

center for the
MIDDLE EAST
Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy



THE NEW GUARDIANS OF RELIGION: ISLAM AND AUTHORITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A.Kadir Yildirim, Ph.D.
Fellow for the Middle East,
Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

March 2019

© 2019 Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Wherever feasible, papers are reviewed by outside experts before they are released. However, the research and views expressed in this paper are those of the individual researcher(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Baker Institute.

A.Kadir Yildirim, Ph.D.

“The New Guardians of Religion: Islam and Authority in the Middle East”

This report is part of a two-year project on religious authority in the Middle East. The study is generously supported by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.

Introduction

On September 24, 2014, more than 120 Muslim scholars from around the world released an open letter to the Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹ Among the original signatories were prominent Islamic scholars, including Sheikh Shawqi Allam, Abdul-Rahman Abbad, Mohammad Ahmad Al-Akwa', Majdi Ashour, Osman Bakr, Abdallah bin Bayyah, Al-Habib Muhammad Luthfi bin Ali bin Yahya, Mustafa Ceric, Abdullah Fadaaq, Sheikh Ali Al-Halabi, Din Syamsuddin, and Muhammad Al-Yacoubi. While the letter itself is a strong statement condemning the Islamic State's instrumentalization of religion for vile political purposes and a notable attempt to undermine its religious legitimacy, it is also remarkable for a different reason: the letter received little international media attention and resonated even less as a rallying point for the global Muslim population, raising questions about the nature of religious authority in Islam and religion's political utility.

Religion and religious authority are valuable political resources—ones that various religio-political actors such as Islamist and fundamentalist (Salafist) groups and governments use throughout the region, as Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid recently explained.² Despite its centrality to a well-grounded conception of how religion and politics interact and to understanding the motivations behind religious actors' actions, we lack a thorough analysis of this key concept in the Middle East. This is worrisome because of the way Islamic authority is structured in the Middle East and beyond: it is non-hierarchical and decentralized. The religion-politics relationship and religious authority are, therefore, largely defined by the dynamics of a free market of religion.

Current conceptions of Islamic religious authority rarely go beyond historical descriptions of its transformation over time and the implications of such changes. At a time when religious actors play an increasingly prominent role in the Middle East and the religion-politics nexus appears to have gained greater traction, a thorough analysis of the dynamics of Islamic religious authority in the region is imperative.

Accordingly, this study—supported by the Henry R. Luce Foundation's Initiative on Religion in International Affairs—examines the nature of religious authority in the contemporary Middle East. Who speaks for Islam in the Middle East, and who wields religious authority?

Our study on religious authority in the Middle East was animated by three key observations about the region's religious space and three related questions. First, Islamist actors across the region have enjoyed widespread electoral popularity. Does this political popularity translate into religious favorability and authority for Islamists? Second, state-affiliated religious leaders are generally assumed to lack the charisma, intrigue, and authority other religious leaders are deemed to possess. State affiliation is presumed to undermine their authority. How much influence and authority do state religious officials actually have? Lastly, there are some strong undercurrents of (violent) extremism in the region, as evidenced by the presence of Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliates. Is there a strong support base for extremists among the broader population?

In this study, our primary goal has been to map religious authority in the region. In order to identify channels of influence between religious leaders who claim to hold Islamic authority—such as Islamists, Salafists, state religious officials, religious scholars, and Sufis—and individual Muslims, we asked a series of questions:

- Which religious actors command the broadest religious authority? Which religious actors wield the least religious influence?
- Do various societal groups follow systematic patterns of behavior before subscribing to the religious authority of religious actors?
- How does adherence to religious authority vary across different demographic indicators such as age, gender, religiosity, income, and level of education?
- Does the authority of religious actors vary across different issue areas such as religion in public life, international politics, relations with the Western world, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the economy, state-society relations, religious practices, and culture?
- Do individual Muslims demonstrate greater or less trust in the religious authority of different kinds of religious leaders across different issue areas?

As part of this study, we conducted an original 12-country public opinion survey that asked 16,497 respondents their views on 82 religious leaders. The survey included direct questions about the respondents' approval of and trust in these religious leaders. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, we also aimed to gauge the respondents' views of these religious leaders indirectly. To this end, we used endorsement experiments. This experimental design allows us to make a series of religious statements the focus of the respondents' evaluation instead of the religious leaders themselves. The combination of alternative methods to map religious authority in the region enables us to reach a more comprehensive set of conclusions than we would be able to by using a single method. The results depict a complex religious space in the Middle East that reflects its citizens' nuanced approach toward religion and the religion-politics relationship.

Why Focus on Religious Authority?

This study represents the most systematic investigation to date of religious authority across the Middle East by employing both quantitative and qualitative sources of data. As such, it aims to provide a wealth of information to policymakers and scholars who research the dynamics of change within Islamic religious authority and identify the channels through which religious groups and actors can influence domestic and foreign policy within the Middle East.

The question of religious authority is not a fleeting concern. It strikes at the heart of the relationship between religion and politics in the Muslim world. Whoever can legitimately claim religious authority has an opportunity to shape the extent of the politicization and “objectification” of religion (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). This is why it is not only Islamists and fundamentalists who call for conservative measures to increase religious control over public policy. Other religious actors, such as state religious agencies and

traditional religious scholars who are typically more careful in the politicization of religion, have, in recent years, also increased their efforts to institutionalize Islam in state and society in order to outdo Islamists (Hatina 2009; Zeghal 1999; Shaham 2009). Such shifts indicate that the locus of political competition tends to have moved toward religion's influence in legislation and policymaking. Conventional thinking on the relationship between religion and politics in the region suggests that failure to keep up with Islamists on this front might undermine the credibility and legitimacy of other religious actors.

Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid rightly draw attention to the ways Middle Eastern states have integrated religion into their foreign policymaking, particularly in recent years.³ However, the religion-foreign policy nexus is not isolated from domestic affairs. Other (religious) actors take cues from the state and agree, challenge, or undermine the state's religious discourse with competing religious ideas and visions. This complex web of interactions between state and non-state religious actors results in a fierce competition for religious visions and authority.

This complexity, as a result, carries notable implications for U.S. foreign policymaking in the Middle East. Despite religion's pervasive presence in the political arena, the field of religious actors and the religious authority they wield is far from clear. Given the sheer number of religious actors, effective engagement with religious actors for maximum impact, insofar as U.S. policy in the region is concerned, is of the utmost importance.

The failure to clearly identify actors with high levels of societal influence might incorrectly skew the selection of partners in the Middle East and the policies that are implemented. If religious actors with little influence or moral authority become the pillars of U.S. policy merely because they are "moderates" who can help combat extremism, while religious actors with actual influence and a real chance of making a difference within the population are deemed ill-suited for partnership, the results for U.S. foreign policy in the region could be damaging. This failure to engage relevant religious actors could affect U.S. foreign policy in two distinct ways.

First, U.S. policy may not reach the audience necessary to enhance its effectiveness and combat extremism. The United States might be preaching to the choir due to the limited influence of its current partners; the country's existing religious partners can only reach out to a segment of the population that is, principally, already in agreement with the policies promoted by the U.S. For example, if religious authority lies primarily within Salafist groups in a given country, while U.S. foreign policy instead engages with that country's traditional ulama or state religious agencies, attempts to alleviate extremism within this country will be misguided.

Second, the typically favorable political and religious outlook of current partners could undermine the substance and appeal of U.S. policies in the region. The policy content and approach may not resonate with the large majority of the people that U.S. foreign policy aims to reach. Moreover, the failure to connect with a larger audience might be leading to perceptions of U.S. policies as out-of-touch and condescending.

In this study, we collected and analyzed data to identify key religious actors who wield Islamic authority, the issue areas in which they enjoy support, and the characteristics of the individuals who view their religious authority as legitimate.

While we do provide precise information about religious actors, we do not necessarily prescribe engagement with a certain set of religious actors. Instead, the data and the methodological tools in this study provide an opportunity to critically evaluate the effectiveness of existing U.S. policies and to revise such policies, if such a need exists. In the absence of relevant data, we cannot evaluate policy effectiveness as it relates to the religious actors in the Middle East. However, we think that our findings will lead to a better understanding of religious dynamics in the region and thereby foster well-informed policy discussions.

Religion and Foreign Policy

Existing policy debates on the role of religion and religious actors in the Middle East typically revolve around two extremes. The first involves the proper way to label violent religious actors and how to deal with them. Some policymakers argue that the violence committed by some Muslims is rooted firmly in Islam and therefore these actions and their perpetrators should be called “Islamic.” The policy response, in turn, should be structured to counter the entire Muslim world and the Muslim faith. Foreign policy and security engagement with Muslims can only occur if Muslims set aside their Muslim-ness, the argument goes. This approach also pays little regard to how a totalizing approach to Muslims and Islam might create further security problems for the United States as well as alienate the country’s Muslim population. Indeed, reports show that such approaches have become useful recruiting tools for extremist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram. Similarly, recent research shows that alienating entire religious communities undermines domestic security (Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq, and van Egmond 2015).

The second perspective rejects totalizing approaches in favor of efforts to engage religious actors throughout the Middle East. Indeed, religion has been a part of U.S. foreign policymaking since the administration of Ronald Reagan. Initiatives such as the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program have been gaining ground domestically as well as abroad with the goal of tackling “bad” religion and nurturing “moderates” in the Muslim world, as Elizabeth Shakman Hurd recently explained.⁴ For example, former Secretary of State John Kerry articulated a new vision that placed religion at the core of American foreign policymaking: “The more we understand religion and the better able we are as a result to be able to engage religious actors, the more effective our diplomacy will be in advancing the interests and values of our people.”⁵ Admittedly, this new initiative experienced a major setback with the Trump administration’s approach to U.S. foreign policy because “diplomatic instruments” were “all but ignored” to engage religion in foreign policy, as Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall show.⁶

While both debates inform our understanding of the context underlying Middle Eastern politics and notably contribute to policy options in regard to religious actors, they fall short in crucial ways. Most importantly, the lack of a thorough understanding of the religious field (i.e., who holds authority, who are the relevant actors, and what is the most effective means of reaching out to the demographic most vulnerable to extremism) constitutes a major obstacle to crafting sound policy.

