

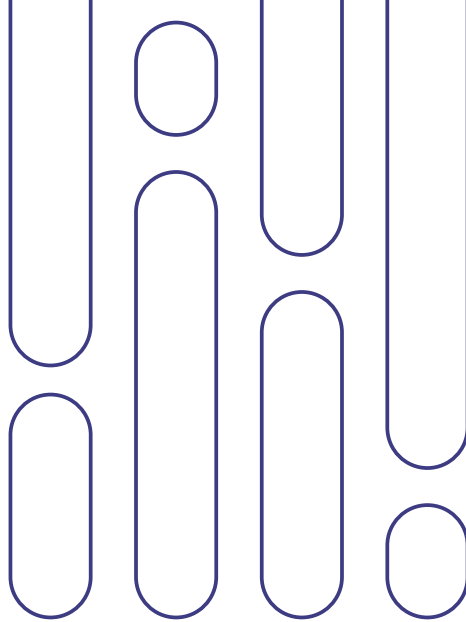
REPORT

Abolishing the Position of the Grand Mufti in Syria: Significance and Implications

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Religion is routinely employed in politics to confer legitimacy. Politicians, opposition groups, whether militant or peaceful, are well aware of this fact and of the centrality of *iftaa* (issuing religious edicts) in the collective mind of the people. Therefore, this reality should be considered when analyzing the details of the decree issued by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to abolish the position of the grand mufti in the country. The decree stipulated that “Article 35 of the law regulating the work of the Ministry of Religious Endowments — by virtue of which the general mufti of the country is designated — shall be abolished.” At the same time, the decree enhanced the powers of the Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Endowments.

Under the decree, the newly established council is entrusted with the tasks previously undertaken by the mufti. These include determining the beginning and the end of each lunar month and announcing the beginning of Ramadan and other important rituals. This is in addition to issuing *fatwas* (religious edicts) and establishing the necessary protocols for this to be done properly. According to the decree, Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun was dismissed from his position as mufti of Syria — a position which he had held since 2004. The position of the mufti has thus been abolished throughout Syria’s provinces.

Iranian Efforts to Distort Syria’s Identity

Since 1979, Iran has been attempting to change Syria’s identity and social fabric, with the aim of imposing a wholly Shiite identity aligned with Wilayat al-Faqih. This pursuit intensified after the US invasion of Iraq which increased

Syria's geographic and demographic significance for the Iranians. Iran wanted the road from Tehran to Beirut to be leveled, with no sectarian or geographic hindrances. This is an old Iranian ambition which Mohamed Hassanein Heikal referred to in his book *The Return of the Ayatollah*.

The Iranians have realized that exercising influence and wielding control is easier in Iraq than in Syria though the Syrian Baathist regime has been in alliance with Tehran since 1979. Unlike Iraq, the majority of the population in Syria is Sunni. Iran faced no difficulty in presenting itself as an advocate and defender of the Shiite community in Iraq — generating the fear that Shiites are vulnerable to the plots and plans of regional and global powers, prompting them to rally behind Iran.

By contrast, the Sunnis in Syria are ruled by an Alawite minority who are more radical than the Shiites in Iran. The interests of the Iranians and the Syrian regime converged on the propagation of Shiism and the weeding out of Syria's traditional identity — replacing it with a new social construct at the sectarian, economic and political levels. Michel Seurat, in his book *Syria: The Barbarian State* casts light on three main issues. The first is Syria's attempt to end its regional isolation through reviving the weak links between the Alawites and the Shiite sect under the existing Baathist rule.

The second is that the Syrian regime sees eye to eye with Iran on the latter's desire to establish a Shiite axis in the region — stretching from Lebanon to Iran — hence enabling the Syrian regime to consolidate its power at home at the expense of its opposition. According to the Syrian regime, this Syria-Iran alliance would keep the Gulf states under

pressure due to the threat of Shiite expansionism.

The third is that Sunni Islam is being employed to serve t Iran's project by Syrian religious institutions. The monthly magazine *Nahj al-Islam* (Approach of Islam), issued by the Syrian the Ministry of Religious Endowments, regularly reiterates that the terms Shiite and Alawite are synonymous — in a bid to merge the two sects to form an united sectarian force against Sunnis. However, the differences between the Alawites and the Twelver Shiites are deep and historic. Seurat concludes that Syria-Iran relations are strategic with common objectives and interests.

In her book *Eclipse of the Sunnis: Power, Exile, and Upheaval in the Middle East*, Deborah Amos sheds light on how Syria's identity has been impacted by the sweeping demographic changes in the country including the mass displacement of indigenous Syrians and the settlement of new communities. Of course, the process of demographic overhaul had started prior to the Syrian revolution. However, after the revolution, the pace of displacement intensified considerably, with demographic change becoming institutionalized and systematic in nature.

