de Sciences Humaines de Paris) makes the Mohammed VI Institute and Morocco an appealing destination for European Muslims seeking religious education. As European countries permit and encourage the spread of tolerant and modern Moroccan Islam within their borders, and as European-Moroccans are able to reconnect with their heritage through religion, the kingdom’s good reputation and influence is likely to be enhanced, and Morocco could play a useful role in helping European countries tackle Islamist radicalism.

All of this vitally depends, however, on the future substance of Moroccan Islam and the kind of force in the world that it will aspire to become. Morocco’s contemporary emphasis on promoting religious ecumenism, toleration and pluralism do distinguish it and its model of Islamic education from many other countries such as Saudi Arabia. Since the 1970s or earlier, Saudi Arabia’s creation of organizations like the Muslim World League and systematic training of foreign imams has enabled it to build religious influence which it has used to pursue its foreign policy goals and to increase its regional standing against its various competitors. However, Saudi-backed schools and institutions are suspect in the minds of many Muslim countries and in Europe, as Saudi religious outreach has also been responsible for the spread of Salafi-Wahhabist ideas and Islamist revivalism. Saudi Arabia now acknowledges some of its past ideological outreach has not been helpful either to the world or to it, and Riyadh appears to be taking some steps to remedy this. Meantime, other countries have been seeking to supplant Saudi dominance in Sunni Islam through ideological outreach of their own. This is best exemplified by a new effort from the governments of Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia to create a joint English-language television channels meant to spread Islamic teaching—and likely also their joint political agendas.31 During the presidency of
Recep Tayyip Erdogan, for instance, Ankara has used its sizeable religious influence among Turks living abroad for its own political gain, which is causing great dismay and security concerns among Europeans.

Morocco, by contrast, has great potential to offer a new and alternative model of Islamic education, one that stresses values such as tolerance, pluralism, and service to others that are universally-valid, whether in Africa or Europe or the Middle East. These values are also sorely needed today. But, again, proper implementation matters, as does the future substance of Moroccan Islam and what it chooses to stand for. In the future, if the kingdom seeks to use religious education to advance a narrow theological-political agenda, such as buttressing regime power at the expense of the Moroccan people, then it is not likely to succeed. However, insofar as Moroccan Islam continues to emerge as a positive religious and moral force in the world—and increasingly comes to be identified with such Islamic public goods as social tolerance, service and duty to one’s neighbors, and improving governance and economic opportunity in the most vulnerable communities—then the kingdom may establish itself as a leading “educator of the faithful” and a vital contributor to the global fight against Islamist extremism.

**Conclusion**

**IN RESPONDING TO THE MODERN IDEOLOGICAL CRISIS, THE KINGDOM OF MOROCCO** has been attempting to revive and promote what it regards as the best ideals of Moroccan Islam in conjunction with socio-economic and governance reforms that serve the people. In this, the kingdom seems to exemplify a new and compelling model of “Islamic governance” that strives to address the diverse challenges it faces and to provide a religiously grounded antidote to Islamist radicalism that can help bind society together. Given the intensifying sectarian conflicts and upheaval in the Middle East, the Sahel and elsewhere, Morocco’s noteworthy and inspiring efforts should be acknowledged and commended.

Morocco and its rulers have long maintained a close link between religious and political authority. The history, contemporary needs, and political conception of Moroccan society all point to a doctrine of faith, a Moroccan Islam, that is essential to the monarchy. In developing and promoting a concept of 21st Century Moroccan Islam, the kingdom is attempting to ensure its future by seeking to stabilize and strengthen the realm as a whole. At the same time, Moroccan Islam is
deeply contested, and by promoting a particular conception of Islam, the monarchy does and will face the risk of exacerbating religious tensions and potentially extremism, particularly if it alienates large segments of the faithful—Sufi, Salafi, or anyone that adheres to a tendency in between. Establishing Moroccan Islam and its best principles of toleration as a compelling and attractive alternative to Salafism and violent factionalism will require not just re-establishing the kingdom as a leader of Islamic scholasticism and intellectual renewal. It will depend also, and paradoxically, on the monarchy’s political legitimacy and thus on continued improvements in governance inside the kingdom, including by securing basic human rights through the fair and equal application of law—regardless of a person’s religious beliefs. Religious doctrines of tolerance matter little when they cannot be freely practiced and lived.

Moroccan scholars and officials have welcomed a deeper partnership with Western countries, including the United States. The U.S. government and civil society have strong incentive to renew their long alliance with the kingdom and support and encourage its many developmental, economic growth, political reform, and educational initiatives. Over the last nearly two decades, the U.S. has allied with and attempted to support numerous projects and initiatives to counter violent extremism, with varying degrees of success. So far, however, Morocco’s emerging model of Islamic governance is uniquely promising, not least because it is religiously-grounded and demonstrates a commitment to genuine Islamic scholarship, teaching, and renewal. Instead of being antagonistic toward religion, Morocco is showing how a modern and moderate Islam can and must help to catalyze ideological, political and moral solutions to the contemporary crisis. If implementation fulfills the vision of programs like the Mohammed VI Institute, Morocco may recreate or even surpass the great historical successes represented by al-Qaraouiyine.

NOTES

16. Speaking with guards in Moroccan Arabic has proved sufficient reason to block my own entry into churches within Morocco until I could prove my American nationality.


24. It is not unusual for a class to cap itself at just over 100 students because the full body of enrolled students cannot find a seat. Libraries are rare, and interaction with professors outside of their lecturing tends to be limited. A lack of hands-on training and development for doctoral students, in addition to their scant research resources, leads to new professors being ill-equipped and under-prepared for classroom teaching. Because Morocco follows the French system, classes are almost exclusively lectures, during which students are expected to take copious notes to be used as answers for the final exam that composes their grade almost entirely if not exclusively. Poor application of this pedagogy and an overly bureaucratic structure in the universities generally leads to unnecessarily poor education.


28. Though a multifaceted issue, Morocco and Algeria continue to fight over land that Morocco absolutely considers its patrimony: the “Moroccan” or “Western” Sahara. Algerian efforts to support the Polisario Front and resistance against Morocco in the region largely stem from an attempt to preoccupy the Moroccan military and to prevent what the Algerian regime regards as Morocco’s expansionist ambitions. For the Moroccan government, the Polisario Front is a terrorist organization supported by foreign states, and Rabat does not recognize the Sahara as an independent entity but only as Morocco. Although political sovereignty is limited by national borders, the monarchy can and still does assert its religious sovereignty throughout the Greater Maghreb.


The Co-optation of Islam in Russia

By Rebecca Fradkin

In Russia more than 14 million people—about 10 percent of the population—identify as Muslim. Islam is the second largest religious group in the country, after Orthodox Christianity. Within the Russian Federation there are eight recognized Muslim republics: Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygeya, and Karachay-Cherkessia. Tatarstan and Bashkortostan are part of the Volga-Urals, while the other Muslim republics belong to the Northern Caucasus. Most of Russia’s Muslims live in these republics, and each one has adopted its own policies toward Islam.

In recent years, the republics of the Northern Caucasus have transitioned from policies that primarily repressed Islam in the early 2000s to following the Volga-Ural model of co-opting Islam. This broad shift, or “policy diffusion,” has occurred as political authorities in one republic after another have increasingly learned that repression of a majority religious group is costly and largely ineffective. Moreover, repression may contribute to radicalization. As an alternative, the co-optation of religion has allowed republican authorities to bolster their legitimacy while permitting both Moscow and the Muslim republics greater influence over how Islam is organized, practiced and expressed. The co-optation of Islam aims to “encapsulate” potential sources of opposition among the Muslim population through institutions and the distribution of benefits, such as money, positions of power, or policy concessions.

So far, Russia’s efforts have largely been effective in reducing the threat of
terrorism and separatism. However, the country still faces a threat from violent extremism—or what Russian officials refer to with a broad-brush as “Wahhabism” and “Salafism.” Russian authorities have used this threat to justify not only their ongoing efforts to co-opt and shape Islam, but to dramatically reduce the space for religious freedom and to crack down on political opponents. Over time, the “securitization” of Islam in Russia runs the risk of eroding confidence in the state—and it could backfire. Already, some Muslims in Russia have begun to opt out of the Islamic institutions supported by political authorities. This paper examines the laws and tactics that Moscow and Russia’s Muslim republics have adopted to both co-opt Islam and prevent violent extremism.

Centralizing Political Power and Delegating Religious Authority

UNDER PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN, THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT HAS INCREASINGLY consolidated its power over the political sphere and over the country’s peripheries, including Muslim republics. For example, in 2002 Tatarstan was forced to strike a line from its constitution that proclaimed Tatarstan’s “sovereignty,” since this conflicted with the national Russian constitution. Shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, each republic negotiated a treaty with Moscow, with the exception of Tatarstan and Chechnya. While Chechnya declared independence in 1991, Tatarstan used that moment to leverage increased autonomy for itself, including control over its own budget. This arrangement even allowed for Kazan (the capital of Tatarstan) to negotiate international treaties. In 2017, this agreement—Tatarstan’s “special status”—was allowed to expire.

A more dramatic expression of Moscow’s crackdown on political competitors took place in Dagestan. In 2015, Said Amirov, the second most powerful man in the republic and de facto leader of the second largest ethnic group (Dargins), was arrested. After Amirov failed to capitulate to central elites, Arsen Gadzhibekov, a high-level investigator, was sent to collect evidence against Amirov. Gadzhibekov was later murdered. Subsequently, a stunning raid conducted by the Federal Security Service was carried out with armored vehicles and armed helicopters. Amirov was arrested and charged with a litany of crimes and is currently serving
a life sentence.\textsuperscript{8} The Amirov case serves as a powerful reminder to other regional elites to mind federal boundaries and not overtly to challenge the Kremlin’s political power or capacity.

An exception to the trend of Moscow’s growing political control over the Muslim regions is Chechnya. Putin has given considerable political latitude to Chechnya’s leader, Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov’s personalistic rule is characterized by terror, including an anti-LGBTQ purge in which members of the LGBTQ community (or those perceived to be gay) have been systematically tortured and even killed.\textsuperscript{9} However, it is noteworthy that Kadyrov is careful to frequently underscore his loyal support of Putin. Meanwhile, he has contributed troops to Russia’s wars in Ukraine and Syria.\textsuperscript{10}

In contrast to the political sphere, Moscow has utilized different tactics in the religious sphere by delegating authority to the Muslim republics. Moscow and regional elites have found higher utility in co-opting Islam rather than repressing it. Today, most adherents of Russia’s minority religious groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, still experience discrimination. However, direct repression is no longer the authoritarian regime’s strategy of choice for dealing with religious groups who are the majority population in a given region. During the Soviet era, efforts to suppress all religious expression failed to eradicate people’s identities as Russian and Orthodox or Ingush and Muslim. Moreover, repressing majority religious groups risks fostering an oppositional religious identity. A prime example of this can be seen in Chechen efforts to resist tsarist, Soviet and Russian intrusion—Chechen resistance efforts eventually adopted a religious identity to channel its opposition.