Islamic Authority and Its Evolution

Scholarly literature offers some crucial insights into the evolution and current structure of Islamic authority in the Middle East. In particular, the literature brilliantly draws attention to the political nature of the historical evolution of religious authority (Dabashi 1989; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Hallaq 2003 and 2009; Kramer and Schmidtke 2006; Zaman 2009 and 2012; Nawas 2013; Kloos and Kunkler 2016).

However, despite extensive and informative discussions of religious authority in the Middle East and beyond, current debates suffer from two major shortcomings. First, conceptions of religious authority are too broad and lack precision. While we are often presented with the overarching dynamics of religious authority and how such authority changes over long stretches of time, typically we are left wanting contextualized accounts of various religious actors in countries across the region. Are there particular dynamics at play that shape how much Islamic authority different religious actors wield, among which sub-populations, and on which issue areas? Second, thorough analyses of various religious actors throughout the region generally fail to incorporate religion and religious authority in their assessments. In what ways does religion inform the actions of these religious actors? When religious actors act, do they take the religious ramifications of their actions into consideration?

These issues, indeed, pose serious challenges to understanding the relationship between religion and extremism in the Middle East and to developing appropriate policy responses. Recent literature suggests that the perception of religious authority, along with religious actors “leveraging Islam” in framing their political messages, underlies the extent of resonance with individual Muslims, in the cases of both IS in the Middle East (Pelletier, Lundmark, Gardner, Ligon, and Kilinc 2016) and Pakistani militant groups (Fair, Goldstein, and Hamza 2016). Quintan Wiktorowicz (2005) asserts that support for religious leaders depends on the use of “cognitive shortcuts,” such as their reputation, to evaluate their authority and credibility. In the case of banned Islamist terrorist group al-Muhajiroun, Wiktorowicz finds that, indeed, individual support for the militant group and its pro-violence discourse is associated with a lack of basic Islamic knowledge.

What is Religious Authority?

Religious authority is characterized by “the ability to have one’s rules and rulings followed, or obeyed, without recourse to coercive power” (Kramer and Schmidtke 2006, 1; Dabashi 1989). More broadly, “a religious authority structure [is] a social structure that attempts to enforce its order and reach its ends by controlling the access of individuals to some desired goods, where the legitimation of that control includes some supernatural component, however weak” (Chaves 1994, 755-756).

Religious authority is uniquely legitimated by a divine source that draws on societal roles, norms, and beliefs to reinforce the authority (Campbell 2007). Moreover, in religions based on revealed scripture, religious authority includes the privilege “to compose and define the canon of ‘authoritative’ texts and the legitimate methods of interpretation” (Kramer and Schmidtke 2006, 1-2).

Religious authority often is conceptualized in an institutional structure and mostly tends to center on official systems or hierarchical power structures (Campbell 2007). These can exist either at the micro level (i.e., state-wide, community-wide) or transnationally (i.e., the Vatican). By contrast, in those religions where there is a lower level of institutionalization and thus religious authority is more diffuse—such as Islam—religious authority is associated with imams, “muftis, preachers, and intellectuals” (Peter 2006). Further, in Sunni Islam, as well as in Judaism, there are not usually formal initiations into the “priesthood” or religious leadership, as is the case in Protestantism, Catholicism, and Shia Islam. Thus, religious authority rests largely on an individual’s choice to follow specific religious teachers he or she finds to be knowledgeable and worthy of respect. Respect is earned, in this regard, rather than conferred (Turner 2007).

In Islam, the contours of religious authority are primarily defined by the notion of a free market of religion, particularly so in Sunni Islam. Two differences set Islam apart from many other faith traditions: the centrality of the text and the absence of a centralized hierarchical religious structure. In the absence of an officially sanctioned set of religious actors to exclusively claim religious authority, God and the Prophet embody the “authoritative center” in Islam (Abou El Fadl 2001, 11). However, God does not speak to humans directly and the Prophet is no longer alive; God speaks via the Qur’an, and the Prophet through volumes of collections of prophetic narrations. Hence, it is through texts that the authority of God and the Prophet is represented. Muslims of all convictions have historically taken the text very seriously as the primary religious authority.

This is not a uniquely Islamic notion. It is common in less centralized traditions for texts to be considered religious authorities, particularly so among the more conservative or fundamentalist traditions (Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Many Protestants, for example, consider the Bible to be a key religious authority (Probst 1989). It is not uncommon for individuals to hold opinions that differ from that of their religious authorities. As such, religious authority does not necessarily translate into moral authority (Hamil-Luker and Smith 1998), although there is positive correlation between the two (Djupe and Grant 2001). For example, for many French Muslims, French Islamic authorities are often regarded as having less moral and religious authority than those in the Middle East, even if the French

authorities hail from Arab backgrounds. This is because it is assumed that authorities in France are “watered-down” or “secularized” Muslims (Bowen 2004).

Islam, however, does not have a centralized hierarchical institution to establish the orthodoxy for its adherents. The fundamental religious texts are in need of interpreters who wield authority. This necessity constitutes the primary reason why we frequently hear of “right” or “wrong” interpretations of the Qur’an, especially as it relates to extremist fringes.⁷ Islamists of various traditions continually refer to the Qur’an and the hadith (prophetic sayings) to justify their political positions and to wield religious authority in support of their political campaigns.

So the central question is, who can interpret the text with authority in Islam? At its core, this is not a religious question; it is a political one. In the absence of clear parameters for determining the rightful owners of such interpretation, politics assumes a key role. Conflicts over the right to interpret the holy text or to authorize the “correct” interpretation of it have partially shaped the early evolution of Islamic history. Indeed, political and religious authority split very early in the Sunni tradition shortly after the Prophet’s death (Crone and Hinds 1986; Dabashi 1989). The conflict between the fourth caliph ‘Ali’s and the Kharijites (Crone and Hinds 1986), or the Umayyad caliph al-Ma’mun’s *mihna* ordeal are examples of religious conflicts that were political in nature. The absence of a centralized hierarchical institution complicates matters in another way as well. Following a religious authority in Islam is “entirely voluntary”; individual Muslims cannot be compelled to accept the religious authority of a person, body, or institution—it is an “individual decision” (Kersten and Olsson 2013, 8).

Until the turn of the 20th century, ulama (Islamic scholars) largely possessed the religious authority in Sunni Islam; for Shiite Islam, the ulama continue their prominent role to this day. The ulama’s central role was by virtue of their scholarship; their “competent human agency to discover God’s law” and the fact that they largely stood for the “best interests” of their community as “Guardians of Religion” legitimized their claim (Hallaq 2003, 252, 258). Historically, however, the lack of a central religious body and the primacy of the text generated conflicts over who should hold religious authority. The inquisition (*mihna*) undertaken by three Abbasid caliphs between 833 and 849 became the turning point for the ulama to institutionalize their religious authority.

Mihna was an effort initiated by the Abbasid caliph Al-Ma’mun to force support among Sunni ulama for a theological doctrine he proposed in 827, namely that the Qur’an was created. The substance of this theological debate was epiphenomenal.⁸ Al-Ma’mun was bent on “curb[ing] the growing influence of the ‘ulama’ by attempting to make the caliph and the caliphal institution, rather than the ‘ulama,’ the religious authority in Islam” (Nawas 2013, 15). The most important legacy of *mihna*, in this regard, was the transformation of the ulama from “a loose grouping of devout followers of the Prophet” into a “societal group” that cohered around the education and promotion of law within the institutional confines of madrasas (religious schools). Put differently, *mihna* “confirmed the sole and exclusive authority of the ‘ulama’ in their capacity as ‘heirs to the prophets’ or the ‘people that bind and unbind’” (Kramer and Schmidtke 2006, 11).

Over the course of the next millennium (from the 10th century to 20th century), the institution of the ulama evolved from a highly autonomous enterprise into a decidedly dependent, ineffective, and increasingly irrelevant one in most of the Muslim world, with Iran and Indonesia being the major exceptions. Early periods of the ulama's dominance in religious authority was marked with little governmental interference. Following the fallout after the *mihna*, the relationship between the ulama and the political elite was defined by countervailing dynamics. The ulama perceived the political elite with great suspicion, equating political power with "vice and corruption" (Hallaq 2009, 42). Yet they viewed the ruling elite as the principal mechanism through which to uphold Islamic law and bring "rulers' ambitions" under control (Winter 2009). For the ruling elite, the ulama offered the most convenient path to securing political legitimacy; by committing themselves to upholding the application of Islamic law in their predominantly Muslim societies, they ensured the support of the ulama and their own political legitimacy.

The break in this structure came in the wake of early European colonization drives in the Middle East and extensive Western influence over Muslim societies. Two developments helped seal this watershed moment to create a void in Islamic religious authority. On one hand, the erstwhile changes in the legal institutional structure disrupted the intimate connection between law and religion, where the key loss was the ulama and their religious authority. While this process was largely a gradual one between the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century (Brown 1997), the effects were decisive. Historically, the ulama acquired their distinct and dominant religious authority from their (exclusive) ability to legitimately derive Islamic law from the foundational texts, i.e., the Qur'an and the hadith. Once the ulama no longer commanded the inside track to exclusive religious authority due to factors such as colonialism, modernization, and the rise of nation-states, the field became wide open for challengers to emerge and contest the ulama. This development induced "fragmentation" of religious authority (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). The new equilibrium in Islamic religious authority can be defined as one of "a growing crisis of authority" since the early 20th century (Robinson 2009, 339). On the other hand, in conjunction with the introduction of the printed press, new (i.e., secular and mass) forms of education created a new society with a different, and more skeptical, approach to religion and religious authority, which eventually resulted in the "objectification" of Islam (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996).

