



Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution (Cambridge Middle East Studies)

By Thomas Pierret

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While Syria has been dominated since the 1960s by a determinedly secular regime, the uprising that began there in 2011 has raised many questions about the role of Islam in the country's politics. This book, which is based on the author's extensive fieldwork in Syria's mosques and schools and on interviews with local Muslim scholars, is the first comprehensive study of the country's little-known religious scene and its most influential actors, the ulama. It demonstrates that with the eradication of the Muslim Brothers after the failed insurrection of 1982, Sunni men of religion became the only voice of the Islamic trend in the country. Through educational programs, the establishment of charitable foundations, and their deft handling of tribal and merchant networks, they took advantage of popular disaffection with secular ideologies to increase their influence over society. In recent years, with the Islamic resurgence, the Alawi-dominated Ba'thist regime was compelled to bring the clergy into the political fold. This ambiguous relationship was exposed in 2011 by the division of the Sunni clergy between regime supporters, bystanders, and opponents. This book affords an entirely new perspective on Syrian society as it stands at the crossroads of political and social fragmentation.

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Review

"Empirically rich and with penetrating analysis, Pierret's book provides an alternative history of modern Syrian politics, quite different from those focusing on the Ba'th regime. It challenges simplistic views about Syrian Islam and its relation to the state, showing the great complexity both of the Islamic sphere in the country and of the relations by which both the Ba'th regime and the variegated ulama and Islamists have sought to use or oppose the other."

Raymond Hinnebusch, Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St Andrews

"Thomas Pierret's pathbreaking study takes us into the networks and mindset of Syria's sunni religious leaders, a unique analysis of the fabric of the Syrian upheaval, that holds many keys for the reading of the future."

Gilles Kepel, Sciences Po Paris

"This recent study of Thomas Pierret is a welcome addition to the existing literature on the subject, and is a comprehensive study of Syria's little known religious scene ... Pierret's book is a thought provoking, complex and engaging work. It is well written and includes useful explanations that help the reader navigate through a complex and very condensed history. The author's arguments are also enriched by an impressive list of references."

Abderrahman Zouhir, Middle East Media and Book Reviews

"This remarkably informative and timely book analyzes the struggle of the high hereditary ulama (clergy) in Syria ... Recommended. Graduate and research collections."

R. W. Olson, Choice

"... the author offers ... a solid analysis of the networks, the ideas, and the activities of the Sunni clerics in modern Syria. I highly recommend the book to students and scholars of political science and sociology of religion, especially those interested in modern Islam."

Abdessamad Belhaj, Journal of Church and State

About the Author

Thomas Pierret is a Lecturer in Contemporary Islam at the University of Edinburgh. He has edited two volumes on contemporary Islam and published numerous book sections and entries for the Encyclopedia of Islam.

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