Since independence, Russian authorities have further learned that outright oppression of a majority religious group is often unsuccessful and counter-productive. Moscow and individual republics have seen that repressing Islam in areas where Muslims are the majority has helped inadvertently to foster oppositional religious identities or has politicized Islam. For instance, the republics in the Northern Caucasus, particularly Kabardino-Balkaria, attempted to repress Islam in the early 2000s. These efforts were largely ineffective and ultimately endangered the consolidation of authoritarian rule. In fact, the lack of legitimate space to discuss and/or practice Islam may have been a factor in the radicalization of some sectors of the population.\textsuperscript{11} Likewise, the absence of permissible public discourse about theology and identity in Kabardino-Balkaria, when combined with state deployed violence, delegitimized the regional government and may have paved the way for anti-state violence.

As a result of these experiences, Moscow and the leaders of Muslim republics since the early 2000s have relied less on outright repression. Instead, “co-opta-
tion” has become the preferred method of choice inside the Russian Federation when engaging with Islam. Co-optation is particularly useful to individual republican regimes in their bid to garner popular legitimacy. By co-opting the national religious identity, such as Bashkir Muslim identity, the republican regime is able to improve its image by upholding itself as the protector of this identity.

When dealing with other sources of potential opposition, the Russian regime frequently employs institutions such as legislatures and political parties for the purpose of co-optation. However, like other authoritarian regimes, Russia has not elected to use political institutions (like legislatures or political parties) to co-opt religion. Using a political institution could risk granting a power base to religious leaders. Accordingly, political parties based on religious affiliation are banned in Russia. The politicization of religion would also likely be viewed as partisan by citizens, thus potentially reducing the legitimacy of the regime. Instead, a religious institution is employed to co-opt Islam.

Despite the Russian regime’s growing political consolidation, Moscow has been more circumspect in the sphere of religion. Instead of using strong-arm tactics, federal and regional institutions have been employed to co-opt Islam. At the federal level, several significant pieces of legislation have been passed under the pretext of preventing violent extremism. These laws serve to securitize Islam in Russia at the national level; they do so by providing a ready-made pretext for federal intervention if regional elites fail to demonstrate sufficient political deference to Moscow. Simultaneously, the task of co-opting Islam has largely been delegated to each of Russia’s respective Muslim republics.

Every Muslim republic has chosen to create an institution for Islam—a Spiritual Association of Muslims, or SAM. Each SAM functions to co-opt Islam through three avenues: 1) co-optation of mosques; 2) co-optation of religious knowledge (ranging from religious appointments to literature); and 3) co-optation through securitization (wherein any behavior straying outside of the SAM is equated with extremism).

National Laws

THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION’S LEGISLATION ON RELIGION BOTH INTENDS TO LIMIT regional independence and to bolster efforts by regional republican governments to co-opt Islam. According to the 1993 constitution, Russia is officially a secular state. At the same time, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam has been
acknowledged and carefully included in Russian policy with respect to religion.

In the 1990s, new legislation was adopted to deter the development of independent religious organizations and, taken together, this benefited the Spiritual Associations of Muslims, or SAMs. Later, beginning in the 2000s, more laws were implemented to deter foreign funding of religious activities in order to further limit the independence of a SAM vis-à-vis the republican regime. At the same time, legislation on religion has also begun to focus on religious extremism. This legislation enables republican regimes to apply vague definitions of religious extremism to independent Muslims groups. It also provides an avenue for central government intrusion under the pretext of fending off extremism within Russia.

In 1997, “The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Association” was passed and signed by President Boris Yeltsin. The preamble of the 1997 law makes clear that Russia is a secular state. It also acknowledges Russia’s “historical heritage” of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism—commonly referred to as the “four traditional religions”—as well as “other religions.” At the same time, the law also underscores “the Special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia and in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture.” The law therefore implicitly creates a hierarchy of religions in which Orthodox Christianity is accorded a special and uppermost status, while Islam, Buddhism and Judaism occupy the second tier, and “other” minor religions a third. In effect, this has meant that Orthodox Christianity has enjoyed a closer and more privileged relationship with the state, even though Islam is also carefully included in the construction of Russia’s “traditional” religious history.

The 1997 law also created a distinction between a “religious organization” and a “religious group,” with more advantages afforded to the former. Religious groups are limited to performing religious services and rituals and providing religious education within their community. On the other hand, religious organizations can perform religious services in private as well as public spaces (e.g., hospitals). These organizations can also own or use buildings, and invite foreign citizens to Russia. In order to be officially considered as an “organization,” the 1997 law stated that a religious entity was required to have been registered for 15 years.

Importantly, when the law was passed in 1997, only a small handful of religious groups had been registered in Russia for fifteen years, and so only a few groups could legally qualify as an “organization.” The only recognized organizations for Islam in Russia during the Soviet Union were the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the European Part of the USSR and Siberia and the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Northern Caucasus. After the Soviet Union’s demise, the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the European Part of the USSR and Siberia was
renamed the Central Spiritual Association of Muslims in Russia. Thus, initially due to the 1997 law, Spiritual Associations of Muslims—SAMs—were the only Muslim institutions that were allowed to conduct religious activities in public or own or use buildings for religious purposes. Consequently, no other Muslim groups could establish mosques.

This official advantage for SAMs was rolled back in July of 2015 with an amendment to the 1997 law on religion. This removed the fifteen-year registration requirement for a religious entity to be considered a religious organization. This alteration occurred in response to a 2009 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, which found the fifteen-year requirement to be in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. This took place because of a case brought to the court by a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia.

However, the July 2015 amendment also put in place other onerous restrictions that favor SAMs. Similar to the 2011 law on religion in Kazakhstan, this amendment requires all places of worship to notify authorities of their existence and to provide the government with both the names and personal addresses of their members.23 Notably, religious bodies that are not associated with a central religious organization are prohibited from providing religious education or conducting ceremonies.24

There are varying levels of registration based on the location and number of members of a religious entity.25 The registration requirement de facto prioritizes the Russian Orthodox Church, which is among the few religious organizations able to obtain national registration. Two Muslim institutions are also allowed to operate at the national level—the Central Spiritual Association of Muslims of Russia and the Council of Muftis.

In effect, however, onerous registration requirements enhance the state’s control over Islam in two ways. First, they inhibit independent Muslim institutions from establishing a foothold in each Muslim republic. Second, they also serve to deter republican SAMs—like the Spiritual Association of Muslims in Tatarstan—from gaining a national following and thus from increasing their base. For example, the law has prevented the SAM in Tatarstan from gaining registration outside of that republic and thus from acquiring potentially greater reach in other parts of Russia.26 Overall, the 1997 law made it more difficult for independent mosques and smaller religious entities to operate in Russia, while simultaneously facilitating a monopoly of power over Islam by the SAM in each republic but denied them any national reach.
National Legislation Deterring Foreign Funding

AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION, A NUMBER OF COUNTRIES, AND particularly Turkey, provided support for the construction of mosques in Russia’s Muslim republics (as well as in Central Asia). Curbing foreign influence in religious affairs became an important issue for Moscow and regional elites in order to reduce the autonomy of Spiritual Associations of Muslims. Thus, in November 2015, another amendment was added to the 1997 law with the intent of limiting and controlling foreign sources of funding to religious organizations inside Russia.27 The amendment required all religious organizations to declare any sources of foreign funding to the Ministry of Justice. Further, it required that these reports to the government be made publicly available, and that the reports describe the activities of the religious organizations, identify their leaders, and explain how the foreign funding will be utilized.28 The 2015 amendment also granted the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General’s Office the right to inspect the financial and business activities of religious organizations in case of any suspicion that they have come under the influence of extremism.29 In effect, this has deterred SAMs from receiving foreign financial support.30

The most recent federal legislative push came in 2016 in the form of the Yarovaya Package, a set of proposed laws on “anti-terrorism,” which placed further restrictions on missionary activities and proselytization.31 The Yarovaya Package has been openly discussed by government officials as a law aimed primarily at controlling Islam in Russia (though it has also been applied against new religious movements). The package adds a definition (for the first time) of missionary activity to Russia’s law on religion and defines it thusly:

The activity of a religious association, aimed at disseminating information about its beliefs among people who are not participants (members, followers) in that religious association, with the purpose of involving these people as participants (members, followers). It is carried out directly by religious associations or by citizens and/or legal entities authorized by them, publicly, with the help of the media, the Internet or other lawful means.32
Additionally, missionary activity is supposed to be carried out only by the director, governing body members, or clergy of an officially recognized religious organization. Others are required to obtain written approval from a registered religious organization, to carry a letter authorizing them to perform missionary activity, and to notify local authorities in advance. Foreign citizens or stateless persons are permitted to carry out missionary activity only on behalf of a specific religious organization, and they are allowed to carry out missionary activity only in the region in which their organization is registered.

These restrictions on missionary activity are aimed, in part, at limiting the influence and financial support emanating from Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Both countries have previously provided funding in some republics for religious education through SAMs. Cutting off those republics’ sources of funding has further reduced the already limited autonomy some SAMs had vis-à-vis the republican regimes. Independent sources of support, including foreign funding, could increase a SAM’s leverage in relation to the regional regime, thus potentially converting a SAM into a subversive institution. Furthermore, this might well pose a threat to regional regimes as well as to the Kremlin.

In a domestic example, the mufti of Ingushetia—with the support of Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Chechen Republic—directly challenged the legitimacy of the Head of Ingushetia, Yunus-bek Yevkurov, by excommunicating him in May 2018. This excommunication was criticized by the Council of Muftis. Despite the fact that Yevkurov was the Kremlin’s preferred leader of Ingushetia, when he fell in popularity after a land-swap agreement with Chechnya, Moscow elected to replace him in June 2019. Thus, while SAMs primarily function as quasi-governmental agencies throughout Russia, they can still serve as an actor in the political field. Along similar lines, foreign funding also introduces outside actors that could interfere with internal republican affairs. This risk was minimized for both the Kremlin and republican elites with the November 2015 amendment to the law and the Yarovaya Package.

**National Legislation on Extremism**

IN THE 2000S, RUSSIAN FEDERAL LEGISLATION ON RELIGION BEGAN TO FOCUS ON the emerging threat of extremism. The “Federal Law on Combating Extremist Activity” was adopted in 2002. This legislation did not purport to be evenly applied
to all religious groups. It is, instead, aimed and in practice almost exclusively applied to Muslims, along with members of new religious movements (e.g., the International Society for Krishna or the Church of Scientology). The definition of “extremism” in the law was further changed via amendments in 2006 and 2007. The definition is a paragraph of imprecise clauses, including:

Forcible change of the foundations of the constitutional system and violation of integrity of the Russian Federation;... incitement to social, racial, national [ethnic] or religious discord; ...propaganda of exclusiveness, superiority or inferiority of an individual based on his/her social, racial, national [ethnic], religious or linguistic identity, or his/her attitude to religion.39

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has expressed its concern that this 2002 Russian legislation “does not require any element of violence or hatred to be present and that no clear and precise criteria on how materials may be classified as extremist are provided in the law.”40 The vagueness of these clauses has been leveraged both at the federal and regional/republican level to officially define the boundaries of acceptable religious identity and practice.

This same law has been used to prosecute people from minority Muslim communities.41 Some Sufi texts have been banned, such as Fundamentals of Rumi’s Thought: A Mevlevi Sufi Perspective by Şefik Can, as well as writings by the Turkish revivalist Said-i Nursî.42 Additionally, the law is used to repress political opposition. For instance, Fauziya Bairamova, a Tatar nationalist activist, was charged with inciting ethnic hatred under the extremism law in 2014 because of her opposition to the Russian invasion of Crimea, and for expressing her support for Crimean Tatars who opposed annexation.43

Similarly, the anti-extremism focus of the Yarovaya Package has been part of a broader securitization measure to frame political opposition as extremism. The Yarovaya Package includes provisions requiring telecommunications companies to store metadata for six months, and to assist the Russian government in its efforts to access encrypted communications. This requirement has been widely condemned by human rights groups as part of an effort to further reduce freedom in the political sphere and to collect information about opposition members.

