



## CAPSTONE CONFERENCE REPORT: RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST; IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

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## **Introduction**

On March 17, 2019, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted a conference entitled “Religious Authority in the Middle East: Implications for U.S. Policy.” The conference, organized by the Baker Institute Center for the Middle East, was the culmination of a survey-based project of the Middle East and North African (MENA) region funded by the Henry R. Luce Foundation and led by the Baker Institute’s A.Kadir Yildirim. The project survey, administered by YouGov, was fielded across 12 countries in the region and encompassed approximately 16,500 respondents. Experts on each country from institutions across the United States and Europe presented their findings at the daylong conference, with emphasis on the implications for U.S. foreign policy. Keynote addresses by Peter Mandaville and Shaun Casey, both academics with policy experience from the State Department’s Office of Religion and Global Affairs under the Obama administration, underscored the salience of understanding the dynamics of religious authority at all levels of policymaking, especially when dealing with such complex religious settings as the Middle East and broader Islamic world.

## **Assumptions About Religious Authority in the Middle East**

The conference began by discussing three key commonly held beliefs about religion and religious actors in the Middle East and how the study’s major findings shed light on these ideas. Firstly, Islamists have displayed broad popularity across the MENA region over the past several decades. On one level, this can lead to the assumption that Islamists’ assertions and beliefs carry dogmatic weight among large segments of the population. However, research on cases such as Tunisia reveals that political support for leaders espousing religious ideals does not always translate into increased trust in those leaders as authoritative commentators on religious matters. In the post-Arab Spring years, Tunisia’s Islamist Ennahdha has proved to be a strong force within the political realm. Nonetheless, Tunisian respondents largely did not view Ennahdha leaders such as Rachid Ghannouchi as carrying authority on religious matters, despite his party’s Islam-inspired identity. Such a case indicates that there may be more of a disconnect between the political success of Islamists and their religious trustworthiness than is conventionally assumed.

The second commonly made assumption outlined in the conference’s opening remarks was that state religious leaders are believed to possess less authority and influence than non-state religious leaders. As the project survey included a dozen countries with varying levels of state involvement in religious affairs, it provided a range of results that challenged this assumption. In Jordan, for instance, the country’s grand mufti—a state employee—and religious pronouncements like the Amman Message received high degrees of public confidence. Similarly, Morocco’s King Mohammed VI is another example of a public leader whose Islamic title of “Commander of the Faithful” indeed holds significance among his constituency. Survey results showed that a majority of the Moroccan public sees the king as a symbol of religious legitimacy and orthodoxy, with Moroccan Salafists and Islamists being less trusted. Furthermore, religious leaders tied to the government in Saudi

Arabia and Qatar were seen as authoritative by citizens of each nation, as well as by many in the expatriate communities of both nations. This finding suggests that contrary to what some may expect, state-appointed religious officials in certain national contexts are not seen simply as government mouthpieces but also as authoritative faith leaders.

Lastly, the survey investigated whether it is valid to assume that the presence of extremist entities across the region correlates with increased public support for extremist ideology. Conference presenters revealed that there are indeed higher levels of approval for statements attributed to extremist figures than was predicted. In Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Jordan, the scholars observed somewhat surprising levels of support for ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi when respondents were indirectly asked about him. Notably, this support was not as pronounced when respondents were directly asked about leaders they consider religiously authoritative; rather, respondents were more likely to lend support to al-Baghdadi in the survey's "endorsement" experiments, wherein they were asked to indicate their degree of approval for statements attributed to him.

## **Religion and Politics vs. Politicized Religion**

One important theme that emerged from conference discussions on the authority of state religious figures is the inherent tension between these leaders' relationship to the state and the possibility of their being viewed as tools of partisan politics. As previously stated, the study's data revealed that respondents across the region have generally favorable views of state-sanctioned religious voices. However, when those figures appear to become too mired in partisan debates and thus too politicized, their credibility and support among the public erodes considerably. This finding suggests that the intersection of religion and politics can be a double-edged sword for perceptions of religious authority. On one level, being affiliated with the government can make religious experts appear more dignified and, to some extent, impartial toward their citizenry. At the same time, citizens throughout the region are unlikely to trust religious leaders who are seen as tools of factional politics. Ultimately, each conference participant noted that the idea of "state religious leaders" must be carefully examined, as religion can be politicized to different extents across national contexts.

