On October 16, 2016, Jordan’s King Abdullah II released a discussion paper outlining his vision to strengthen the nation as a “civil state,” or what he termed a state “that is governed by a constitution and laws that apply to all citizens without exception.” Acknowledging controversy over the term in the Muslim world, Abdullah was careful to note that his vision “was not synonymous with a secular state,” because “in a civil state, religion is a key contributor to the value system and... religion is also enshrined in our constitution.” Yet the king also warned that “we will not allow anyone to manipulate religion to serve political interests or gains for a specific faction.”

This vision reflects a common strategy in the Middle East. In the face of opposition challenges by Islamist political parties and militant groups, most governments in the Arab world attempt to fold religion into state institutions while draining it from the realm of political contestation so that it does not serve as an effective rallying cry for mobilization against the regime.

In Jordan at least, this strategy also appears to align with public preferences toward the relationship between religion, politics, and the state, as demonstrated by public opinion data collected in our online survey—described in detail in a previous country report—and in face-to-face surveys by the Arab Barometer. The online survey was part of a larger Baker Institute study on religious authority in the Middle East. The polling data indicates that most Jordanians are deeply religious in their personal lives, and that many support the incorporation of Islam and Islamic values into the constitution and state institutions. Yet this preference for religion in the public sphere is matched by a similarly strong preference to avoid the mixing of religion with partisan politics. For instance, the surveys show that large majorities of Jordanians prefer sharia law to play some role in their country’s legal system, but they also oppose the involvement of religious organizations and mosques in elections, or attempts by religious figures to influence how people vote.

These preferences appear to relate to how Jordanians evaluate the authority of religious figures in their country. In our online survey, respondents were asked to rate the authority of religious figures associated with several different Islamic tendencies, including the “official” Islam of the state, the Muslim Brotherhood, quietist Salafism, and jihadi Salafism. The survey results reveal that actors associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism were perceived as religious authorities by only a handful of respondents. On the other hand, Jordan’s grand mufti exercised significantly more authority, though it remained relatively limited. State religious leaders like the grand mufti position themselves as apolitical religious bureaucrats, whereas Islamist leaders are typically associated with...
a religiously inspired political platform. Thus, these survey results suggest that Jordanians are more likely to discount the authority of religious figures who are tied more closely to political activity or ideology.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN JORDAN**

Religious institutions have constituted an important component of the Jordanian state since its founding in the 1920s. The Dar al-Ifta was established to regulate and guide religious life in 1921, and sharia courts were given jurisdiction over personal status as part of the Basic Law issued in 1928. This role was then preserved in the 1952 constitution. The sharia courts are headed by the Department of the Chief Islamic Justice, and the Dar al-Ifta is overseen by the grand mufti. In addition to these two institutions, the state religious sphere is also influenced heavily by the Ministry of Awqaf, which is led by a minister and is responsible for supervising the country’s imams and mosques.

Because of the authority exercised by state religious institutions, they have often been called upon to promote government policies, particularly related to social issues. In recent years for instance, religious leaders have played an important role in promoting the use of contraceptives and family planning. They also helped to push for the repeal of the penal code’s Article 308 that allowed rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims, and for amending the personal status law to strengthen protections for women in 2010. The government’s ability to mobilize state religious institutions to push for its policies, while useful in these cases, goes hand in hand with the regime’s political control over these institutions. Such control—if too heavy-handed—can actively weaken the authority of religious institutions by driving perceptions that their officials are mere mouthpieces for the government and therefore partisan actors in their own right.

Traditionally, the Jordanian government has exercised relatively less control over state religious institutions compared to neighboring countries—this lighter touch may explain the continued authority of these institutions. Following the Arab Spring and the emergence of ISIS, however, this control has begun to increase, including the enforcement of a unified topic for the Friday sermon and the banning of imams who deviate too far from the script. While ostensibly implemented to combat extremism and improve the quality of religious discourse, these policies may have undermined the authority of state religious officials. As one activist scoffed in an interview with the author, Jordan’s imams now “talk about respecting parents ... because they cannot talk about anything sensitive,” such as important political and social topics. A prominent journalist also suggested that Jordanians have become less likely to trust state religious officials in recent years because they view their role as protecting and justifying the government. Consistent with this claim, trust in religious leaders fell slightly between 2013 and 2016, dropping from 38 percent to 32 percent according to the Arab Barometer.

The vulnerability of state religious officials’ authority to politicization is consistent with the polling data from our online survey and the Arab Barometer on Jordanians’ attitudes toward religion, politics, and the state, as well as their attitudes toward the religious authority of the grand mufti. Jordanians value religious institutions as part of the existing constitutional structure of the state; however, they want the religious figures who operate within them to act as independent authorities whose decisions are rooted in their religious expertise, not as pawns of the government’s current political needs.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

These dynamics have implications for policies adopted by the Jordanian government in how it manages its religious sphere, in addition to implications for policies pursued by the U.S. government as it engages with governments and religious actors in Jordan and the Middle East.
Countering Extremism

While the vast majority of Jordanians reject extremism in the name of Islam, the country contains a small but active jihadist community. On a per-capita basis, Jordan has sent more foreign fighters to ISIS than any other Arab country except Tunisia, and several small-scale terrorist attacks have occurred within the country in recent years. As a result, extremism continues to be a concern for Jordanian policymakers.