More broadly, legislation on religious extremism provides tools for republican regimes to co-opt Islam within their borders. Meanwhile, it also poses a threat to Muslim republics. The leaders of the republics are expected to affirm that Moscow is the center of ultimate authority. If they are unable or unwilling to do so, “extremism”
can be used as a pretense for Moscow’s unwelcome intrusion into their republican jurisdictions.\textsuperscript{44}

Taken together, national legislation on religion has benefited the regimes of Muslim republics by helping each of them to consolidate religious power through their respective Spiritual Associations of Muslims. It has done so by making it more difficult for independent mosques and religious organizations to register, meanwhile increasing the leverage of republican regimes over SAMs by restricting support from foreign sources. At the same time, national legislation on countering extremism has also served to remind regional leaders and elites of their potentially precarious position if they do not prevent acts of violent extremism, or if they pursue too much independence from Moscow. The threat of Islamic extremism has already been framed as a pretext for intervention by the central government.

There have also been regional attempts, particularly during the 1990s, to control the religious sphere through law. For example, in 1998 Tatarstan passed a law officially awarding a monopoly to its SAM and banning all other Islamic institutions. Such laws have largely been erased due to their conflict with national law. Co-optation at the regional level through legislation is, therefore, no longer a viable option.

Additionally, some Muslim republics also initially managed to repurpose Soviet government institutions—including the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC), and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC)—into republican level Councils for Religious Affairs (CRA). This formal approach has also fallen by the wayside.\textsuperscript{45} On the other hand, unofficial regional policies that seek to co-opt and shape Islam through Spiritual Associations of Muslims have been allowed to flourish.

**Spiritual Associations of Muslims**

Russia’s first established Islamic institution, the Orenburg Spiritual Association, was created by Catherine the Great in 1788. This association was an official state institution responsible for, regulating and controlling the Volga-Urals and Siberia (and during the nineteenth century, part of what is now northern Kazakhstan.) The mufti of the Orenburg Spiritual Association was selected by the Russian state.\textsuperscript{46} This was the predecessor to the Muslim institutions that were established in the Soviet years: the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Central Asia (headquartered in Tashkent, Uzbekistan); the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of...
the European Part of the USSR and Siberia (Ufa, Bashkortostan); the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Northern Caucasus (Buynaksk, Dagestan); and the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Caucasus (Baku, Azerbaijan). The first three of these Soviet institutions were officially Sunni and each respective leader was referred to as a mufti. The fourth was primarily a Shi’a institution, headed by a shaykh-ul-Islam, though its deputy leader held the title of mufti and was granted similar authority over Azerbaijan’s Sunni Muslims. Each institution was colloquially referred to as a muftiate.

In the early 1990s, various regional and national Muslim institutions emerged from the ashes of the four Muslim institutions created by the Soviets. The creation of republican level Spiritual Associations of Muslims began shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union. For instance, the Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kabardino-Balkaria was created in 1989. Subsequently, Karachay-Cherkessia’s SAM was created in 1990, and it has had the same mufti since 1991. Bashkortostan is unique in that it houses both a republican SAM (created in 1992) and the Central SAM. Republican leaders in Bashkortostan must thus manage relationships with both institutions. In Adygeya, a SAM for the republic and neighboring Krasnodar Krai was established in 1993.

In 1994, the Spiritual Association of Muslims of Dagestan was created, which consolidated various independent Spiritual Associations of Muslims that sprang up to represent different ethnic groups within Dagestan (such as the Avar, Lak, Kumyk, and Dargin Qasiate Spiritual Associations of Muslims) after the fall of the Soviet Union. In Tatarstan, a monopoly was granted to one religious institution in 1998 in order to both quell the region’s nationalist demands and to stem off intrusions from the central government. Similar arrangements have spread to all the other Muslim republics, as each of them went through a protracted process of granting a monopoly over religion to one Muslim religious institution or SAM. At the national level, two notable institutions remain—the Central Spiritual Association of Muslims of Russia (headquartered in Ufa, Bashkortostan), and the Council of Muftis (created in 1996). However, the influence of these rival institutions on each respective republic is limited, and the Council of Muftis’ power base is primarily in Moscow. In addition to the Muslim republics within present-day Russia, all of the other Muslim republics in the former Soviet Union, including those that are now independent states, currently have SAMs. For example, Kyrgyzstan set up a Spiritual Association of Muslims in 1993 and Uzbekistan in 1992. Efforts to co-opt Islam in Russia today are deployed through these republican SAMs. Moscow has thus far calculated that an effort to directly co-opt Islam via the central government would incur too much resistance, besides being overly
resource intensive. Furthermore, co-optation from the very top would likely be viewed as illegitimate by citizens, since it would be disconnected from the ethnic and national identities of Russian Muslims. Instead, regional regimes have elected to utilize religious institutions in order to co-opt Islam.

By allowing Islam to be addressed at the regional level, republican regimes are allowed to garner legitimacy through, for example, their association with regional identities, such as the Tatar Muslims or Ingush Muslims. This arrangement also provides further assurances to Moscow that (1) the religious sphere is monitored by regional authorities, and (2) that there is an absence of violent attacks. Thus, republican regimes are also incentivized to prevent violent attacks in order to reduce the risk of losing autonomy.

Each SAM sets policy on Islam and has engaged in an extensive effort to co-opt and shape Islam through three processes. First, each republican SAM seeks to co-opt every mosque within its borders. This follows an unofficial policy and is not directly enforced through legislation. This unofficial policy does receive some federal backing through the 1997 federal law on religion, due to its more lax registration requirements for larger religious communities. These more lenient requirements make registration easier for larger religious organizations like SAMs.

Secondly, each Spiritual Association of Muslims has established a monopoly based on the right to produce knowledge related to Islam within the borders of the republic. And lastly, straying outside the bounds of the Spiritual Association of Muslims is portrayed as “extremism,” a frequently nebulous term, which is not exclusively limited to acts of violence. Citing “extremism” serves the purpose of framing resistance to a SAM monopoly as being beyond the bounds of accepted society. Also, portraying potential instances of religious extremism as being deftly handled by local authorities is an attempt to ensure boundary control and to fend off justifications for central intrusion.

Co-optation of Mosques

FROM THE 1990S, THE CO-OPTATION OF MOSQUES IN THE VOLGA-URALS WAS EXECUTED by republican SAMs. Likewise, the transition from repressing independent mosques in the Northern Caucasus in the 1990s, to primarily co-opting them, has also been enforced by SAMs. Spiritual Associations of Muslims divide their territories into administrative units known as muhtasibates. Each muhtasibate
oversees mosques within its jurisdiction. I have classified mosques in Russia in three categories: governmental, co-opted, and independent.

Governmental mosques are constructed with funds from republican governments or they are commissioned by high-level (republican) government officials. For example, the Akhmad Kadyrov Mosque in Chechnya is named after the first mufti of Chechnya, who later became president. It was commissioned by his son, the current president of Chechnya, with support from Moscow. In August 2019, Kadyrov also oversaw the opening of another mosque in Shali, Chechnya. It is now the latest mosque in the region to claim the title of “largest in Europe,” with a stated capacity of 30,000. In the capital of Bashkortostan the central mosque, Lala Tulpan, was constructed with the support of the government, and the mosque is used in official advertisements to attract tourists from the Middle East. The first two presidents of the Republic of Adygeya officially supported the construction of numerous mosques throughout the republic.

Co-opted mosques are constructed from money raised by donations from the local population and/or wealthy benefactors and are subsequently required to join the SAM. For example, in Kazan, Tatarstan only two mosques were government constructed, while all other mosques in the city were co-opted into the SAM in 1998. Alternatively, some independent mosques in Russia have been constructed from funds raised by locals and/or benefactors and have thus far been able to continue to avoid co-optation into the SAM while remaining independent. However, most mosques that have resisted incorporation into a Spiritual Association of Muslims, or compliance with SAM, have subsequently been closed.

In both the Volga Urals and Northern Caucasus, two patterns illustrate how mosques have been shut down by authorities. In some cases, an imam is either accused of being a Salafi or an extremist (see Co-optation through Securitization below), or the closing has been portrayed as a bureaucratic procedure under the guise of building or other administrative codes.

In Tatarstan, every mosque throughout the entire republic is part of SAM. Likewise all mosques in Bashkortostan are either affiliated with the republican SAM or Central SAM. Under Kadyrov, there are no longer independent mosques in Chechnya. This stands in stark contrast to the 1990s when numerous Salafi mosques were present in the republic.

Mosque closures in the Volga Urals have been limited. Since the 1990s, SAMs in this region have preferred to bring mosques into their sphere of influence. Additionally, the Volga Ural closures have not been accompanied by widespread state violence or repression of the wider Muslim community. Rather, these mosques closures are examples of targeted repression. In contrast to the Tatar-Bashkir
approach, other republics previously deployed widespread state violence against imams and Muslims who went to mosques that theologically differed from the republican SAM, or who criticized the SAM in the early 2000s.

In a very stark instance, widespread violence perpetuated by the state in Kabardino-Balkaria jeopardized the perceived legitimacy of the SAM and republican government itself. This violence was even coupled with the closing of all mosques in the republic in 2005. Such heavy-handedness, implemented in varying degrees against all Muslims who wanted to pray or go to mosques, has negatively affected the perception of the SAM. Some citizens in Kabardino-Balkaria even petitioned Putin, requesting permission to move to another republic within Russia or abroad, in order to have the right of religious freedom. While mosques are once again open in Kabardino-Balkaria, the oppressiveness of this policy and the repression not only of individuals who engaged in violence but of all Muslims not in the SAM may have contributed to further outbreaks of violence against the state.

The Kabardino-Balkaria government has since recalibrated. As part of this détente, independent communities, or jamaats, and some mosques, continue to have a presence in Kabardino-Balkaria. The effects of earlier widespread repression are still felt, however. In Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria some Muslims continue to refuse to go to the central SAM-affiliated mosque in protest.

The ruling authorities in Dagestan and Ingushetia have also recalculated and made concessions to their Muslim populations. Indeed, some independent mosques continue to operate in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria, as each of these republican regimes have learned that widespread repression endangers their legitimacy and is costly. Meanwhile, villages in Dagestan along the Chechen border have established independent mosques and expressed a desire to join Chechnya. A few imams of independent mosques in Dagestan identify as Salafi, such as in the city of Khasavyurt, while the SAM in Dagestan affiliates with Sufism. Additionally, under the previous president of Ingushetia, President Yevkurov (who was recently forced out of office), the republic also balanced counterinsurgency efforts with dialogue, and allowed some Salafi mosques to continue to operate. With only a few months in office, it remains to be seen how successfully acting-President Mahmud-Ali Kalimatov will operate in the religious sphere.