Historically, the ulama have always faced competition in their religious authority; challenges are not unique to the modern age. Both political leaders, as in the case of Abbasid caliph Ma'mun and his successors, and nonpolitical figures such as "preachers and storytellers," Sufis, and philosophers, challenged their authority. The challenge we observe in recent times, nonetheless, differs from the historical cases in "scale and severity" and the substance of such challenges. As such, they are "unparalleled" (Zaman 2009, 209-221).

The *new* challengers to religious authority came from various backgrounds and commanded large audiences, much larger than the old challengers could ever imagine. Such challengers include the state, new religious intellectuals, reformist ulama, Muslim

modernists, and Islamists. What really characterized these new claimants of Islamic authority was their “deep commitment to the Islamic character of the state and society” (Bein 2011, 24) and that they were Muslims “whose consciousness has been objectified ... and who are committed to implementing their vision of Islam as a corrective to current ‘un-Islamic’ practices” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 44).

The rise of political Islam, proto-Islamists, and Salafism during this period in Islamic history is no coincidence. The politics of the time motivated these actors to take action; their answers to fundamentally political questions of the time (i.e., Western colonialism and modernization) were religious in character (i.e., a variation of “Islam is the solution”). If Islam is capable of delivering answers to Muslims’ problems such as colonialism and underdevelopment, then the key problem for why this had not happened in the past lies in those who possess religious authority and failed in their roles as the representatives of Islam, according to these new religious actors. In this regard, Islamists and Salafis of various convictions helped further the fragmentation of religious authority and the objectification of Islam, and ultimately wielded significant religious authority themselves.

While the literature embodies a satisfactory account of the long-term dynamics of religious authority in the Muslim world, it falls short in recognizing and articulating specific mechanisms for the legitimization and sustenance of religious authority, drawing societal support for such authority, and identifying demographic tendencies across various religious actors. With this study, we aim to fill this gap.

Public Opinion Survey

In order to gauge how individual Muslims perceive religious authority, we conducted an online public opinion survey in 12 countries across the Middle East: Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates. The survey was administered by YouGov, the leading survey company in the Middle East. In total, the survey includes more than 16,497 respondents in these 12 countries. Of the 24 Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, our survey includes one-half of them with diversity in size, regime type, ethnicity, and level of development. As an online survey, the YouGov sample is not representative at the national level: the respondents are disproportionately male, educated, and urban. However, the survey is representative in regard to various indicators of religiosity, which is one of the most important characteristics in our study of religious authority, in addition to indicators such as employment and marital status. For a discussion of the demographics of the survey sample and the advantages and disadvantages associated with this sample and the questionnaire, see the Survey Appendix (<http://bit.ly/2TNDpdP>).

We structured the survey to achieve two related goals. We wanted to quantitatively assess the influence of local religious leaders whose authority is largely confined to their own countries. To that end, in each country included in our survey, we identified six prominent religious figures. At the same time, we aimed to capture cross-national trends in religious authority and how religious leaders prominent throughout the region fared. Hence, each

country survey included the six local names complemented by seven transnational religious figures. This gave us 13 religious leaders in each country whose influence and authority we could gauge.

It is important to note that one of the principal motivations for mapping religious authority in the Middle East rests on the assumption that religious authority is diffuse and goes beyond traditional scholars and state-affiliated clerics. Therefore, we tried to cast as wide a net as possible in terms of affiliations and backgrounds of religious leaders in each country. Our list of religious leaders includes Islamist politicians, bureaucrats, and royal family members in addition to religious scholars and state religious officials. This strategy of going beyond those religious leaders who underwent traditional religious training offers an opportunity to test the veracity of our moving assumption and get a good sense of how different kinds of religious leaders fared.

Admittedly, it was not always possible to find names for each category of religious leader we were interested in. Where such names were not available in a country, we tried to strike a balance between diversity of names and popularity.

One of the concerns was whether respondents would be able to identify different religious leaders by their names alone. Our interest is not purely in the religious leaders themselves; we are likewise interested in what they represent with their institutional affiliation or ideological orientation. Going beyond the names and including institutional affiliation or ideological orientation where the former is not available would ensure that the implications of our analysis can go beyond the names included in our survey.

We examined the question of religious authority from a variety of angles in this survey, both direct and indirect. We asked about approval of each religious leader. Likewise, we asked about trust in each religious leader on a five-point scale.

A fundamental problem in studying sensitive political questions such as the religion-politics relationship—including religious ideology and religious extremism—is the challenge of “eliciting truthful answers” (Blair and Imai 2012). Some names can be particularly sensitive to respondents for various reasons. For example, under authoritarian conditions—such as monarchies or repressive regimes—the names that are associated with the ruling elite might garner more favorability than they would otherwise. The names that are deemed oppositional or controversial, by contrast, might suffer from lower approval and favorability for the opposite reason. Such names might potentially include Islamist opposition, Salafis, or violent extremists.

Therefore, in addition to direct trust and approval questions, we included a battery of endorsement experiments. With the endorsement questions, we provided respondents with a series of statements endorsed by different religious leaders and asked them to evaluate each statement by using between subject randomization. The goal was to gauge how respondents’ assessment of the statement varied with the religious actor making the statement, taking responses to the no-endorser statements as the baseline.

The motivation behind the use of an endorsement experiment—or survey experiment—is the assumption that individuals will display greater agreement with religious statements made by those whom they perceive to be holding legitimate religious authority. Hence, on average, we should observe a higher proportion of agreement with those names that hold greater religious authority among survey respondents, while much less agreement with those who do not. Because the statements are held constant across all respondents but the name associated with the statement varied with random assignment, the variation in responses can be attributed to the variation in the names associated with the statement and their distinct attributes, i.e., state religious official, Salafi, Islamist leader, or Sufi.

An endorsement experiment is an effective method to deal with sensitive political questions and has been shown to reduce “social desirability biases” (Bullock, Imai, and Shapiro 2011; Blair, Imai, and Lyall 2014). Due to the subtle and sensitive nature of the notion of religious authority and the different shapes it can take, the embedded experimental design is an effective means to deal with this challenge. The design of endorsement experiments enables us to make a series of religious statements the focus of respondents’ evaluation, rather than the religious leaders themselves.

While there is some concern about the external validity of survey experiments, recent research shows that survey experiment effects closely mirror those of real-world natural experiments, albeit with some drop-off in the size of the effect (Barabas and Jerit 2010). Rosenfeld, Imai, and Shapiro (2016) find that indirect survey questions such as endorsement experiments yield estimates closest to the actual results in comparison to direct questions in surveys, lending further support to the use of this technique. To our knowledge, no such study of religious authority in the Middle East has been conducted before.

Endorsement experiment questions in our survey revolved primarily around five distinct issue areas: foreign policy, violence, social issues, democracy, and relations with the West. These issues are among the most commonly cited areas of interest about religious actors, particularly Islamists, in the Middle East (Kurzman and Naqvi 2010; Yildirim and Lancaster 2015). The focus on these issues ensures that the project stays true to the key issues that define religious actors in the region. Likewise, these issue areas relate most directly to the U.S. foreign policy priorities in the region. In particular, three of these issues (foreign policy, violence, and relations with the West) directly relate to security policies in the region, whereas the other two (democracy and social issues) carry major implications for the long-term evolution of the region.

Main Findings and Implications

Our study on religious authority in the Middle East offers important answers to the three key questions that motivated our study: Does Islamist political popularity translate into religious favorability and authority for Islamists? Do state religious officials have credible religious influence and authority? Is there a strong support base for extremists such as IS and al-Qaeda affiliates among the broader population in the region?

We find that the popularity and religious influence of Islamist actors vary across the region. On one hand, Islamist figures obtained notable levels of approval from respondents in most countries in our survey (Figure 1). Likewise, they were found to be trustable at significant levels compared to most other figures in our survey (Figure 2). On the other hand, survey respondents were notably more lukewarm about Islamists when asked about their views on religio-political issues in our endorsement experiments. Islamist names typically garnered negative endorsement scores in our endorsement experiments (Figure 3), indicating that respondents were more likely to disagree with a statement when it was endorsed by an Islamist leader.

Our study fundamentally challenges the conventional wisdom on state religious officials. Our study shows that state-affiliated religious leaders have largely outperformed our expectations in terms of having the trust and approval of large segments of respondents in all countries in our survey (Figures 1 and 2). This finding holds with the endorsement experiments as well. Importantly, state-affiliated religious officials have the most influence in countries where the state employs religion and religious discourse as a key element of its national identity, such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Iran, and Jordan.

However, considered in tandem with the relatively weak performance of Islamists in our study, particularly in endorsement experiments (Figure 3), it is evident that the support that state religious officials receive is conditional on ensuring a nonpartisan approach to religion. Maintaining that nonpartisan position is key to their stature as legitimate religious authorities.

Finally, the most concerning finding in our study is that extremist religious discourse has a sizeable audience. Respondents in our survey did not express support for local or transnational extremist figures such as the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi when asked directly in the trust and approval questions (Figures 1 and 2). However, endorsement questions revealed a dramatically different picture. In several countries, support for al-Baghdadi was among the highest when asked indirectly in endorsement experiments (Figure 3). Such support is particularly strong among respondents from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco—countries that send the highest numbers of foreign fighters into Syria (Benmelech and Klor 2016).

In addition to these broad findings, our study brings together a strong group of scholars with country-specific and topical expertise. Not only did these scholars shape the project at its inception, they also helped in survey design, data analysis, and the crafting of policy-relevant reports by distilling the data into digestible forms. Here, I briefly summarize their findings in the country reports.