In 1980, the Alawites held a meeting in Al Qardahah — the hometown of Hafez al-Assad. They decided to send 200 students to Qom to study in religious seminaries. Since then, dozens of students have been sent to Qom and several religious seminaries opened in Syria. The Iranian government sent jurists and clerics to Syria. In addition, the headquarters of pro-Wilayat al-Faqih Iraqi and Afghan militias were opened — with militiamen freely roaming Damascus, Hama, and Aleppo, as mentioned by Amos in her book.

These realities suggest that this Iranian incursion into

Syria resulted from a Syria-Iran consensus and common long-term interests and goals. Abdul Rahman al-Hajj, in his book *The Shiite Baath in Syria*, highlights significant developments related to Iran's influence in Syria. For example, the Syrian regime allowed the missionary activities of the Lebanese Hezbollah in the city of Aleppo, not in Latakia or Damascus, and allowed the restoration of the shrines of Prophet Muhammad's family, the establishment of seminaries, and the dispatch of students to Qom, and so on.

The Implications of Abolishing the Mufti Position

Observers of Syrian affairs have laid out several scenarios following the abolition of the mufti position — the most important of which are summed up as follows:

- **A Possible Dispute Between Russia and Iran**

Some observers have indicated that the dismissal of Syria's Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun was to appease the Russians who were concerned about the pro-Iranian approach of Hassoun — as his actions were completely in line with the Iranian position — such as facilitating Iranian schemes to change the demographic map of Syria. Hassoun had also worked in partnership with the Iranian cultural attaché in Aleppo, Ayatollah Abdul-Saheb al-Mousavi in organizing many religious and economic events.

But this scenario seems unlikely as the mufti position does not impact Russian-Iranian competition. The Iranians maintain a presence in Syria through multiple channels and Hassoun has not been an effective advocate for Iran on the ground. Rather, the abolition of the mufti position and the sacking of Hassoun may be part of Iran's strategy to serve its long-term objectives, as explained below.

- Conflict Between Hassoun and the Minister of Endowments

Some analysts suggest that the sacking of Hassoun resulted from rivalry between Hassoun and the Minister of Endowments Abdel-Sattar al-Sayed, who is reported to be close to the Russians, unlike Hassoun who is aligned with the Iranians.

This scenario is supported by the [statement](#) made by the Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council — affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Endowments — on November 11, 2021, which criticized Hassoun’s interpretation of the Quranic Surah al-Teen (The Fig), stopping short of mentioning him by name. The statement noted, “The Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council, out of the responsibility it bears towards the interpretation of the Holy Quran, in the soundest way and avoiding the manipulation of the meanings of the Holy Book, reiterates the necessity of adhering to the well-established rules and avoiding the personal aberrant interpretations that language does not recognize, and logic does not approve. They breach the Islamic Ummah’s consensus and undermine the Islamic Ummah’s unity, constituting a reason for sowing discord among Muslims and contribute to stoking divisions within its ranks and fostering disunity within it.”

The Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council has replaced Dar al-Iftaa — the body responsible for issuing fatwas — and its powers have been enhanced. This council includes scholars from all the Islamic schools of jurisprudence, according to the [official](#) website of the Ministry of Religious Endowments.

However, the recent decision was unlikely to have been

based on a personal dispute. The similarities between Hassoun and Sayed are far greater than their differences — especially as both of them have diligently worked to serve the Assad regime, and both of them are Sunnis. Moreover, disputes can arise between clerics, especially if they hold senior positions and seek closer ties with the head of state. If Hassoun's personal problem with Sayed was the main reason, the regime would have curbed Hassoun or sacked him without totally abolishing his position. The Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council includes clerics from the Shiite sect and other Islamic sects as well. Therefore, the argument suggesting that the minister of endowments, unlike Hassoun, is close to the Russians, hence the reason behind the sacking, appears weak.

- Iran's Clout and the Distortion of Syria's Identity

Some believe that Assad's decision to abolish the position of the grand mufti aims to increase Iran's clout in the country and its efforts to alter Syria's demography and identity. After this decree, fatwas will reflect all sects, not just Sunnis, something which is not apparent in any Islamic country — even in Iran itself, which constitutionally and practically asserts its Shiite identity. The Syrian regime has helped the Iranians displace Sunnis, dispossessing them of their homes and transferring ownership to foreign mercenaries, [granting some of them Syrian citizenship](#). In the same vein, the Syrian regime now seeks to rid the Syrian fatwa of its distinctly Sunni nature, transforming Sunni-Syrian identity into a multiethnic and multi-sectarian one, in a bid to elevate the standing of the Alawite community, making it central to the core essence of Syrian culture and identity.