In the case of Chechnya, both the overwhelming violence deployed by Kadyrov against any type of dissent and the free rein provided to Kadyrov by Putin have made public resistance to the SAM a very high-risk endeavor. While no independent mosques exist in the republic, it is difficult to determine how ordinary citizens perceive the legitimacy of Chechnya’s SAM in light of the overbearing political environment.
Overall, the Volga-Urals have more effectively co-opted mosques in Russia relative to the Northern Caucasus by using more targeted suppression. This, in turn, has reinforced the legitimacy and power of the SAMs in the Volga-Urals region. Alternatively, the republics of the Northern Caucasus, which have had to contend with nationalist separatist movements, have a record of violently repressing larger communities of Muslims, including those who did not engage in violence. This has adversely affected the legitimacy of the SAMs in the eyes of the people, and has thus continued to inhibit the consolidation of their monopoly over Islam.

Shaping Religious Knowledge

The Russian government and each republican government’s determination to co-opt Islam also extends deeply into the realm of religious knowledge. In effect, each republican SAM claims the exclusive right to produce religious knowledge within its boundaries. Each regime has sought to monopolize Islamic religious and intellectual life and enforce its writ in two ways—first, by restricting access to religious ideas independent of its SAM, and second, by producing SAM-approved versions of religious knowledge (including Friday messages, books and online materials).

The former effort involves tightly controlling all religious appointments in the SAMs as well as repressing Muslim religious leaders who have had or seek profiles outside the SAM framework. All imams at SAM mosques—which comprise the majority of all mosques in Russia—are either appointed or approved by the SAM. Imams who have attempted to create a power base independent of the SAM are usually swiftly repressed. For instance, at one mosque in Kazan, Tatarstan, an imam attracted a dedicated following. In response, the mosque was closed, purportedly for a building violation. Meanwhile, the imam was charged with extremism under the pretext that he was a follower of the pro-caliphate revivalist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir. A similar episode took place in Dagestan. A self-identified Salafi imam in Khasavyurt publicly lamented the closing of Salafi mosques and claimed that he himself was being targeted by authorities. As a result, he was charged with inciting terrorism.

Notably, there are few opportunities for Islamic higher education in the republics, and the educational opportunities that do exist are only available through the SAM. The most significant of these institutions is the Russian Islamic University, located
in Kazan, Tatarstan. It was created in 1998 with the support of the Tatar government, the SAM of Tatarstan, the Central Muslim Spiritual Association, and the Council of Muftis. In 2007, the institute became the first Islamic educational institution in Russia to receive accreditation from the state. Other institutions of higher Islamic learning include the Northern Caucasus Islamic University of Muhammad Arif (Dagestan), Rizah Fakhretdin Islamic Institute (Bashkortostan), Maryum Sultanova Islamic Institute (Bashkortostan), King Fahd Islamic Institute (Ingushetia), Kunta-Haji Islamic University (Chechnya), and Moscow Islamic University. Additionally, all secondary madrasahs in the country must be affiliated with a SAM.

The current lack of Islamic educational opportunities is of concern to religious leaders as well as the general Muslim public. In one survey conducted in Adygeya, just 20 percent of respondents stated that they were “satisfied” with the educational level of their local imams. Conversely, 60 percent stated that they were “dissatisfied.” Indeed, the lack of educational attainment by imams was a common refrain during my own fieldwork in Tatarstan. Low levels of religious knowledge manifest themselves in other ways. For example, the SAM in Karachay-Cherkessia claims officially to adhere to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. However, pamphlets produced by the SAM on how to read namaz (daily prayers) included practices from other madhabs (schools of Islamic thought) that do not reflect Hanafi orthodoxy.

Imams in SAM mosques are no longer allowed to produce or deliver their own Friday messages. Today, the SAM of each republic produces a Friday message and then uses a distribution system to get its message to every mosque. The Friday messages in some republics are published in advance in a book, which is physically mailed to imams and is also available for citizens to purchase. Although the development and dissemination of the Friday message by SAMs is not official policy, it is enforced in all SAM mosques, and thus in most mosques throughout the country.

The co-optation of religious knowledge also extends to religious literature and websites. Within each republic, Islamic literature requires a SAM stamp of approval. Additionally, most republics also require that religious literature can only be sold in SAM-approved locations. While this is officially not part of Russia’s laws governing religion, each SAM in practice maintains a near monopoly over religious knowledge, and to varying degrees, each SAM has made efforts to produce religious texts and websites.

For instance, two of the most prominent websites are the Kazan, Tatarstan-based “Islam Today” and “Islam Review.” These news service agencies work closely together to produce content that is not directly critical of SAM associated authorities in Russia. The Council of Muftis maintains the popular website “muslim.ru.”
While “islam.ru” is formally independent, its deputy editor is an advisor to the Council of Muftis. Some mosques, particularly those that are government constructed, maintain their own websites. Other SAMs have their own publishing houses. Medina Publishing House, for example, is supported by the Central SAM. *The Islamic Herald (Islamskii Vestnik)* is a Muslim newspaper in Makhachkala, Dagestan.80

In addition to co-opting mosques, co-opting religious knowledge through controlling access to religious appointments and educational institutions, and producing and disseminating Friday messages, religious literature, and websites, each republic has also sought to co-opt Islam through securitization.

## Securitizing Islam

RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES (BOTH NATIONAL AND REGIONAL), INCLUDING THE SAMs, ALL argue that the various restrictions on Islam and its expression are fundamentally justified by national security concerns. Indeed, the co-optation of mosques and of religious knowledge in each republic is justified as a necessary measure to allow for the development and preservation of a peaceful and prosperous society. Meanwhile, Muslims who stray outside of the SAM-approved religious frameworks and requirements are depicted as threats to society’s overall security and development. Because of this, Islam has become increasingly “securitized” in Russia.81 Not only are terrorists or separatists labeled as “extremists,” but also political opposition and others whose religious views differ theologically from the SAMs.

Of course, Russia does face some legitimate security threats from violent groups (including from separatist movements in which religious ideology may play a secondary role). For instance, the so-called “Caucasus Emirate,” an umbrella terrorist organization, first arose in 2007. The Caucasus Emirate was affiliated with al-Qaeda and sought to bring the northern Caucasus under unified rule. Led by Doku Umarov, the Caucasus Emirate claimed responsibility for the bombings of the Moscow metro in 2010 and Domodedovo International Airport in 2011.

Today, after Russian forces killed Umarov in 2014 and then his successor, the Caucasus Emirate is largely defunct. However, some remnants of the movement have since joined the Islamic State (ISIS).82

In 2015, ISIS declared that it had created a new governorate in the North Caucasus: *Wilayat Qawqaz*, led by Abu Mohammad al-Qadari. This new ISIS “province” claims to encompass Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and
Karachay-Cherkessia. While the Wilayat Qawqaz is still in present in Russia, its attacks have been isolated and small scale. Furthermore, it has been estimated that anywhere from 200 to 7,000 Russian nationals have fought either in Iraq or in Syria against the Assad regime, where they have joined ISIS or other violent Islamist groups. These divergent estimates are the product of unclear methodologies and probably faulty data; regardless, ISIS recruitment, particularly in the Northern Caucasus, remains a problem.

Russia has been among the few countries to allow its citizens in Syria and those accused of belonging to ISIS—particularly children—to return to Russia. This policy is driven by both humanitarian and security considerations, as it is intended to prevent the radicalization of children abroad who in later years may return to Russia. After the collapse of the Islamic State, the way power will continue to be distributed amongst terrorist and separatist groups remains to be seen. As it stands now, the lack of an international actor to provide it with substantive support probably means that Wilayat Qawqaz will be limited to conducting unsophisticated attacks by individuals. Increasingly, these individuals are likely to work alone or within a limited circle, without direct training from the broader ISIS network.

In contrast to the North Caucasus, acts of violence in the Volga-Urals region have been rare. The violent incidents that have occurred have been limited to targeted assassinations or assassination attempts against high profile members of SAM. In 2012, the deputy mufti of the SAM in Tatarstan was shot and killed while the mufti was injured in a car bombing. These events were widely regarded as a shocking occurrence. No specific group claimed responsibility for the attack. Five individuals were arrested and Tatar and Russian authorities claimed that the assassination and assassination attempt were the acts of Islamic extremists. The accused ringleader of the attacks was the chairperson of a company that organized hajj trips—and that was later taken over by the mufti (who was subsequently injured in the car bombing). According to The Moscow Times, Russian authorities stated that the assassination and assassination attempt were motivated by both ideology and finances due to a loss of income from hajj trips.

At the same time, some ethnic Tatars and Bashkirs are known to have joined militant groups in Syria. In 2015, two men in Tatarstan were given prison sentences for fighting in Syria. In 2016, a new militant group, the Junud al-Makhdi, was formed in Syria. The self-described mujahidin group was formed by ethnic Tatars and Bashkirs. There is no evidence so far that Junud al-Makhdi operates domestically in either Tatarstan or Bashkortostan or is planning attacks in these republics.

While the actual threat posed by religious extremism is clearly different in the Volga-Urals and the Northern Caucasus, the official rhetoric of the authorities in
both regions about Islamist extremism is strikingly similar. Indeed, throughout the Russian Federation, Islamist terrorists—whether they are members of ISIS, the Caucasus Emirate, or other terrorist groups—are all officially labelled by Russian authorities as “Salafis” or “Wahhabis.”

Some Muslims in Russia’s republics self-identify as Salafi; however, the vast majority of them eschew violence. Exactly how Muslims who identify as Salafi view religion and the nature of their religious practices—including the range and diversity of views between and within Russia’s various regions—has not been adequately examined. In my own fieldwork in Tatarstan, Russia and Kazakhstan, people who described themselves as Salafis did not necessarily associate this term with a particular religious ideology or theology, but with the basic knowledge and practice of Islam. By contrast, they described Russia’s SAM-recognized imams (in both Tatarstan and Kazakhstan where only SAM mosques remain) as poorly educated. Simultaneously, interviewees I spoke with in Russia who sought out Salafi leaders for religious advice were unable to articulate how these leaders differed theologically from SAM imams.

Meanwhile, those same labels of “Salafi” and “Wahhabi” are also applied by SAM and government officials to various smaller non-violent religious groups, again, despite their differences in theology. At the same time, these labels are also applied to religious leaders who have tried to create power bases outside of the context of SAM. In the kremlin of Kazan, Tatarstan, the most prominent mosque in the region was destroyed in 1552 by Ivan the Terrible during the Russo-Kazan war between the Kazan Khanate and Muscovite Russia that resulted in the conquering of Kazan. As a sign of resurgent national pride, a new mosque, Kul Sharif, was erected on the same grounds in 2005. However, the mosque was officially opened as a museum, not a place of worship, and thus it was not officially part of Tatarstan’s SAM.

Meanwhile, the imam of the mosque, Ramil Yunusov, attempted to create his own power base and subsequently became entangled in a conflict with the mufti of the SAM. Yunusov resisted attempts by the mufti to incorporate the mosque into the SAM. Unsurprisingly, Yunusov was accused by authorities of being a Salafi; he was subsequently arrested and removed from his position. Ultimately, Kul Sharif Mosque was subsumed into the SAM of Tatarstan.

The labels “Salafi,” “Wahhabi,” and “extremist,” have also been used to denigrate the political opposition. After Crimea, the homeland of Crimean Tatars, was annexed by Russia in 2014, Crimean Tatar activists have increasingly been imprisoned or exiled. In June 2019, eight Crimean Tatars were jailed under charges of “extremism.”