Sharan Grewal (Brookings Institution) focuses on the Tunisian religious landscape. Tunisia presents a compelling case because of the unique constellation of religious conditions—in particular that of a popular Islamist party—a strong undercurrent of support for religious extremists, and ongoing public debates about the role of religion in a democratizing state. Grewal's findings demonstrate why it is important to measure religious authority from different angles. He finds that among survey respondents in Tunisia, Islamist religious

figures enjoy widespread approval in line with their electoral popularity, but the high survey approval rates dissipate when it comes to their authority on religious matters specifically. Grewal also finds that while jihadists in Tunisia do not receive significant support among survey respondents, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's leader, commands the largest support among religious figures based on the endorsement experiments.

Courtney Freer (London School of Economics and Political Science) analyzes the two Wahhabi states in her report: Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In this comparative study, Freer finds that alignment with the state is an important factor that boosts support for religious leaders in Saudi Arabia; the same, however, does not hold for Qatar. The large expatriate populations in both countries show a critical distinction across different segments of their populations. In particular, Freer demonstrates that expatriate and citizen populations have different views on religious leaders, which has clear implications for how religious authority and national identity is constructed on Wahhabi ideals, especially in Saudi Arabia. Lastly, in these two wealthy states that are steeped in rentierism, Freer examines the effect of patronage—i.e., material disbursements—on support for religious leaders and finds that the level of income or support from religious groups has no significant impact. This result follows the robust patronage network the state has forged in both countries.

Iran is the only Shiite-majority country in our study. The clergy's major role in Iran makes this an intriguing case and complements the study in important ways. Mirjam Künkler (Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study) examines the complexity of the Iranian religious landscape by focusing on both the clerics associated with the regime and those clerics who are critical of the current regime. The findings suggest that despite the relatively strong support enjoyed by clerics associated with the regime, there exists a strong undercurrent of support for clerics who are critical of the clergy's involvement in the political process.

Tarek Masoud (Harvard University) investigates the religious landscape in Egypt. By contesting the status of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country, the Sisi government has weaponized religion as a key tool in its search for legitimacy in the post-2013 period and has increasingly centralized religion and religious apparatus in Egypt. While the government's suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood reveals itself in the extremely low favorability of the group's leader Mohammed Badie, the results more broadly indicate that the religious sphere in Egypt is highly competitive among state-affiliated religious leaders, Salafis, and more mainstream figures like Amr Khaled.

Yusuf Sarfati (Illinois State University) surveys the diversity of the religious sphere in Turkey, one of the most interesting cases in which an Islamist politician leads the government. By focusing on Ihsan Eliacik, Sarfati argues that the Islamic Left poses a serious challenge to the religio-political hegemony of the AKP and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Eliacik advances a counterhegemonic discourse that centralizes minority rights and pluralism, women's empowerment, corruption, and freedom of expression. Sarfati examines the survey data and finds that the values promoted by the Islamic Left broadly and Eliacik in particular strongly resonate with his supporters. Moreover, the contrast between supporters of Eliacik and supporters of pro-AKP religious figures highlights the power of religious discourse in shaping religio-political views.

Morocco, where a head of state, the king, explicitly claims religious authority as *Amir al-Mumineen* (Commander of the Faithful), represents a unique case in our study. *Annelle Sheline* (Baker Institute) examines the results of the survey in Morocco and finds that Moroccans do trust the religious leadership of King Mohammed VI. This result contrasts sharply with the relatively low levels of approval of and trust in other Moroccan religious leaders in the survey, particularly Islamists, Salafists, and Sufis. Sheline reviews the survey data by providing the historical context in which the religious status of the king is constructed in the post-colonial period, discusses what it means for the modern state-led national identity building in Morocco, and explains the ways in which the monarchy undermines competition from alternative sources of religious leadership.

Scott Williamson (Stanford University) examines the relationship between religion, politics, and state in Jordan. In a political context where the regime often relies on its religious officials to mobilize support for its policies, Williamson finds that Jordanians walk a fine line in their conceptions of religion-politics relationship. On one hand, they prefer Islam to have a role in state institutions and the general policy direction of the country; religion is important in their conceptions of state. On the other hand, they want to avoid politicization of religion by religio-political actors, and therefore embrace a form of separation between religion and politics. These countervailing dynamics result in low levels of trust in Islamist religious actors and higher levels of trust in state religious authorities. As U.S. policy in the Middle East shifts with respect to the goals it pursues and the ways it engages actors in the region, it is important that religion remains a key component of American policy in the region because of the centrality of religion and religious actors to the region's politics. Our research has key implications for this type of engagement.

Our study shows a strong strain of support that IS leader al-Baghdadi enjoys in several countries in the region. While this support oftentimes does not translate into support for local extremists in any meaningful way, it nonetheless reveals a concerning trend and helps explain why certain countries in the region send high numbers of foreign fighters into Syria to fight alongside the IS. While direct military action against IS in Syria is necessary to address the immediate human suffering and geopolitical ramifications of IS presence in the region, such action should be complemented by a long-term strategy to undertake broad efforts at social reform in order to curb the undercurrent of support for extremism in the region. Critically, the complex nature of the religious sphere should be harnessed in this process. In particular, religious actors who enjoy broad legitimacy as religious authorities should constitute a key element of these efforts.

It is important to caution against securitizing U.S. foreign policy engagement with religion in the Middle East because it carries the serious risk of delegitimizing the local religious actors who are involved in such engagements. This is particularly a concern for state religious officials who are viewed and instrumentalized as agents of moderation. Religion permeates various aspects of life in societies across the Middle East. Reducing it to extremism and extremist violence alone compromises the ability of the U.S. foreign policy to engage with a much larger population and a broader set of issues.

Relatedly, our research shows that state religious actors enjoy significant influence and power that hinge on local circumstances. As such, state religious officials' potential to act as legitimate religious authorities offers an opportunity to promote reform in social issues such as education, women's rights, pluralism, and democratization that are not directly related to extremism or security. Examples of such policies have been employed in countries such as Tunisia and Jordan in recent years in regard to equal inheritance and family planning. Simultaneously, however, this influence and power is precarious because of its proximity to political power.

Lastly, the mixed performance of Islamist actors in our study reflects their complicated legacy throughout the region. Even when Islamists—and to some degree, Salafists—fail to resonate strongly with respondents as religious authorities in our survey, there is extensive evidence for the support they enjoy as leaders in most countries throughout the region. Such nuanced support for Islamists underscores the importance of engaging them in efforts to find long-lasting solutions to major policy issues in regional countries. Their absence from these processes carries the risk of delegitimizing reform efforts right from the beginning. The recent public debates on equal inheritance in Tunisia show that Islamists can play the role of spoilers in social reform efforts just as they can reinforce reform and democratization efforts like Ennahdha did in the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution.

Figure 1. Approval of Religious Leaders

The respondents were asked, “Which of the religious leaders below do you approve of? Please select all that apply.” The approval percentage shows the share of respondents who approved of the listed religious leaders in each country.