As mentioned previously, the Jordanian government has responded to this challenge in part by increasing its active control over imams and mosques in recent years, working to dictate Friday sermons and cracking down on dissident preachers. Yet such policies may do more harm than good—even within the narrow confines of security concerns—if they undermine the authority of imams and other religious officials working within the state’s religious institutions. The vast majority of Jordanian religious officials do not hold extremist views, and these officials are particularly well positioned to counter those who do advocate for these positions. However, religious leaders are more likely to be effective at doing so when the public perceives them as authoritative figures who are speaking for themselves and not as mouthpieces for the government. While the survey results discussed earlier suggest that state religious leaders may exercise relatively more authority than Islamist actors, that authority also appears to be fragile. In line with this fragility, the survey data also shows that many Jordanians do not pay attention to any religious leaders at all and instead prefer to interpret religion themselves. The more the government politicizes its religious institutions, the more fragmented religious authority is likely to become, and this environment will be one in which extremist groups are more effective at recruiting disaffected individuals.

Religion and Public Support for the Jordanian Government

In part, recent efforts to increase control over state religious institutions may reflect the government’s desire to leverage endorsements from religious figures to strengthen its popular support, while also silencing those figures who criticize its policies. As with countering extremism, this increased control is liable to backfire. It is true that a less politicized religious sphere may expose the government to criticism from certain religious figures, but less politicization should also result in greater religious authority for religious officials as a whole. When endorsements from religious figures do occur in this context, they should be more effective at bolstering the government’s public support. On the other hand, politicizing the religious sphere is a recipe for generating weak religious figures who cannot convince the public to stand by the government. Furthermore, the survey data discussed above indicates that Jordanians dislike the politicization of religion; as a result, the government may be generating new grievances among the public by trying to increase control over state religious officials and institutions.

Promoting Social Reforms

As mentioned previously, the Jordanian government has often relied on religious institutions to endorse and promote certain social policies, including family planning and stronger legal protections for women. These issues often touch directly on religious questions, placing them naturally within the purview of religious leaders. The more the government politicizes its religious institutions, the more fragmented religious authority is likely to become, and this environment will be one in which extremist groups are more effective at recruiting disaffected individuals. This dynamic suggests that the government would benefit from relaxing its efforts to dictate what religious officials can say, including by dropping its efforts to control Friday sermons. Of course, the government should not avoid monitoring extremist views and policing calls to violence or other such actions by religious officials, but putting words in preachers’ mouths is likely to be counterproductive.
advocated for these social policies suggest that the efforts of religious leaders have been especially important for achieving their implementation. Given these dynamics, the Jordanian government, as well as Jordanian activists and advocacy groups, should continue to work with religious leaders when pursuing social reforms. However, it is still important to remember that overbearing government control of state religious officials is likely to be counterproductive—these relationships should be willing partnerships, not forced associations.

**U.S. Government Involvement**

The U.S. government has interests both in preserving the stability of the Jordanian government and countering extremism in the country. Insofar as both objectives may be undermined by the Jordanian government’s attempts to exercise greater control over the religious sphere, U.S. officials should encourage their Jordanian counterparts to relax this push to increase their control of state religious institutions and officials. This encouragement would also be in line with stated U.S. goals to promote democratization and human rights in Jordan, since controlling the activities of religious figures infringes on both the freedom of expression and the freedom of religion.

The U.S. government also counts social reforms on issues like women’s rights among its policy objectives in Jordan, and U.S. government officials in the country should build relationships with religious officials as they promote such reforms. For instance, the USAID mission in Jordan lists “Gender Equality and Female Empowerment” as one of its core objectives and suggests that “enduring social norms and traditions . . . have stifled women’s advancement.” Since religious leaders are likely to be particularly effective at addressing these norms and traditions, they should be engaged on these issues wherever possible. As part of its efforts to foster change on such issues by promoting social dialogue, U.S. officials and their partners should continue to involve religious leaders as key stakeholders in these discussions. It is important that this involvement not just reflect superficial endorsements from religious officials who already agree with U.S. positions, since such endorsements are unlikely to be perceived as credible and are therefore unlikely to change minds. Rather, engagement should involve discussions with religious figures who hold a range of views on these issues.

**ENDNOTES**

3. Arab Barometer Surveys, http://www.arabbarometer.org/. Survey waves 2, 3, and 4 from Jordan are used in this report.
9. Author interview with Jordanian activist, February 2018
10. Author interview with Jordanian journalist, March 2018.

**AUTHOR**

Scott Williamson is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Stanford University. He researches the comparative politics of the Middle East, with a focus on authoritarianism, human rights, refugees, and the politics of religion. Williamson received his bachelor’s degree in political science and Arabic from Indiana University.

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.