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One likely long-term consequence of labeling all Muslims who engage in violence as “Salafis” or “Wahhabis” will be to make it more difficult to distinguish between the different political and ideological motivations of these actors. Such an approach does not allow for an analysis that incorporates people’s beliefs, practices, worldview, grievances (legitimate or not), or how they interact with their social context.\textsuperscript{95} Contrary to Moscow’s thinking, it also obstructs efforts by the government to manage and deter violent religious extremism. Painting political opponents, Muslims whose religious beliefs differ theologically from the SAM, those who simply want to practice their faith outside the SAM framework, or members of new Islamic groups with the same brush as members of ISIS, the Caucasus Emirate, and other terrorists lessens the gravity of the charge “extremist” or “terrorist.” This broad-brush labeling may also generate more skepticism of the state among the population—and perhaps also drive anger and new forms of political opposition.

**Conclusion**

*Moscow has chosen not to directly repress Islam or to attempt to directly co-opt it along its Muslim-majority peripheries. Instead, the Russian political elite have come to believe—correctly—that such an effort would be viewed as illegitimate and would likely stir-up significant resentment and opposition. As a result, internal policies on Islam have been delegated to the leadership of the Muslim republics. The authoritarian republican regimes have, for their part, learned that it is more politically advantageous to them to try to co-opt rather than repress Islam. While the North Caucasus have had more serious security threats to contend with than other parts of Russia, the choice in the early 2000s to repress Muslims was not effective. In fact, repression only further exacerbated their internal problems, and thus jeopardized the rule of regional elites and the legitimacy of the SAMs. The republics of the North Caucasus have since joined the Volga-Urals in efforts to try to co-opt the majority religious group. So far, the policy of co-optation has helped reduce the risk of antagonizing the majority religious group while also bolstering the legitimacy of authoritarian republican regimes.*

*The Muslim republics within the Russian Federation enact the co-optation of Islam through three processes. Firstly, the majority of mosques in Russia have been co-opted into a SAM. Secondly, religious knowledge is supervised and*
controlled through monitoring religious appointments and the production of religious literature and websites. Lastly, through laws and informal policies, religious movements, leaders, and independent thought outside of SAMs are framed, increasingly, as religious extremism, Salafism, and/or Wahhabism.

Moscow has put several safeguards in place to ensure that the central government can intervene should a republic attempt to gain too much autonomy or fail to manage and contain violent religious extremism. National laws on religion, including ones that focus on extremism, provides the federal government with a powerful pretext to intrude in religious affairs throughout the country. At the same time, Russia’s Muslim republics are trying both to co-opt Islam for the sake of their own political legitimacy while simultaneously seeking to prevent violent religious extremism. Meanwhile, they are attempting to project an image to Moscow that the religious sphere is contained and monitored in order to maintain their boundary control.

Overall, these assorted efforts to co-opt Islam in Russia’s Muslim republics have so far been effective, thanks largely to the astute decision to delegate the co-optation of Islam to the republics. However, the decisions by Moscow and individual republican regimes to aggressively securitize Islam pose several medium and long-term risks. First, the conceptual stretching of the term “extremism” from individuals who engage in acts of violence to members of the political opposition and individuals whose theology simply differs from a SAM may weaken the charge of being accused of “extremism.” Without legitimate avenues in which to openly debate various theological viewpoints, some individuals—after already being identified as extremists by a SAM or the government—may decide to embody the labels imposed upon them. Conflating different extremist ideologies with each other as well as with independent political and religious thought provides little room for understanding the motives and aims of extremist groups.

Russia faces genuine threats to its security from violent extremism. However, other countries committed to combating violent extremism should view Russia’s (and other authoritarian governments’) claims about the threat of Islamic extremism with skepticism. Equating all independent religious thought and practice with groups that commit violence severely hinders dialogue and the exercise of religious freedom. In fact, the authoritarian refusal to permit independent religious thought and practice in public spaces may eventually lead to radicalization. This, of course, highlights the authoritarian’s dilemma with respect to religion. For the sake of maintaining their own power, authoritarian governments must inhibit the growth of independent civil society and religious expression. This weakens a society’s capacity to deal with extremism, and also heightens the risk of violence.
NOTES


2. Russia has various sub-federal units with varying degrees of autonomy (including republics, oblasts, krais, cities of federal importance, autonomous oblasts, and autonomous okrugs). The most autonomous unit is the republic. In Muslim republics, most members of the titular ethnicity or ethnicities typically identify as Muslim. The titular ethnicity is the ethnic group for which the republic is named—for instance, Tatars in Tatarstan, Udmurts in Udmurtia, or Chechens in Chechnya. Dagestan does not have a single titular ethnic group and no one ethnic group constitutes a majority. The 1994 Constitution of Dagestan declared that the largest 14 ethnic groups are the titular ethnicities. See Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, “Paradiplomacy in the Russian Regions: Tatarstan’s Search for Statehood,” Europe-Asia Studies 55, no. 4 (2003): pp. 613–29. Avars make up about 31% of the population in Dagestan and Dargins about 17% according to the 2010 Russian Census. Adygeya and Bashkortostan are the only Muslim republics in Russia where the majority of the population does not identify either as Muslim or with the titular ethnicity. In Kabardino-Balkaria, the Karbardins constitute about 57% of the population, while the Balkars make up about 13%. In Karachay-Cherkessia, the Karachays constitute about 41% of the population, while the Cherkess constitute only 12%. “Results of the 2010 All-Russian Population Census, Volume Four National Composition and Language Skills, Citizenship, Table Four Population by Nationality and Knowledge of the Russian Language by Subjects of the Russian Federation,” Census (Federal State Statistics Service, 2010), http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm.

3. Islam within Russia has diverse streams. Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygeya are predominately Hanafi, while Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan are predominately Shafi’i.


13. See Rebecca Fradkin, Authoritarian Regimes and the Co-optation of Islam: Kazakhstan and Russia (University of Oxford, 2019) for further analysis on how the co-optation of religion by authoritarian regimes differs from and is similar to the co-optation of other sources of potential opposition.

14. According to Article 14 of the 1993 constitution, Russia is a secular state. Moreover, “No religion may be established as a state or obligatory one,” and, “Religious associations shall be separated from the State and shall be equal before the law.” Despite the common assertion, no religion is identified as “traditional” to Russia legally. “Constitution of the Russian Federation” (1993), Article 14. See Peter B. Maggs, Olga Schwartz, and William Burnham, Law and Legal System of the Russian Federation, Sixth (Huntington, N.Y.: Juris Publishing, 2015), p. 879.


17. Religions besides the aforementioned are grouped together as “other” religions. The first tier is Orthodoxy, the second the other named religions, while the unnamed religions constitute the third tier. Zoe Knox, Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism (Oxford: Routledge Curzon, 2005), p. 3.


22. The Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan and the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Caucasus were the other Muslim institutions during the Soviet Union.


26. Tatarstan frequently portrays itself as the center of Islam in Russia and has one of the few religious institutions of higher education for Islam in Russia.
27. While the law is written to be applicable to all religions, smaller Christian and Islamic groups that were not aligned with the Orthodox Church or a Spiritual Association of Muslims were of particular concern.
30. Spiritual Associations of Muslims receive funding from donations at mosques under their jurisdiction and in some republics receive official and unofficial financial support from their respective republican government.
35. The collapse of the Soviet Union left many people stateless, including for example ethnic Russians in Estonia. According to the 2010 Russian census, there are about 178,000 stateless persons in Russia about whom there is limited available demographic data. “Results of the 2010 All-Russian Population Census, Volume Four National Composition and Language Skills, Citizenship, Table Four Population by Nationality and Knowledge of the Russian Language by Subjects of the Russian Federation.”
41. I am not using the word “group” here in the context of the 1997 law distinction between religious groups and religious organizations.
44. In the summer of 2013 penalties came into force for any public action which can be deemed as “insulting the feelings of believers.” This code, Criminal Code Article 148, was passed after the arrest of several members of the punk-rock collective Pussy Riot in 2012 after they performed in the Moscow Patriarchate Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. According to SOVA, an NGO focusing on nationalism, religion, and radicalization in Russia, this Criminal Code has been applied more frequently in cases starting in 2015, including against citizens who post on social media sites such as Kontakte, a Russian version of Facebook. Sibireva, “Freedom of Conscience in Russia.”
45. For example, in Tatarstan, a Religious Affairs Council (RAC) was created out of the remnants of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, which was housed in the Cabinet of Ministers. The RAC was then reorganized into two separate offices, the Office for Cooperation with Religious...
Associations and the Office of State Confessional Relations—both housed in the Cabinet of Ministers to the Presidential Administration. Then in 2017 these two offices were merged into The Tatarstan Presidential Inter-ethnic and Inter-faith Relations Council under the Presidential Administration. The current council has little power and its reach is not significantly felt amongst religious communities.


54. The All-Tatar Public Center (VTOT), a Tatar nationalist organization, was founded in 1988. A faction of the VTOT then established a party called Ittifaq (Union) in 1990, which was headed by Fauziya Bairamova and Rafael Mukhametdinov. Azat Khurmatullin, “Tatarstan: Islam Entwined with Nationalism,” in *Russia and Islam: State, Society and Radicalism*, ed. Roland Dannreuther and Luke March (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), p. 104. Ittifaq began to agitate against the fact that the Central Spiritual Association of Muslims in Russia was headquartered in Ufa, Bashkortostan. Ittifaq envisioned the Central SAM as being headquartered in Kazan in order to promote Tatarstan as the center for Islam in Russia. Thus, the Spiritual Association of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan was created with the support of the Tatar president, Shaimiev. In response, the Regional
Spiritual Association of Muslims of Tatarstan was created under the auspices of the Central Spiritual Association of Muslims in Russia. President Shaimiev then convened a Unifying Congress of Islamic Clergy in 1998, which declared that only one Muslim institution, the Spiritual Association of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan, was allowed in Tatarstan. Shireen T. Hunter, *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 61.


56. A handful of regional level Muslim institutions remain, such as the Coordinating Center of Spiritual Associations of Muslims of the Northern Caucasus, which was established in 1998. Its influence over the regional Spiritual Associations of Muslims in the region is limited, however. Chechnya formally left the Center in 2012. Other institutions include the Islamic Congress of Russia, the Spiritual Association of the Muslims of Russia (DUMR), and Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Asian Part of Russia (DUMAR), Spiritual Board of Muslims of the European Part of Russia (DUMER).

57. The Soviet Union had 15 republics, of which six were Muslim.

58. One republic did initially try to use legislation to enforce a monopoly on Islam. In 1999 Tatarstan passed a republican law, “The Law on Freedom on Confession and Religious Organizations,” which officially awarded a monopoly to its SAM and banned other institutions for Islam. Article 10 of the law directly states that Muslim organizations in Tatarstan must be, “…Directed by one centralized religious organization, SAM RT.” Zakon Respubliki Tatarstan, “O Sovesti i o Religioznykh Ob”edineniakh, Law of the Republic of Tatarstan,” p. 2279 (1999); Eduard Ponarin, “The Potential of Radical Islam in Tatarstan” (Budapest, 2008), p. 11; R. M. Mukhametshin, *Islam v Obshchestvennoi i Politicheskoj Zhizni Tatar i Tatarstana v Xx Vek* (Kazan, Tatarstan, Russia: Tatarskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel’stvo, 2005); Rushan Gallyamov, “Islamic Revival in Volga Ural-Macro Region: A Comparative Analysis of the Bashkortostan and Tatarstan Models,” in *Islam from the Caspian to the Urals: Macro-Regional Approach* (Sapporo, Japan: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2006), p. 88. In an interesting case of boundary control, Article 10 was overturned in a case brought before the Supreme Court by a group of imams who opposed SAM RT’s monopoly. Ponarin, “The Potential of Radical Islam in Tatarstan,” p. 13. Ensuring regional laws, particularly in Tatarstan, which had a vibrant nationalist movement in the 1990s, comply with federal law has been a priority under Putin. This type of violation of Tatarstan’s boundary control indicates that Moscow will not
allow Tatarstan, or other Muslim republics, to construct an **official** monopoly on Islam.

