



WORKSHOP

Syria: Religion in Revolution, War, and Displacement

French Institute for Anatolian Studies
Istanbul - Türkiye
5th -7th March 2025

Call for papers

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

1. *Doctrines and practices*

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



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

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

2. *The reconfigurations of religious authority*

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



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

3. Questioning faith, challenging religious norms?

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

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

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