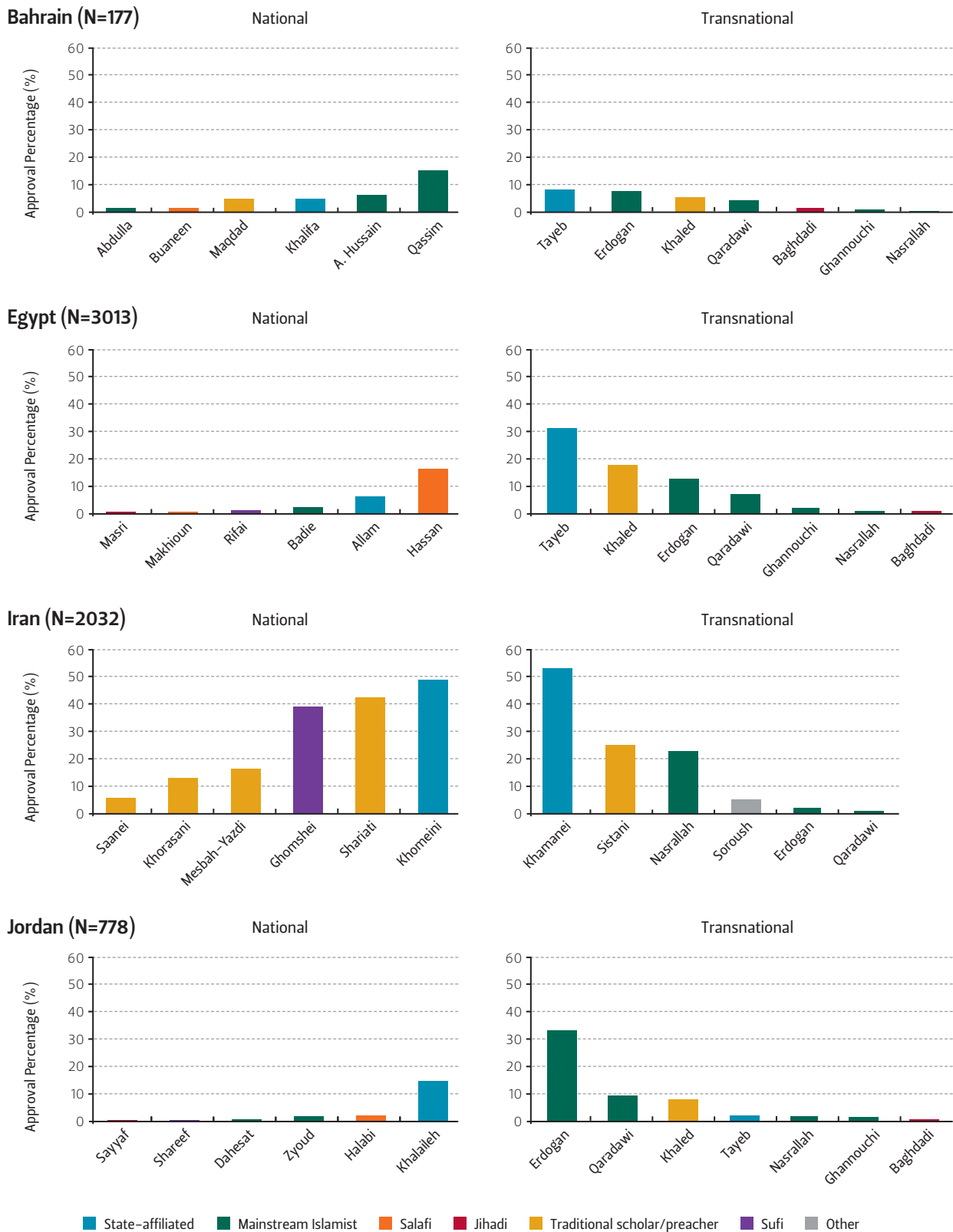


Figure 1. Approval of Religious Leaders — Continued

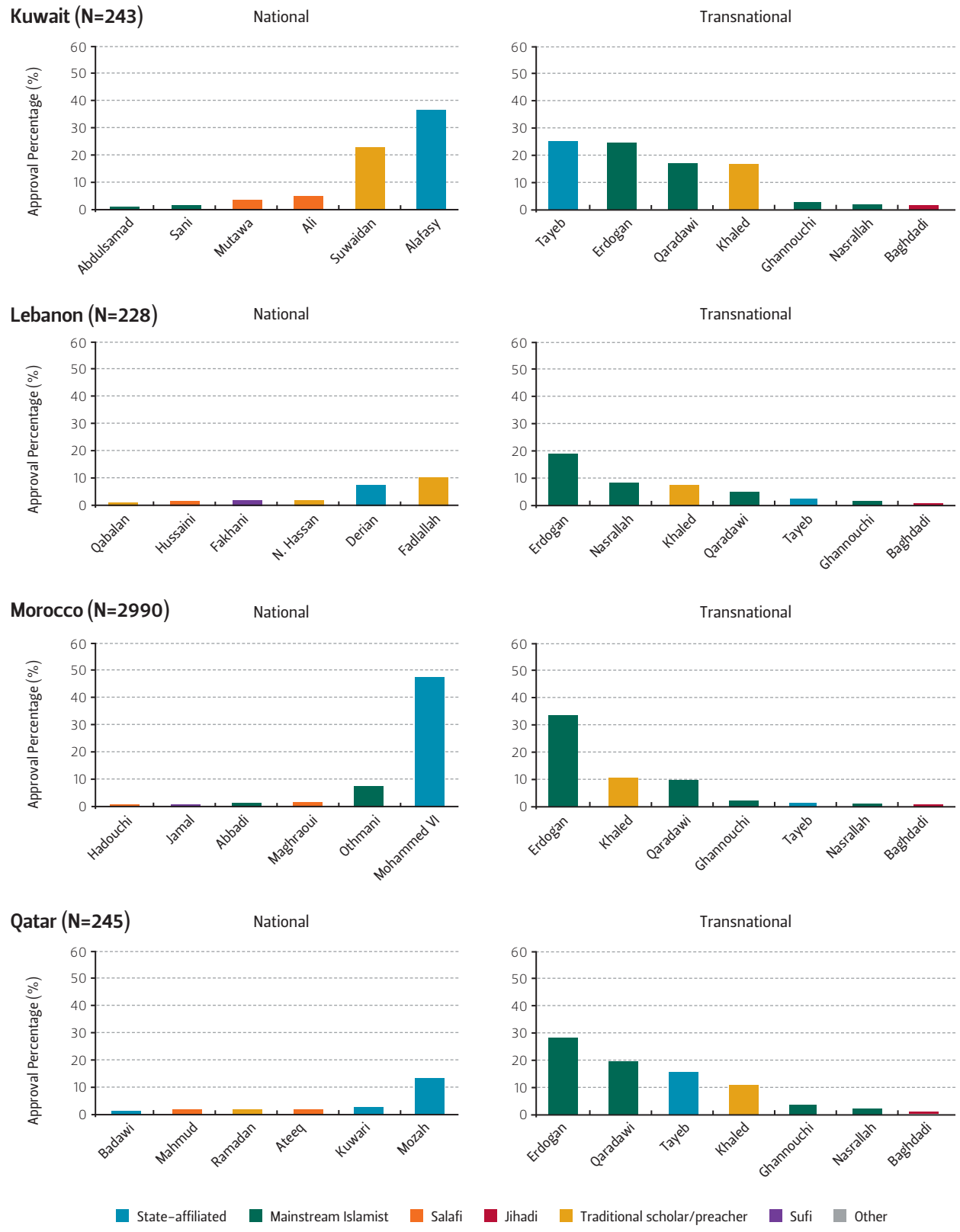


Figure 1. Approval of Religious Leaders — Continued

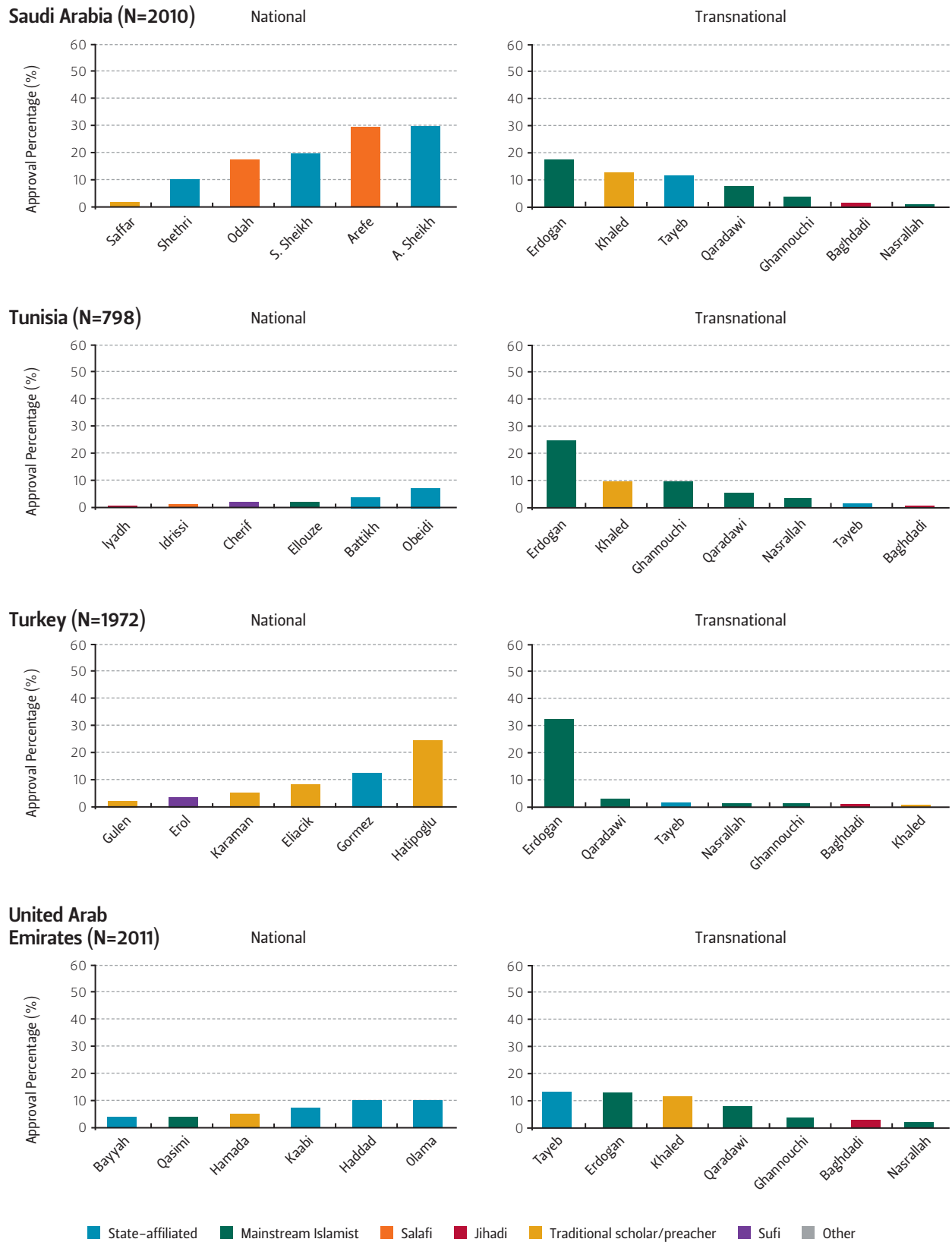


Figure 2. Trust in Religious Leaders

The respondents were asked, “On a scale of 1 to 5, please tell us how much you trust each of the following individuals as an authority on matters of faith and Islamic practice.” The figures shown are the average ratings for each religious leader across all respondents in each country. Higher values indicate greater trust.