59. Each muhtasibate typically aligns with the region’s administrative units, including districts and rayons.


64. Confirmed by extensive fieldwork conducted by author in Tatarstan in 2015 including 20 interviews with government officials, SAM officials, and imams and 290 interviews with “ordinary” citizens. Fradkin, “Regime Co-optation of Islam: Tatarstan.”


70. Aliyev, “Political Crisis Is Looming in Ingushetia.”


72. “Memorial Recognizes Dagestan Imam Magomednabi Magomedov as a Political


76. Madhab refers to schools of jurisprudence within Islam. The Hanafi madhab is one of the four main schools of Islamic thought. The Hanafi madhab is the most commonly practiced school of Islamic thought. This madhab is the most common throughout much of the former Ottoman empire. The other schools of jurisprudence are the Maliki, Shafi’i, and Hanbali madhabs. Norman Calder et al., “Law,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford University Press), http://www.oxfordislamic-studies.com/article/opr/t236MIW/e0473#anafSchool.

77. Namaz, or salat, refers to the five prayer times that are considered the second pillar of Islam. The time of each prayer is governed by the position of the sun. John L. Esposito, ed., *“Salat,” in The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2003), http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/oprt125/e2075.


80. As with other SAM produced content, the content of the newspaper is typically not political in nature. Rather its intent is to produce content that is widely consumed and not critical of SAM.


84. There have been several small-scale, unsophisticated attacks in Russia that Wilayat Qawqaz claims to have committed. The weapons used were often rudimentary, including knives and vehicles. These attacks have been primarily aimed at the state. In one instance, several police officers were attacked in Chechnya in August 2018. Ivan Nechepurenko, “Police Are Attacked in Chechnya; ISIS Claims Responsibility,” The New York Times, August 20, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/world/europe/militants-attack-police-chechnya-isis-kadyrov.html. In Kizlyar, Dagestan after a shooting at an Orthodox church that killed five people, the Islamic State claimed responsibility. “Five Killed in Russia Church Shooting,” BBC News, February 19, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43105171. Additionally, after an explosion in an apartment building in Magnitogorsk in 2019, ISIS also claimed responsibility. However, authorities have disputed this assertion and stated that they believe the explosion occurred due to a gas leak. “Islamic State Claims


89. There is very limited data on the prevalence of Russian citizens self-identification as Salafi given the high stigma and potential repercussions. In my own interviews in Tatarstan, only 3% of Muslims I interviewed discussed identifying as Salafi or choosing to consult religious sources specifically because they were a Salafi source. Fradkin, *Authoritarian Regimes and the Co-optation of Islam: Kazakhstan and Russia*, p. 308.


91. Kremlin refers to a city citadel (and are found in cities outside of Moscow.


93. Interview by author with SAM Official A, Kazan, Russia 2015.

Deploying Social Media to Empower Iranian Women: An Interview with Masih Alinejad

By Lela Gilbert

Masih Alinejad is recognized by millions of global admirers for inspiring protests against the Iranian regime’s enforced mandatory hijab. She believes that the compulsory wearing of the traditional women’s Islamic head covering is a visual symbol of submission to Sharia law, and more specifically of female submission to overbearing male authority. And through her videos and interviews, she has developed an enormous social media following for her Facebook page “MyStealthyFreedom” and her Twitter hashtag #WhiteWednesdays.

Masih is an Iranian-American journalist-in-exile who now lives in New York where she continues to oppose the religious dictatorship in her home country. Her resistance to Tehran’s authoritarian religious regime led to her expulsion from Iran in 2009. She has since become an international social media maven, providing communication platforms for Iranian women to celebrate their headscarf-free hair.
in photos and videos, along with encouraging other expressions of personal freedom.

Masih Alinejad was born on September 11, 1976 in Ghomikola, a small and poor northern Iranian village. Just about three years later the Shah of Iran was overthrown. For the first time in more than two thousand years, there was no Persian king on the peacock throne.

Instead, a Shiite cleric, Sayyid Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini—better known as Ayatollah Khomeini—became Iran’s “Supreme Leader” and seized the reins of the Iranian government. He and his followers began to enforce his strict interpretation of Shiite theology, launching the Iranian Revolution in early 1979 and imposing harshly enforced Sharia law on the country’s entire population.

In her best-selling book The Wind in My Hair, Masih wrote, “I am a child of that Islamic Revolution and have lived nearly all my life under its shadow. My story is that of modern Iran, the tension between the secular tendencies of its population and the forced Islamification of the society, and the struggle of women, especially young women, for their rights against the introduction of Sharia law, against violations of human rights and civil liberties. The revolution changed much, but for women it was many steps backward. In the Islamic Republic, being born a woman is like having a disability.”

Today, during angry, widespread protests across Iran, the power of Masih Alinejad’s social media networks has resonated across the world. She has posted countless videos of passionate and courageous demonstrators marching and chanting in dozens of Iranian cities. They protest against the powerful clerics who rule the country with iron fists, and videos capturing their defiance have flooded Twitter, Instagram and Facebook for days. Thanks to those videos, the youthful energy of Iranian resistance to the religious regime was available online 24/7, until the panicked regime cut off virtually all internet access to the entire country for five days, after which the government claimed it would be “gradually restored.”

I recently met with Masih Alinejad in New York to interview her for Current Trends in Islamist Ideology about her exceptional struggles on behalf of freedom for Iranian women. We discussed her efforts to expose the injustices the Islamic Republic’s religious authorities have imposed on the Iranian people, and particularly on its female population.

As we began, she told me about her early years and how promises of economic improvement and intensifying religious demands affected her childhood.
MASIH ALINEJAD: I grew up in a traditional family which later became a very religious family. My parents and relatives were excited by the revolution, and their reason was only poverty. My grandfathers, both of them, were very, very poor. My parents didn’t have proper jobs and were also poor. So their goal and dream was to have a fair opportunity to earn enough money to survive. And because of all the propaganda from Khomeini’s people, they believed the promise of the revolution, which contradicted the “establishment”—the Shah’s regime. Everyone was told that the revolutionaries wanted to create a government for the poor peasants.

LELA GILBERT: Something like the Soviet Union in those days?

MASIH ALINEJAD: It was exactly the mentality of Soviet Union. And that was my father, who was most excited that finally we, the poor people, were going to be recognized. We were going to be the ones with dignity. He listened to Khomeini’s cassettes, excited by what the new Supreme Leader was promising. And my father said, “The things we are hearing are beyond our expectations!” Khomeini was announcing, “You don’t need to pay for electricity. You don’t need to pay for water. You don’t need to pay for buses and transportation....”

LELA GILBERT: So was it really religious at all?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Not at the beginning—at least as our village understood it. For my parents, the reason to support the revolution was not a religious reason. They were just poor and looking for a better opportunity to survive, and they believed that the money from the country’s oil was going to be on their own table. That’s all. But after the revolution, the whole goal changed. And they became extremely religious.

LELA GILBERT: Yes, tell me about wearing the hijab even as a child.

MASIH ALINEJAD: My mother, who used to wear small headscarves, which were very beautiful—this happy woman became the unsmiling one wearing a dark chador. She also became the police in the house. She was supportive of my father who constantly said, “You’d better wear a hijab.”

LELA GILBERT: So he was more fanatical?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Oh, yeah. My mother was really supportive of us, but she
didn’t have any power. And she was brainwashed as well. From the beginning, she was thinking that all this was good for us. When she changed her appearance, she thought this was good for us as well. So my sister, my mother and I, we used to wear hijab inside the house. And it wasn’t only us. A lot of my relatives and people in the village—for instance, we had 200 families in the village and about half of the people in our village were doing the same—wearing hijab inside the house. But our household was very extreme, and we even had to wear it in front of our father, and even when we went to bed.

LELA GILBERT: Traditionally, you wouldn’t have to do that in your own home. Only with people outside the family. Is that right?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yes, traditionally only with people outside the family, or in the village. Or when somebody comes to your house, you’d go and put on a hijab. But it became far more extreme after the revolution. When I compare two family pictures, from before and after the revolution, it just breaks my heart. I’d look at my parents and think, “You were not like this. You didn’t look like this before. But then you became a propaganda tool for the government saying that you are the people who want to change society.” A lot of times the government becomes successful by using people against people, and that means morality police, and not just the official police...

LELA GILBERT: Turning ordinary people against one another?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yeah, people against people They advise you that in the Islamic way if you’re a women you have to cover. And legally, they have the power to do that in an Islamic country. People are allowed to stop other people and tell them what to wear.

LELA GILBERT: Even strangers?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Strangers. In the streets.

The older she got, the more Masih became aware of the lack of freedom girls and women faced in her village, and the less she respected the severe religious control she was subjected to. “As a girl,” she told me, “I never had a clue about discrimination, feminist movements or equality or equal rights. Instead as I got older, through the educational system I was always brainwashed that my female body was a sin. And if I got raped or
harassed by men, that was my fault because I didn’t cover myself properly. I was the reason that men couldn’t control themselves and harassed me sexually. That’s what the educational system in Iran taught us: the female body is evil and has to be completely hidden.

LELA GILBERT: So hijab became the symbol of hiding the evil female body. What did you think about this when you were young?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Hijab became part of my body, even beyond my personal identity. When you wear it from the age of seven, when you go to bed, it’s like you’re—you know, you think your hair is part of your body, yeah? But when you cover it, you don’t feel your hair anymore. Instead the headscarf is going to be part of your body. You take it everywhere with you. And taking it off—it’s like chopping up your body. It’s like cutting your body. It’s that difficult for people who wear it every day in their life. So it was my identity. It was my body. It was everything. It was the bond between me and my family.

I never had a clue about ideals like freedom of choice or equality. But what I was witnessing was my brother. Ali was only two years older than me. And he was the most visible example of all the freedom that I was banned from enjoying. I envied his freedom without having any clue about why—but yeah, why? Why was Ali free to go and jump in the beautiful river? Ali was enjoying bicycle riding. He loved to jump in the river, to sing, to go out with boys and play around. But we girls, no. We were not allowed to do these things.

LELA GILBERT: At what age did all this begin?

MASIH ALINEJAD: From the age of seven when you go to school. And when you go to school, there’s segregation. And you see the total discrimination. You don’t have a clue about what discrimination is but you feel it. Like, I couldn’t see any difference between my hair and his hair. But I had to cover it.

LELA GILBERT: What did your mother say about all this?

MASIH ALINEJAD: My mother, actually, as I told you, was a brave woman. She was brainwashed, but she had courage. For example, if I was scared of the dark, my mother told me how to defeat the darkness. She said, “If you’re scared of the darkness, then the darkness can devour you.” We had no electricity, no running water, no indoor plumbing—so we used an outhouse. And the outhouse was in
the very darkest part of the backyard garden. I was scared. So my mother said, “Instead of being scared of the darkness, stare into the darkness.”