This scenario is the most likely. These new moves are more favorable to Iranian interests. The abolition of the biggest Sunni *marjaya* (religious authority) in Syria for issuing fatwas, ending its monopolization of iftaa, and appointing an excessive number of Shiite clerics in the Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council will lead to an overrepresentation of Syria's Shiite minority at the expense of other sects, primarily Sunnis. This presents an unprecedented opportunity for Shiites to assert their influence through an official religious institution. In addition, Iran's sectarian plots and plans in Syria will continue unabated as although Hassoun has been removed, Sayed also supports Tehran's sectarian project in Syria.

- Seizing Control of the Sunni Endowment

This scenario suggests that the purpose of the decree to abolish the grand mufti position in Syria includes paving the way for the Iranians and their proponents to control the Sunni endowments run by the ministry, hence allowing them to have a say over Sunni endowments through their membership in the Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council. It is worth noting that — although there are no official statistics — estimates suggest that nearly half of Damascus falls within the remit of the ministry, and the same applies to the rest of Syria's cities. The recent decree will thus enable the Ministry of Religious Endowments' officials to take their corruption — which was in the past confined to leasing endowment properties, in which they only set its rental investment — one step further. The aforementioned control of endowments allowed the Ministry of Religious Endowments to sell endowment properties under a legal pretext that contradicts the core purpose of the [en-](#)

[document properties](#). This scenario is part of the policy of changing the demographic makeup of the country undertaken by Syria's authority and the Iranians.

The Iranian Fatwa and the Enhancement of Legitimacy

To clearly understand Assad's move, we should first understand the position of fatwas in Iran. There is no official mufti in Iran, thus all *mujtahids* jurists (a person recognized as a religious authority) have the right to issue fatwas regarding public affairs and the Sharia. A fatwa is exclusively binding on those following a particular jurist.

The guardian jurist (the supreme leader) is no exception when it comes to issuing fatwas on acts of worship and day-to-day worldly issues. Yet, he has an exclusive privilege: he can elevate the status of his fatwa to the level of government legislation, as he is the guardian jurist. The fatwas of the guardian jurist take precedence over other fatwas.

The other important issue is that according to Khomeini, Shiites (following mujtahid clerics) are obligated to cast aside the fatwas of their clerics and follow the fatwa of the guardian jurist.

When Syria renounces its Sunni identity by allowing other jurists to participate in the iftaa process, the country will face further encroachment by the guardian jurist and Iranian clerics. This is because the Syrian state will have abandoned its jurisprudential and religious heritage in favor of a multiethnic and multi-sectarian jurisprudential council. This will enable individuals to emulate clerics beyond Syrian borders on matters related to acts of worship, and day-to-day issues as well as political and economic

matters.

The decree will render a single-unified Syrian fatwa void and weaken the Syrian state's unity in favor of sub-identities linked to Iran or the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, only four days after Assad issued his decree, the Turkey-based Syrian Islamic Council which opposes the Syrian regime and is reportedly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood announced the appointment of Sheikh Osama Abdul Karim al-Rifai as [mufti of Syria](#). It is worth noting that the Syrian Islamic Council is chaired by Rifai.

All parties seek to extract benefits from the abolition of the grand mufti position. The biggest beneficiary from the recent decree issued by Bashar al-Assad is the Iranian government in terms of maximizing its dominance over Syrian society and implementing its policy of demographic change. The decree also benefits the Syrian regime itself in enhancing its legitimacy and strengthening the relationship between the Alawites and the Twelver Shiites. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood will benefit through uniting its ranks and enhancing its counter-sectarian mobilization. The biggest loser, meanwhile, is the Syrian nation-state as this decision undermines its identity and cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Assad's decree to abolish the position of the grand mufti and enhance the role of the Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council serves the Iran-Syria policy to change Syria's demographic map and erase the Sunni identity, allowing the shared sectarian interests of the Iranian government and the Syrian regime to be achieved. The Iranians are focused on propagating Shiism with the aim of creating enclaves

loyal to the guardian jurist and aligning them with the Iranian government on political and jurisprudential matters. For the Iranians, the aforementioned is part of a wider struggle related to seeking benefits for the financial and human price they have paid in the Syrian war since 2011. Iranians who carry a sectarian interpretation of historical events, are also desperate to control the capital of the Abbasid caliphate, Baghdad, and the capital of the Umayyad dynasty, Damascus. Many Iranian officials have repeatedly stated that Iraq and Syria are part of the “Greater Iran” that they seek to establish. Based on Iran’s strategy, the Syrian regime seeks to create a Shiite-Alawite environment to avoid a repeat of the events in the 1980s and the Arab Spring in the 2010s. The Syrian regime does not view Iran as a threat, nor does it perceive deference to the Iranians as an encroachment upon its sovereignty and national security. This is because of the accumulated venom the regime harbors towards the Gulf states and many Arab countries. The solution may lie in opening a serious dialogue with the Syrian regime to reach clear understandings with it to curb Iranian expansionism, preventing the situation in Syria from deteriorating further and preserving Syrian identity in accordance with its rich cultural and religious heritage.