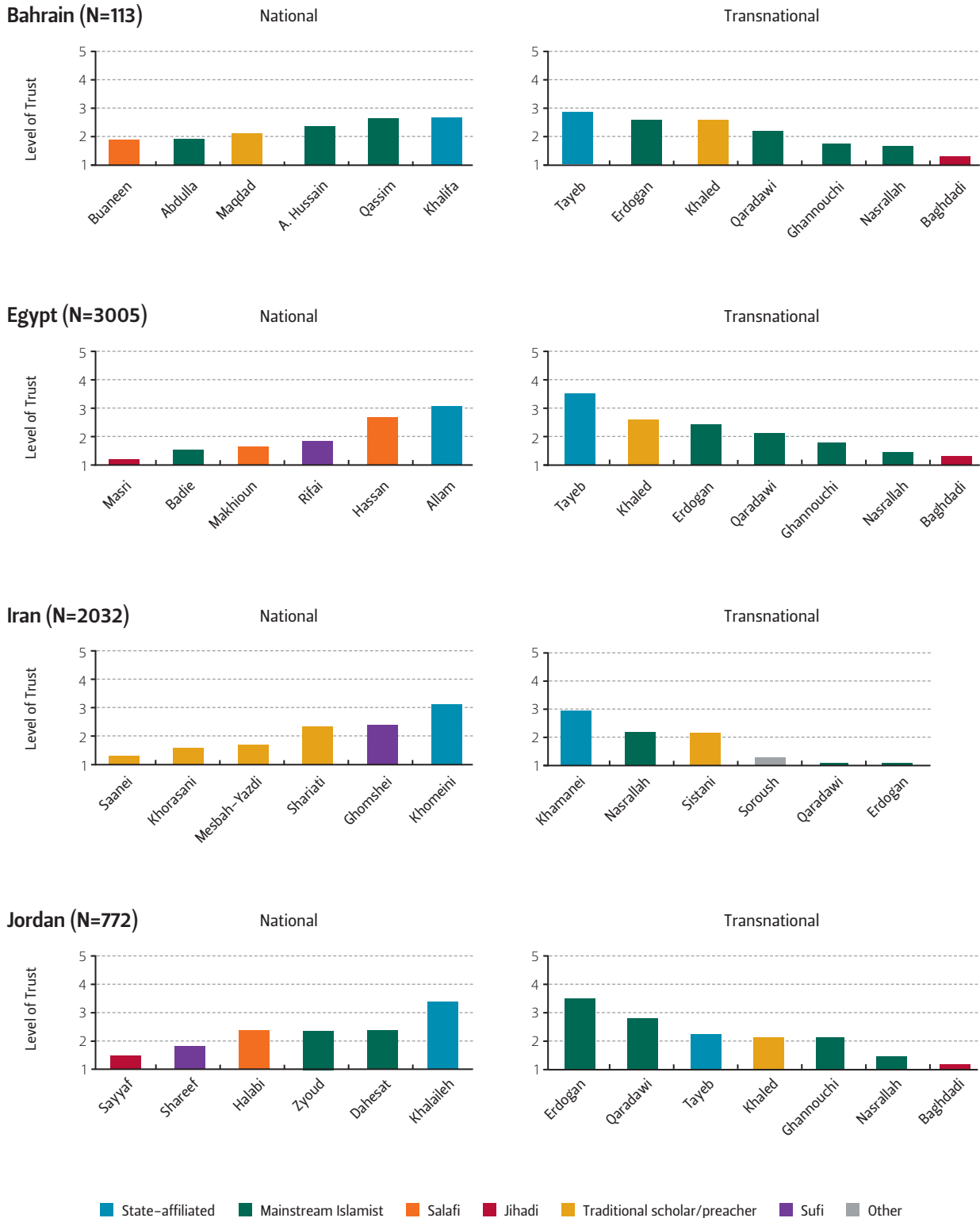


Figure 2. Trust in Religious Leaders — Continued

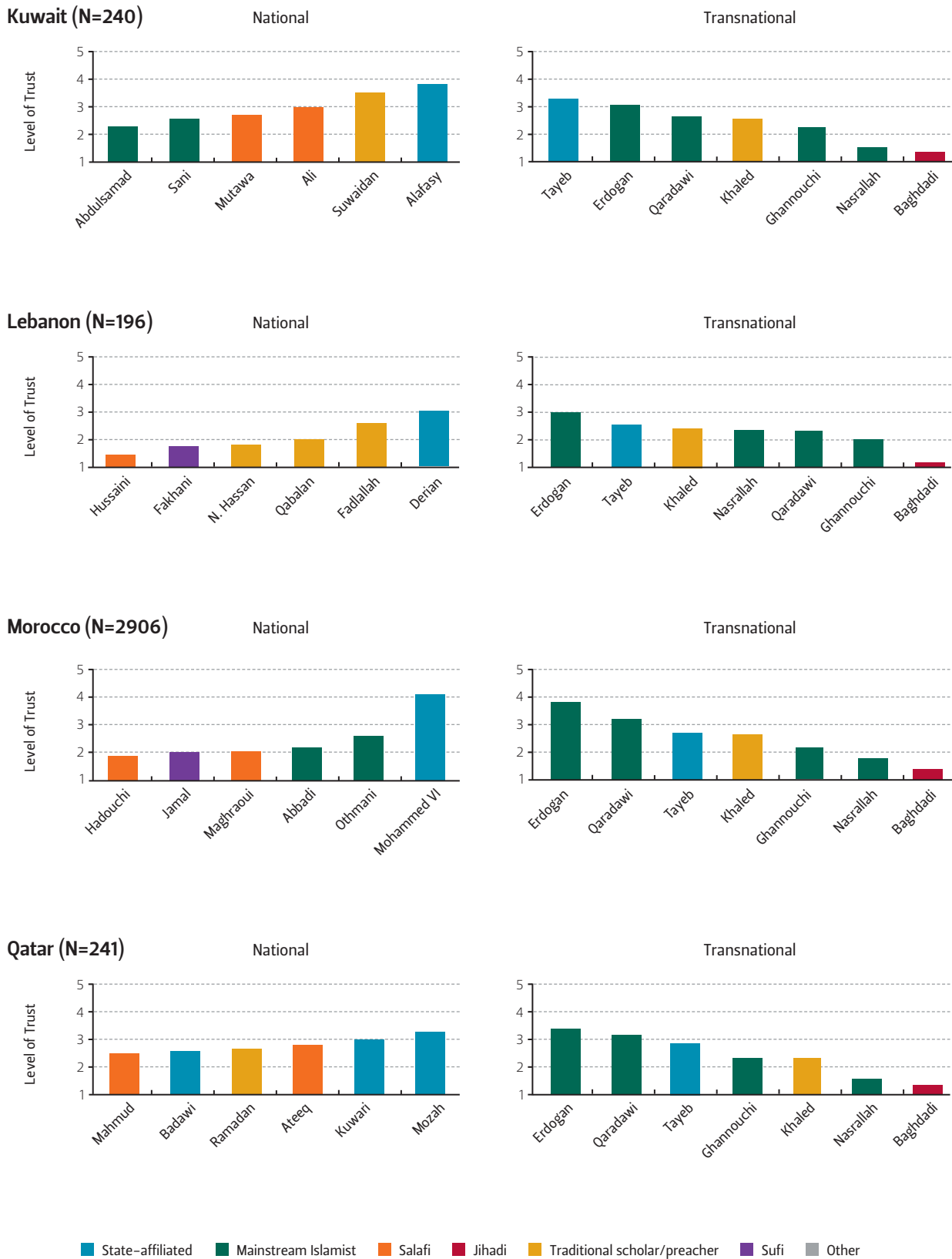


Figure 2. Trust in Religious Leaders — Continued

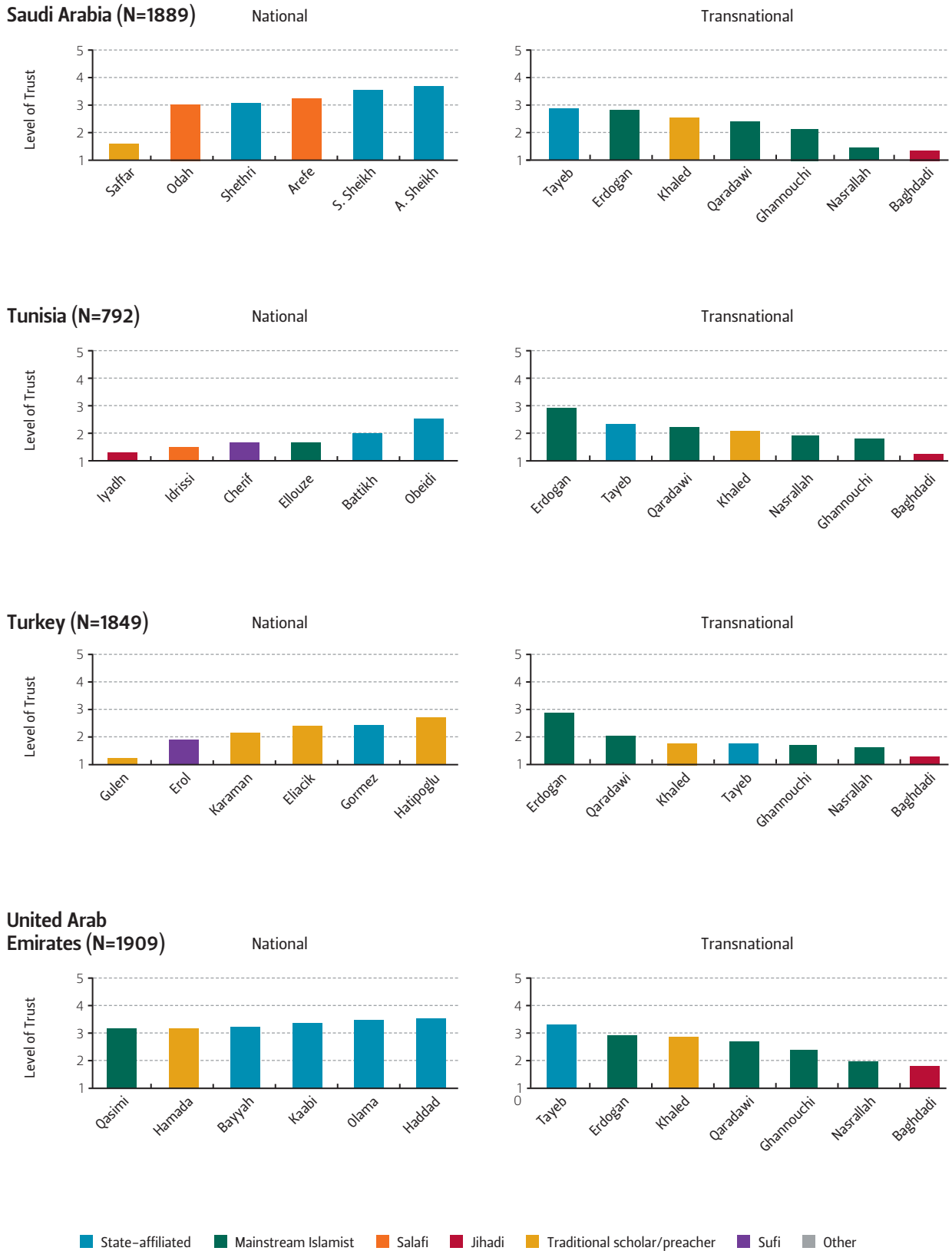
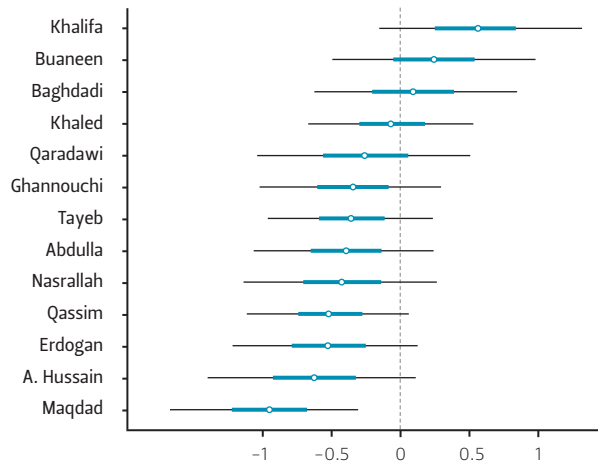