She told me, “If you’re scared of the darkness, then the darkness can swallow you up. But if you open your eyes as wide as you can, the shadows, monsters, the darkness will disappear!” I’ve experienced a lot of darkness in my life. But I found out for myself as a 7- or 8-year old that I could take my brother into our backyard garden to the outhouse during the night. So I said to him, “Look you’re scared of the darkness. I can lead you to the outhouse. But during the day, it’s you. You have to take me out with you. You have to teach me how to ride a bicycle. You have to take me to the river.” And that is how I gained my rights back—by using my brother. And so my brother became an ally for me from early childhood.

LELA GILBERT: This is Ali.

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yes, Ali.

On the evening of September 24, 2019, the Center for Human Rights in Iran reported “Ali Alinejad was arrested and taken away in a blindfold and handcuffs, according to his sister. Against a backdrop of an ongoing campaign aimed at silencing foreign-based activists, agents of Iran’s Intelligence Ministry arrested the brother of prominent U.S.-based activist Masih Alinejad, she announced on Twitter.”

On November 18, Masih wrote to me, “My brother has been held in solitary for 52 days now. The main line of questioning involves his relationship with me. His crime is simply being my brother. His health has suffered, naturally, and his 11-year-old daughter has been badly affected, not eating and missing school. Ali is kept in the notorious Evin prison, in a special wing overseen by Revolutionary Guards.

“Hadi Lotfi and Leila Lotfi, siblings of my ex-husband were arrested on the same day as my brother was, on Sept. 24. Hadi was released after 1 day detention and questioning and Leila after almost 3 weeks. She was grilled about her relationship with me, which is very tangential.

“Their aim was not to find incriminating evidence, which they didn’t as none exists, but to intimidate me into silence. I have a bigger family, the Iranian people, and for their sake, I’m not going to allow anyone to blackmail me into silence for the sake of my immediate family.”

MASIH ALINEJAD: So Ali became one of the most important allies for me, and that is why we were always together, reading books together. You know, on the map, we have only one Iran. But in reality, after the revolution, we have two Irans.
—one that you see in official media—clerics, Parliament, government, establishment, schools, a country where all the women wear black hijabs.

But for us, there is another Iran—one that is underground, hidden. Singing was forbidden for women, however women still sing today, but do it away from prying eyes. Dancing was forbidden, but we girls danced in private. Mixed party was banned—but we had mixed parties underground. And some books were banned, history, politics, even fiction—these books were available under the counter and we read them all. So we had an underground life, me and my brother—reading books, singing, learning about history and going to mixed parties. And, you know, everything that we were banned from doing, we were doing underground.

LELA GILBERT: So how old were you by that time?

MASIH ALINEJAD: By now I was a teenager. Then we decided—let’s do something more. Let’s create awareness about politics! So my brother and I started to read books on politics and history and then discuss it with other people and tell them that, hey, we have to spread the word about this. We summarized the books and spread our ideas in a newsletter we had created with our group. We secretly distributed the newsletter at night. That same night some of our group wrote slogans on walls in our town.

LELA GILBERT: What was the slogan?

MASIH ALINEJAD: It was very extreme. “Religion is poisonous to logic.”

LELA GILBERT: That’s pretty intense in Iran!

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yes! And so instead of accepting all the clerics’ propaganda, we read about religion ourselves and we wrote slogans, to challenge the religious dictatorship. We were very young, but we were critical and always we challenged our parents, teachers at school, the principal, all of them. We asked, “Why are we not free to challenge religious teachings?” “It’s against God!” we were told. “It’s against religion!” As a young girl, I was often told that if you don’t cover your hair, you’re going to be hanged by your hair in Hell. So we turned against religion. We didn’t want to be hanged by our hair...

LELA GILBERT: So everything came back to religion and not the economy?
MASIH ALINEJAD: Yeah, because everything is about religion. And we became very critical of that religious dictatorship, the religious government. And in our book club, we started to read forbidden books, which we kept underground. And then, after publishing two issues of our newsletter, our group—all of us were arrested—me, my brother, my boyfriend Reza and his sister Leila and others.

LELA GILBERT: How old were you when they arrested you?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Nineteen.

LELA GILBERT: Was that a wake-up call for you as to what kind of forces you were really dealing with?

MASIH ALINEJAD: That was the first time that I experienced a different level of darkness—I had come against the power of the state. My brother, my fiancé and all our group were rounded up and interrogated. I was so young and naive.

LELA GILBERT: Wasn’t Reza’s sister Leila in jail too?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yes. Leila received a suspended sentence because she was only 17 years old at the time. When it came to me, I was also given a three-year suspended sentence because I was ... pregnant. When I found out, I didn’t know which was worse, being in jail or being pregnant. I hadn’t formally been married and so it was a scandal.

LELA GILBERT: So until then you didn’t know you were pregnant?

MASIH ALINEJAD: No. Because I was young and I had just gotten engaged. But, you know, once I found out that I was pregnant, the moment I was released from prison I went with Leila to get an abortion. I knew it’d be a scandal and I’d get into more trouble with my parents. It’s funny, because my son, Pouyan, was the reason I was freed. My parents were very scared and...

LELA GILBERT: Were they ashamed of you?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yes.... They were.
After being released from her incarceration, Masih was no longer able to continue her education. She and Reza got married, and their son Pouyan was born. Reza was teaching part time, and for a while, Masih managed to earn some money taking photographs of local weddings. Her work became popular enough to finance a video camera and her success increased. Then she, Reza and Pouyan moved to Tehran and life became more complicated than ever. Divorce ensued; and in accordance with Sharia law, Pouyan was awarded the custody of Reza. This was a heartbreaking experience in which Masih found herself very much alone.

“I had always wanted to be a writer,” she wrote in her book, “but I ever thought I was any good at it…and my teenage writing had gotten me into jail….”

In Tehran, she decided she wanted to be a journalist. She wanted to ask her questions to the powerful men who should be able to answer them. She applied for an internship at a reformist publication, Hambastegi. The interview didn’t begin well, but the tide turned in her favor when she offered her prepared speech.

“There are more qualified candidates. There are those who have the right family connections, and some can speak a foreign language or two. But I am a true product of the Islamic Revolution. My family are the mostazfain—the down-trodden—the ones who made this revolution and are the bedrock of support for the Islamic Republic. My father and brothers fought in the war. We don’t have connections because we are too busy working to feed our families This revolution was about giving opportunity to people like me, the have-nots, not the insiders.”

She got the job.

LELA GILBERT: Tell me about your journalism career—how you managed to succeed and how you remained in it, literally to the bitter end, which is at least part of the reason you’re here in New York today.

MASIH ALINEJAD: Journalism was a journey for me and, yes, it was the reason I ended up getting kicked of my country.

I discovered that if I wanted to expose the truth or corruption or the underlying violence, I would have to cross the regime’s red lines and be the voice of ordinary people. So in the Iranian Parliament, you are not allowed to criticize the supreme leader of Iran, and that was a red line. In fact, there are lots of redlines. For example, when I interviewed former presidents [Hashemi] Rafsanjani, [Mohammad] Khatami, and [Ali] Larijani, who is now the Speaker of Parliament—all of them—I was not allowed to ask questions about hijab. It was a red line. We were also not allowed to ask about nuclear activities or press freedom or the role of Islamic government.
Very early on as a journalist, I decided that I didn’t want to follow the crowd. So rather than chase the tidbits of news that were officially handed out to us, I decided to find my own news. One way was to challenge members of the Parliament. Of course that way, I got plenty of scoops but several times I got myself into trouble, which I mention in my book. But the most important time was when I exposed corruption in the Iranian Parliament. Very simply, it was an issue of paychecks. The hardline members always claimed that their salaries were the same as an average teacher or a nurse. I suspected they were getting paid much more. So, I confronted some of the members of the Parliament.

I found one lawmaker from a faraway town and told him: “Look—if you show me your pay slip, I’ll just write about how much you received without mentioning your name. But if you don’t, then in my story I’ll have to mention that you declined to show your pay details which means you have something to hide. It’ll be bad for you back home.” After much grumbling he agreed as long as I kept his name out of the newspaper.

LELA GILBERT: You agreed to write about them, but to keep them anonymous.

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yes, anonymous. I reached out to many members and eventually got three pay slips in one month. And I published that, and it really exposed the hypocrisy and corruption. There were all sorts of secret payments and bonuses every month that the lawmakers hadn’t declared.

A day or two afterwards, a group of teachers who were striking for more pay, came to demonstrate outside the Parliament building and they all placards carrying my story. It became a scandal. So, officials decided to kick me out of the Parliamentary lobby. I was denied access to the Parliament as a journalist. I mean, if my exposé had happened here in America or in the UK, I’d have won investigative journalism awards. But instead my award was being kicked out from the Iranian Parliament.

Also, as a woman journalist you are often accused of flirting with your sources or attacked for the way you look. The atmosphere in the Parliament was toxic for women. One time, when I challenged an MP about his political views, I got personally attacked, and he almost punched me in my face.

LELA GILBERT: He almost physically attacked you?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yes. I had just asked a critical question about his position on a political issue. He didn’t like my question. So he said, “First cover your hair, and
then ask your question.” That expression, “First cover your hair...” is very familiar
for a lot of women in Iran.

I said, “wait a minute, there’s nothing out!” meaning all of my hair was under
the mandatory headscarf.

He said, “I’m going to punch you on your face if you don’t cover it!”

I touched all over my headscarf and discovered two errant pieces of hair had
slipped out.

“All this for two strands of hair?” I asked angrily. “You should be ashamed of
yourself for wanting to punch me!”

He was taken aback by my tone.

“Shut up, shut up!” He shouted and he was swinging his fists at me. He had to
be restrained by other lawmakers and journalists.

LELA GILBERT: That sums up women’s rights in Iran and what the hijab really
represents. How do you explain that kind of an outburst?

MASIH ALINEJAD: It actually shows you how the compulsory hijab is very im-
portant for these men. It’s a tool that they can easily use to oppress any woman.
They can easily deny your existence. And for me, it was very heartbreaking to be
humiliated by a cleric instead of answering my question or even criticizing me
because of my question. He was using hijab issue to oppress me, to silence me and
to attack me.

LELA GILBERT: You said at one point that you felt like a hostage.

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yeah, that’s right. You’re like a hostage. As a woman you
have so few rights. Anything you say doesn’t matter to them; what you wear mat-
ters to them. They’ve held women hostage for 40 years, writing their own ideolo-
gies on our bodies and saying to the rest of the world that this is the Islamic
Republic. When you go to Iran, the only way that you can see that it’s an Islamic
country is through the women, because we are wearing the most visible symbol of
Islam.

LELA GILBERT: And the guys are in T-shirts and jeans.

MASIH ALINEJAD: Exactly. This is the whole propaganda that they’ve been
using in the rest of the world, saying that this is an Islamic country and our women
choose the hijab, which is a big lie.
I strongly believe that the main fight in Iran is over lifestyle, over how we want to live. People talk a lot about the possible war between the U.S. and Iran, over the nuclear issues. But we Iranians already are facing a daily war, one that is between the people and a government that wants to impose its religious ideology by force on the population.

The religious dictatorship wants the youth to follow that lifestyle. But the youth want to choose for themselves. The government has guns and bullets, courts and prison. They control all the media. But the people, they have the social media. Their only weapon is social media—Twitter, Facebook, which are banned, and Instagram.

LELA GILBERT: Don’t they know how to get into social media even if it’s banned?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yes, the youth in Iran, they’re very smart. They know how to bypass the restrictions; they use VPNs to bypass filters. They don’t know how to get into the traditional media, so they use social media. And risk their lives doing it.

LELA GILBERT: Considering what you learned as a journalist, do you think Iran’s Reformist politicians came closer to offering those fundamental rights that the conservatives deny?

MASIH ALINEJAD: At the core, they are the same. Reformist and conservative, President [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad or President Khatami. When it comes to the Islamic Republic and supporting the regime—especially when it comes to women’s rights or human rights—they’re all the same. But unfortunately, the regime tactic is successful because they get people to participate in fake elections. Only approved candidates are allowed to run.

When I lived in Iran, I thought reform was the way forward. I thought the regime could be reformed. I thought Ahmadinejad was extreme. And he always said crazy things like how there was a connection, between him and the saints. He claimed he had a halo of light around him.

LELA GILBERT: The light? You mean what he said at the United Nations? That he was surrounded by light and everyone’s eyes were on him?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Exactly. But his views are similar to those of President [Hassan] Rouhani and [Foreign Minister] Javad Zarif. All share the same Shiite religious beliefs, from the martyrdom of Iman Hossein, the third Imam to the
disappearance of Mehdi, the 12th Imam. The reformists are just more careful in how they present themselves to Western media.

Or take [the late] Qassem Soleimani, head of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp’s Quds Force. He is very savvy in how he uses social media to project a particular image. But at the same time, when at an Iranian television interview, he projects a different image, more pious, telling stories with a religious message.

LELA GILBERT: For example...

MASIH ALINEJAD: He recounted a story of how during the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, a Hezbollah solider had a dream of Fatimah al-Zahra, the daughter of prophet Mohammad, who said “Everything is going to be all right.” And when he woke up, he heard that the troops had shot down an Israeli helicopter and Israeli tanks had come under attack. Soleimani told this story and he believed in the miracle that the soldier had witnessed. He has the right credentials and my fear is that, for next election, he is going to be one of the Presidential candidates.

So there really is no difference between Javad Zarif and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, apart from the fact that Ahmadinejad cannot speak English. Zarif is charming and he lies effectively in English. The Western media cannot believe that he’s a liar because he has charm.

LELA GILBERT: So you’re saying Zarif is charming, and Ahmadinejad has no charm?

MASIH ALINEJAD: Ahmadinejad has rough manners, he looks out of his depth but he has his fans in Iran. But Western media totally love Zarif, because he knows how he can charm them with a joke. However right now, thanks to social media, Iran’s young generation can criticize and expose Zarif’s lies.

LELA GILBERT: So they’re pushing back in Iran.

MASIH ALINEJAD: People are pushing back. I think people are getting successful as well.

LELA GILBERT: I want you to tell me about 2009 and the election that led to the Green Movement and also set free some of the ideas about freedom that are still out there today. But for you, it ended up exiling you so you can no longer live in your own country.
MASIH ALINEJAD: That was actually the time that I realized it’s good to be out of Iran. Because I had a name, but I couldn’t use it when I was in Iran. In 2009 they killed more than a hundred people.

Before the election, the whole regime was very open to reformists, to the youth, to allowing women to wear loose hijab in the street—more freedom. This happens every election—the rules are relaxed and then after the votes are cast, the rigid laws are reenacted.

The 2009 election was going to be historic, we felt. Two reformist candidates were going to challenge Ahmadinejad. We thought change was possible. We thought reform was possible.

LELA GILBERT: And you were covering all this.

MASIH ALINEJAD: I had gone to London to take a short course in English and when I returned, my passport was confiscated by the security agents. They wanted me to leave Iran but I told them I had no such plans. I was in Iran and I was covering the news. I was with the reformist camp and because of my critical articles over the years against Ahmadinejad, I was rather well known.

Then, one day, I discovered that my car had been vandalized with my press card jammed under the front tire. I made an official complaint, and I also asked my newspaper, Etemmad Meli to support me. Mehdi Karroubi, one of the presidential challengers, was also the owner of the newspaper. He told me: “Even I cannot protect myself now. Because this is a sensitive situation: nobody can predict what’s going to happen to us after the election.”

So Karroubi not only warned me but he had also warned the other presidential challenger during a TV debate. He had said to Mir-Hossein Mousavi, “Are you ready for the main fight after the election?” He said that because he knew that something was going to happen. And that’s why he warned me, “I cannot protect you.”

Karroubi urged me to leave Iran. I was also warned by the security services that it was better if I left the country or else face the consequences. The security services didn’t want me to help the reformists. So with just days left to the voting, I decided to leave Iran for a few weeks and then return after the election, which I was sure was going to be won by one of the reformists. My passport was returned to me and I was ushered out of the country. And I wasn’t the only one. Many journalists had been warned to leave Iran. It was an attempt to kick out the troublemakers. The press were watched all the time.
The highly contested 2009 Iranian presidential election was a watershed for Masih Alinejad. She told me, “I exposed the story of 57 people who got killed. I made individual documentaries by interviewing the parents of 57 protestors who lost their lives, who got shot in the head or got tortured to death in notorious Kahrizak detention center. And so I learned a lot. When you got to Karroubi and Mousavi—the two leaders of the Green Movement, they were still saying “We want the Islamic Republic. We just want reform.” But while I was interviewing the parents of those young women and men who were killed, they said, “This is f***** up. This regime is killing our people, our innocent children in the street. We don’t want this regime anymore.”

After making those documentaries, Masih became more convinced than ever that until Iran’s women were able to choose what to wear and whether to cover their hair, there would be no real freedom for anyone. The hijab, and the mandatory covering of women’s bodies, was a religious declaration of female inferiority to males. And until that barrier was torn off and discarded, any other kind of equality was impossible. This was the inspiration for Masih’s MyStealthyFreedom Facebook page and for the White Wednesdays movement.

BBC reported, “Using the hashtag #whitewednesdays, citizens have been posting pictures and videos of themselves wearing white headscarves or pieces of white clothing as symbols of protest. The idea is the brainchild of Masih Alinejad, founder of My Stealthy Freedom, an online movement opposing to the mandatory dress code. Before the 1979 Islamic revolution many Iranian women wore Western-style outfits, including miniskirts and short-sleeved tops, but this all changed when the late Ayatollah Khomeini came to power....”

Since 2009, social media has become Masih Alinejad’s massive sphere of influence. During the November 2019 uprising in Iran, videos made on smart phones have been broadcast—within minutes—across the world. The slogan “My camera is my weapon” has been adopted by youthful demonstrators. And the power of the mullahs continues to be dramatically challenged by young women armed only with iPhones. Their empowerment springs from their hope for a better future, and from their solidarity in sharing that hope with thousands of other women all around the world.

MASIH ALINEJAD: In 2009 social media hadn’t yet taken off. I was forced to live in London. And I watched how the election was rigged and Ahmadinejad was declared the winner. They shut down the newspaper that I worked for. The regime did everything to oppress people, to silence the whole Green Movement. They killed people. They denied the killings, but I was receiving a lot of information...”
from people inside Iran. The parents of those people who got killed—do you know about Neda Agha Soltan?

LELA GILBERT: Yes, sadly I know about her very well. Video of her shooting and death was replayed innumerable times.

MASIH ALINEJAD: She became the symbol. And I broke her family’s story. And her mother and her father still, after 10 years, they sent me a video the 10th anniversary. Her mother said, “This is the first time that I watched the film of my daughter being killed.”

I was listening to these families and they were telling me how their children got tortured to death in prison. I thought to myself, how exactly do they want to reform this system? So I moved on, and I became the voice of those people actually asking for regime change. These people don’t want to participate in another election.

That changed my life forever, interviewing the families of those people who got killed.

LELA GILBERT: What happened to those interviews? Were they made public?

MASIH ALINEJAD: I made a two-hour television documentary, from inside Iran. A mother, Shahnaz Akmali, had lost her son Mostafa during the protests. She agreed to help me, not just by filming inside Iran, because I can’t be there, but also Shahnaz contacted other mothers who had lost loved ones. She went town to town, door to door, introducing herself. “I’m Shahnaz, mother of Mostafa.”

This is how it is in the documentary. After she knocks and introduces herself, she meets other mothers and yes, they’d hug each other. And we learn about how death came for a daughter, a son, or a husband. Shahnaz found many families and filmed them and sent the videos to me. It was a story about the forgotten names, the families who had never received the attention they deserved.

Later, after the documentary was shown, she was arrested and received a one-year prison sentence. She now has to serve her sentence. But she’s a proud and determined mother of Mostafa. She sent me videos of a lot of other mothers, and now she’s going to prison. And she said, “I’m proud because I made that documentary. I became the voice of those voiceless people.”

I said, “I feel guilty. I want to go back to Iran.”

She said, “If you come back to Iran, you’ll betray me because you are there to be my voice.”
LELA GILBERT: So how were you able to help her from London?

MASIH ALINEJAD: If you make every individual person to act like an organization, to be a movement, then the dictators cannot go and arrest every individual person. That is what I learned from my journey, from journalism, from working at a reformist newspaper, from official media. Then from campaigning through social media and giving voice to voiceless people.

So for me right now, this is the goal—to make every individual person to be their own storyteller, to be their own newspaper, to be their own media. Shahnaz is one media. Saba Kord Afshari, a 20-year-old girl who joined White Wednesdays movement, now she’s received 24-year prison sentence. She is her own media now. Nobody can keep her silent. Everybody hears her. And her mother Raheleh told me, “Now that my daughter’s in prison I’m going to be her voice.” And I said, “They can arrest you.” She said, “Yes, then another mother and daughter are going to be my voice.”

That’s the goal of journalism. To break the censorship, to win the battle, you have to make every single person, every individual person, to be their own media.

LELA GILBERT: So you’re empowering ordinary women to speak out and to overcome their fears.

MASIH ALINEJAD: Yes. They feel very empowered. A girl named Yasaman is 23 years old. She joined our White Wednesdays movement. And she got arrested. Her mother came out with a white headscarf and said, “I’m the voice of my daughter. Come and arrest me.” They arrested her. Both of them, mother and daughter, are in prison right now, sentenced to 16 years in prison.

From prison, they both sent out a letter saying that, “Now we are the voice of unknown prisoners here. We’re sending this letter to defend their rights. These are the people that the government of Iran wants to silence. It’s not possible.”

For a dictatorship, it’s easy to shut down a newspaper. But by using social media, you empower millions of people to be their own voices and the government loses the battle. Right now, they’ve already lost the battle. That is why they took my family members hostage—because they lost the battle. They censored the official journalists and media inside Iran, but the news of the girl waving her headscarf is everywhere on CNN.

Women who join the #WhiteWednesdays movement can have the same audience share as President Rouhani on CNN by using their mobile phones.

I’ve created a hashtag called, #mycameraismyweapon, which is our version of
the #MeToo movement. With a mobile phone, women can film harassment by the morality police and send the videos to me for publication. Instead of being victims, they can become warriors.

The power of ordinary people is that they can reach thousands of others. They can change the tune of the media. They can challenge the propaganda. And I believe that they can bring freedom to Iran.
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