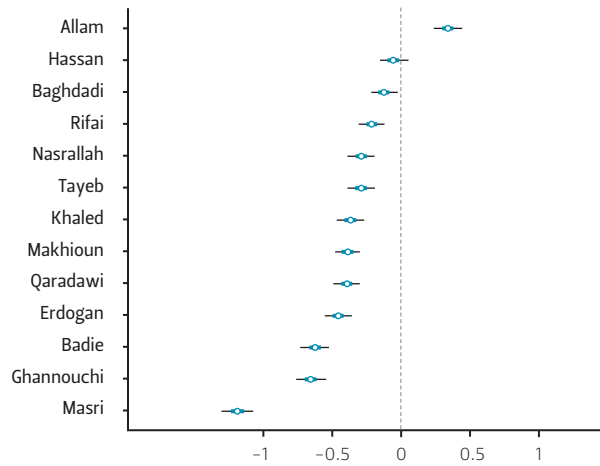
Figure 3. Endorsement Experiment Effects

The graphs show the aggregate effect of randomly assigning each religious leader's name to 14 religious statements. Higher values indicate that respondents, on average, were more likely to agree with a statement when shown the name of that religious leader; lower scores indicate that respondents, on average, were more likely to disagree with the statement. In each of these graphs, the point intercept is depicted with error bars around them.

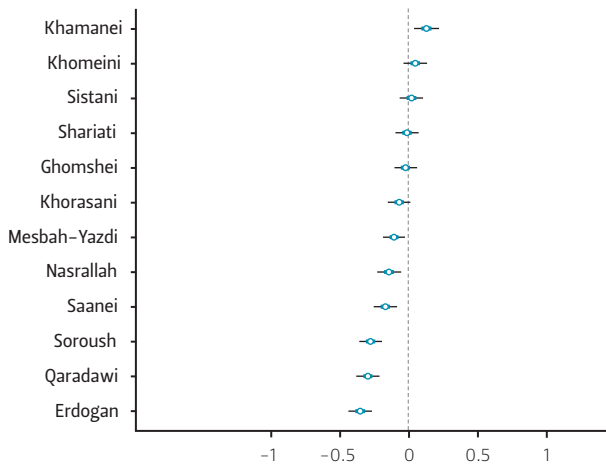
Bahrain



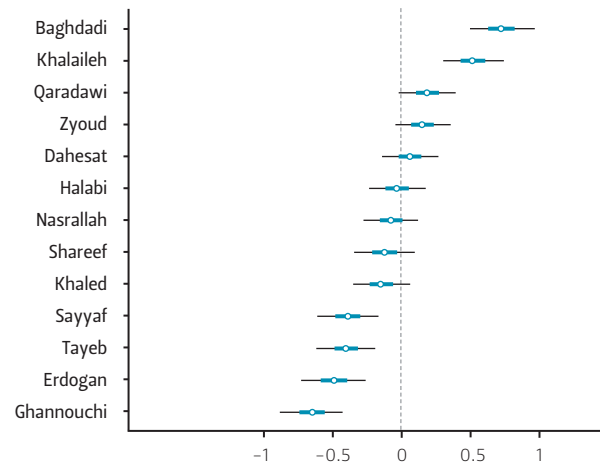
Egypt



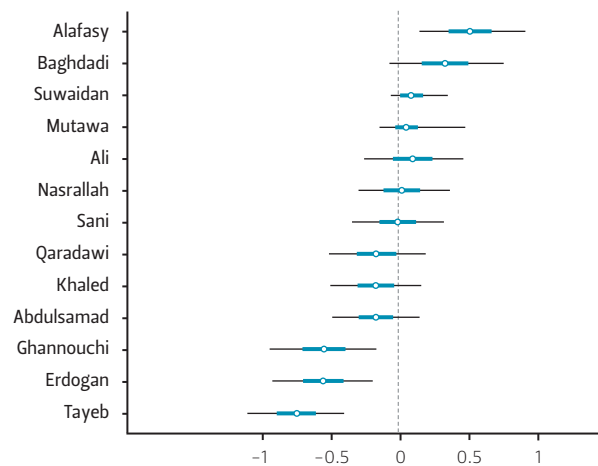
Iran



Jordan



Kuwait



Lebanon

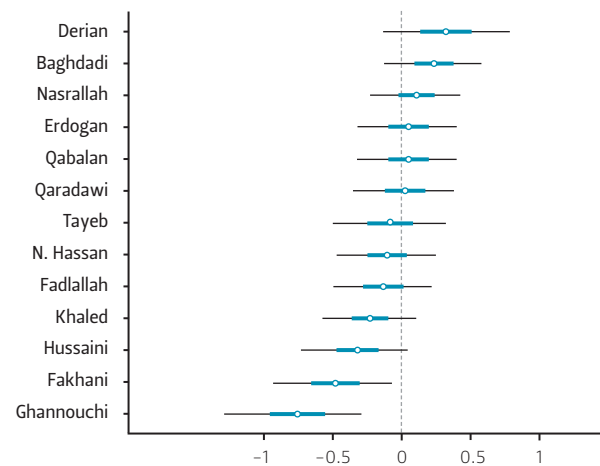
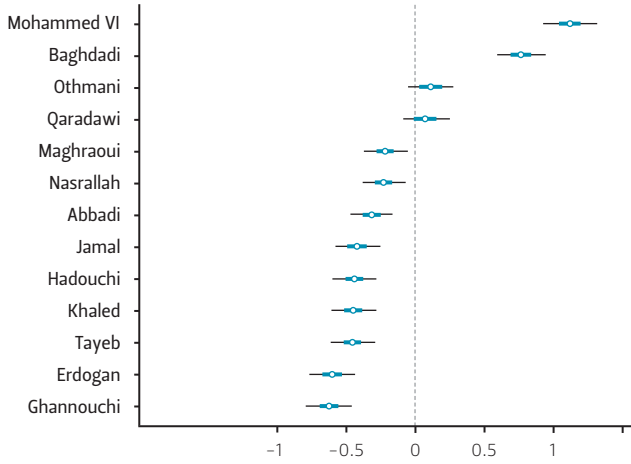
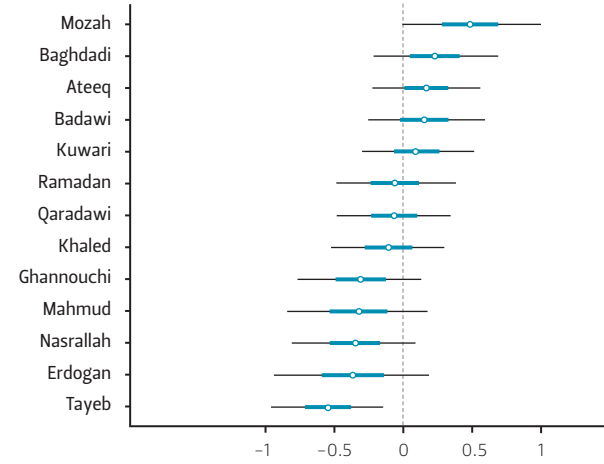


Figure 3. Endorsement Experiment Effects — Continued

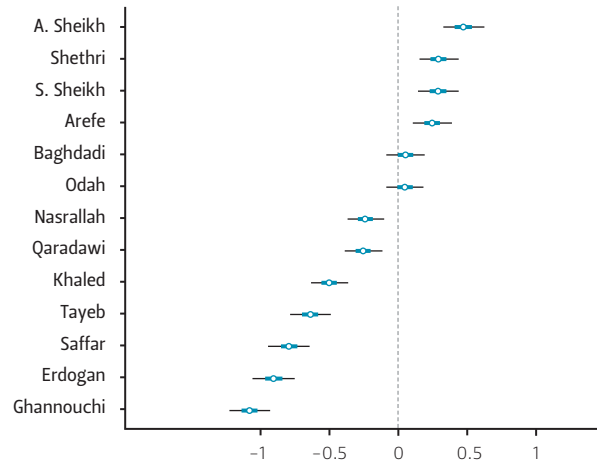
Morocco



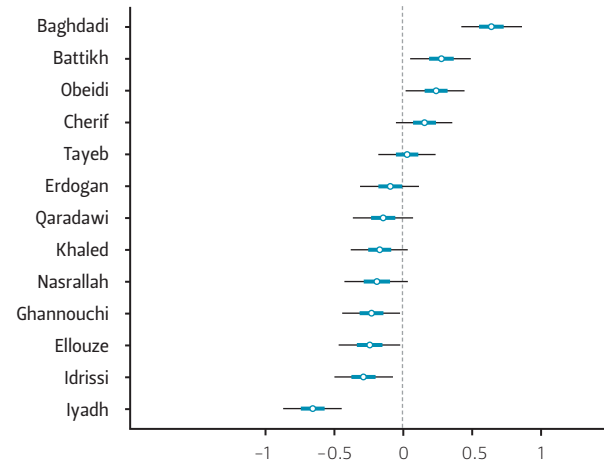
Qatar



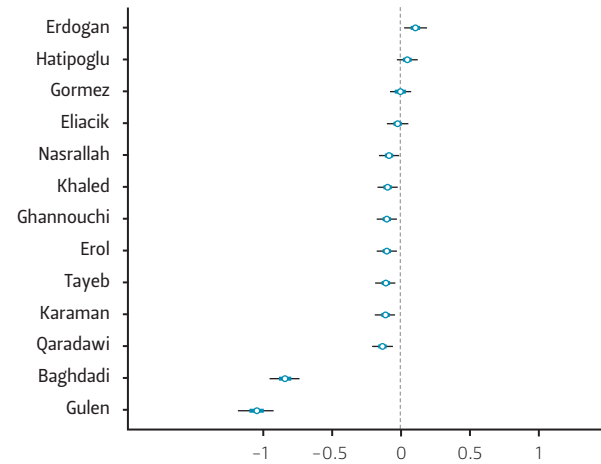
Saudi Arabia



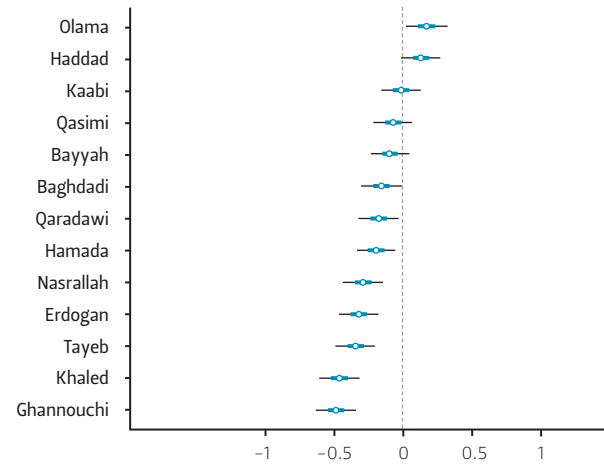
Tunisia



Turkey



United Arab Emirates



Endnotes

1. “Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi,” available at <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com>.
2. Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, “The Rise of Islamic Soft Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-07/rise-islamic-soft-power>.
3. Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, “Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy,” (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, November 2018), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FP_20181116_islam_as_statecraft.pdf.
4. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Countering the ‘Countering Violent Extremism Program,’” *Religion Dispatches*, April 27, 2016, <http://religiondispatches.org/countering-violent-extremism-and-the-politics-of-religion/>.
5. Secretary Kerry’s remarks were made at Rice University in Houston, Texas, on April 26, 2016. The statement is available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/04/256618.htm>
6. Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall, “Trump administration should use key diplomatic tools for religious engagement,” *Religion News*, February 17, 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/02/17/trump-administration-should-use-key-diplomatic-tools-for-religious-engagement>.
7. See, for example, the exchange on ISIS between Graeme Wood (“What ISIS Really Wants”) and Caner Dagli (“The Phony Islam of ISIS”) in *The Atlantic*: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/> and <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/what-muslims-really-want-isis-atlantic/386156/>.
8. See footnote 8 in Nawas (2013) for a detailed discussion of the theological dimension of the issue.

References

- Abou El Fadl, Khaled. 2001. *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women*. Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications.
- Barabas, Jason, and Jennifer Jerit. 2010. “Are Survey Experiments Externally Valid?” *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 2: 226–42.
- Bein, Amit. 2011. *Ottoman Ulama, Turkish Republic: Agents of Change and Guardians of Tradition*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Benmelech, Efraim and Esteban F. Klor. 2016. “What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?” *NBER Working Paper* No. 22190.
- Blair, Graeme, and Kosuke Imai. 2012. “Statistical Analysis of List Experiments.” *Political Analysis* 20: 47–77.
- Blair, Graeme, Kosuke Imai, and Jason Lyall. 2014. “Comparing and Combining List and Endorsement Experiments: Evidence from Afghanistan.” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4: 1043–63.

- Bowen, John R. 2004. "Does French Islam Have Borders? Dilemmas of Domestication in a Global Religious Field." *American Anthropologist* 106, no. 1: 43–55.
- Brown, Nathan. 1997. "Sharia and State in the Modern Middle East." *International Journal Middle East Studies* 29, no. 3: 359–76.
- Bullock, Will, Kosuke Imai, and Jacob N. Shapiro. 2011. "Statistical Analysis of Endorsement Experiments: Measuring Support for Militant Groups in Pakistan." *Political Analysis* 19: 363–84.
- Campbell, Heidi. 2007. "Who's Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3: 1043–62.
- Chaves, Mark. 1994. "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority." *Social Forces* 72, no. 3: 749–74.
- Crone, Patricia, and Martin Hinds. 1986. "God's Caliph." In *Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dabashi, Hamid. 1989. *Authority in Islam: From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Djupe, Paul, and J. Tobin Grant. 2001. "Religious Institutions and Political Participation in America." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 2: 303–14.
- Eickelman, Dale, and James Piscatori. 1996. *Muslim Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fair, Christine C., Jacob Goldstein, and Ali Hamza. 2016. "Research Note: Can Knowledge of Islam Explain Lack of Support for Terrorism? Evidence from Pakistan." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 4: 339–355.
- Hallaq, Wael B. 2003. "Juristic Authority vs. State Power: The Legal Crises of Modern Islam." *Journal of Law and Religion* 19, no. 2: 243–58.
- Hallaq, Wael. 2009. *An Introduction to Islamic Law*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamil-Luker, Jenifer, and Christian Smith. 1998. "Religious Authority and Public Opinion on the Right to Die." *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 4: 373–91.
- Hatina, Meir. 2009. "The Clerics' Betrayal? Islamists, 'Ulama' and the Polity." In *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: 'Ulama' in the Middle East*, edited by Meir Hatina, 247–62. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Herriot, Peter. 2007. *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Kersten, Carool, and Susanne Olsson. 2013. "Introduction." In *Alternative Islamic Discourse and Religious Authority*, 1–15. London: Ashgate.
- Kloos, David and Mirjam Kunkler. 2016. "Studying Female Islamic Authority: From Top-Down to Bottom-Up Modes of Certification." *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 4: 479–490.
- Kramer, Gudrun, and Sabine Schmidtke. 2006. *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*. Vol. 100. Brill.
- Kurzman, Charles, and Ijlal Naqvi. 2010. "Do Muslims Vote Islamic?" *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 2: 50–63.

- Lyons-Padilla, Sarah, Michele J. Gelfand, Hedieh Mirahmadi, Mehreen Farooq, and Marieke van Egmond. 2015. "Belonging Nowhere: Marginalization & Radicalization Risk Among Muslim Immigrants." *Behavioral Science & Policy* 1, no. 2: 1–12.
- Nawas, John A. 2013. "The Ulama' As Autonomous Bearers of Religious Authority: Explaining Western Europe's Current Identity Problem with Islam." In *Negotiating Autonomy and Authority in Muslim Contexts*, edited by Monique Bernards and Marjo Buitelaar, 15–28. Walpole, MA: Peeters.
- Pelletier, Ian R., Leif Lundmark, Rachel Gardner, Gina Scott Ligon, and Ramazan Kilinc. 2016. "Why ISIS's Message Resonates: Leveraging Islam, Sociopolitical Catalysts, and Adaptive Messaging." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39, no. 10: 871–99.
- Peter, Frank. 2006. "Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17, no. 1: 105–18.
- Pratt, Douglas. 2013. "Fundamentalism, Exclusivism, and Religious Extremism." In *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, edited by David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas, 241–61. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.
- Probst, Peter. 1989. "The Letter and the Spirit: Literacy and Religious Authority in the History of the Aladura Movement in Western Nigeria." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 59, no. 4: 478–95.
- Robinson, Francis. 2009. "Crisis of Authority: Crisis of Islam?" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 19, no. 3: 339–54.
- Rosenfeld, Bryn, Kosuke Imai, and Jacob N. Shapiro. 2016. "An Empirical Validation Study of Popular Survey Methodologies for Sensitive Questions." *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 3: 783–802.
- Shaham, Ron. 2009. "Western Scholars on the Role of the 'Ulama' in Adapting the Shari'a to Modernity: A Critical Review." In *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: 'Ulama' in the Middle East*, edited by Meir Hatina, 171–91. Leiden: Brill.
- Sherkat, Darren E., and Christopher G. Ellison. 1999. "Recent Developments and Current Controversies in the Sociology of Religion." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25: 363–94.
- Turner, B S. 2007. "Religious Authority and the New Media." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2: 117–34.
- Weinberg, Leonard, and Ami Pedahzur. 2004. "Introduction." In *Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism*, edited by Leonard Weinberg and Ami Pedahzur, 1–10. Portland, OR: Frank Cass.
- Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2005. *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Winter, Michael. 2009. "'Ulama' Between the State and the Society in Pre-Modern Sunni Islam." In *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: 'Ulama' in the Middle East*, edited by Meir Hatina, 21–45. Leiden: Brill.
- Yildirim, A.Kadir, and C.M. Lancaster. 2015. "Bending with the Wind: Revisiting Islamist Parties' Electoral Dilemma." *Politics and Religion* 8, no. 3: 588–613.

- Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. 2009. "The Ulama and Contestations on Religious Authority." In *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates*, edited by Muhammad Khalid Masud, Armando Salvatore, and Martin van Bruinessen, 206–36. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Zaman, Mohammad Qasim. 2012. *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Zeghal, Malika. 1999. "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of Al-Azhar, Radical Islam and the State (1952-94)." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31: 371–99.