Somewhat counter to this observation, the survey did indicate that polarizing political figures can at times be viewed as authoritative religious voices in other countries in the region. Support for Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a case in point. While Erdogan remains a divisive political figure within Turkey and the region, his mobilization of a wide swath of the Turkish public by appeals to Islamic values—along with his own public persona as a religiously devout man—have led to Erdogan receiving marked levels of support in Turkey, Lebanon, Morocco, and Jordan, as well as in Egypt and Qatar, where Muslim Brotherhood ideology has historically been more prevalent.

## Proposals for U.S. Foreign Policy

An ultimate goal of this conference was to examine what the survey research in each national context implies for U.S. foreign policy—particularly for policies that involve interaction with religion. Peter Mandaville, a senior research fellow at Georgetown’s Berkley Center, laid out the well-intentioned yet problematic approach that U.S. officials often take toward the Islamic world. When these officials identify certain “moderate” religious leaders as “theological antidotes” to “bad Islam,” the United States runs a number of risks. Firstly, American efforts to bolster some religious voices over others can have the unintended consequence of delegitimizing such figures and strengthening extremists. As several presenters indicated, the legacy of U.S. foreign policy remains polarizing across the MENA region, and perceptions that religious leaders are explicitly endorsed by the U.S. can stigmatize them and undermine their authority. For this reason, the United States must be wary of openly advertising its approval of any particular religious leader. This remains particularly true in the case of state-affiliated religion. Just as state-sanctioned spiritual figureheads can lose their prestige by participating in partisan divides, they can likewise be hampered if they appear to be propped up by the U.S. This conundrum is particularly salient in the efforts of Morocco’s King Mohammed VI to propagate a brand of “moderate” Islam that can combat extremism. If the U.S. were to involve itself too closely as a partner in this effort, the king’s longstanding legitimacy as a bearer of Morocco’s Islamic heritage could be discredited.

Additionally, experts at the conference underscored how U.S. officials and diplomatic professionals must frame the concept of “extremism” in Middle Eastern and broader Islamic contexts. On one hand, the United States must not take an essentialist approach by framing engagement with the Islamic world solely as a means to combat extremism. The State Department and other U.S. agencies must recognize that engaging religious actors across the Middle East should involve more than simply discussing violence and radicalism. Failure to do so could, at worst, lead to the perception that the United States equates Islam with extremism, ignoring the multifaceted nature of Islam and how religion shapes countless aspects of MENA societies. Concurrently, the U.S. must not ignore the influence of extremist tendencies within the Islamic world. This point was made clear by survey results showing wide-reaching support for extremist figures such as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. As Mandaville indicated, Secretary John Kerry’s declaration of the Islamic State (ISIS) as “apostates” demonstrates a potentially counterproductive method for diplomats addressing religion. While Kerry made this remark with the intention of delegitimizing ISIS to the world, he also implied that the U.S. has an authority to delineate what is and is not proper Islamic doctrine. This vocal American stance against radicalism might be supported by certain actors in the region, but it might also engender anti-U.S. sentiment by making the United States appear to overstep its bounds in defining what constitutes religious authority within Islam.

## Conclusion: Limitations and Considerations

In sum, the conference challenged some of the prevailing assumptions about religious authority, the state, and civil society across the MENA region. Such observations are valuable for scholars focused on the politics, society, and religion, as well as policymakers tasked with making inroads into the religious sphere in MENA. The finding that state religious voices have high credibility amongst their publics might tempt some diplomats to see such figures as a panacea for religious extremism. One participant indicated, for instance, that trusted state figures such as Tunisia's grand mufti can provide "counter-narratives" to extremist, violence-promoting religious elements of their societies. However, rushing to identify and support public religious officials for their moderate views may not be as effective a solution as policymakers might hope, as it has two important limitations.

Firstly, several participants reminded the audience that trust in state institutions still remains relatively low across the entire region. This lukewarm public confidence in bureaucratic systems should caution policy professionals that engagement with Islamic leaders in Middle Eastern contexts must not solely be confined to those supported by the state. Instead, it is important to remember that the fairly nonhierarchical, "free market" structure of Islam (though more characteristic of Sunni than Shia Islam) means that religious authority is more likely to be fragmented across different types of religious figures than fully centralized within a single, state-sanctioned official. Secondly, the aforementioned stigma attached to the United States throughout the region should make American officials wary of endorsing state Islamic authorities, lest the very extremists they seek to discredit gain public support.

With these lessons in mind, one critical question remains: how does this scholarship on religious authority ultimately apply to the present-day political realities of the United States? Does the Trump administration's reliance on the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom<sup>1</sup> signal a shift in how the U.S. will identify and engage with Middle Eastern religious actors? In his keynote address, Casey indicated that regardless of an administration's willingness to draw upon scholarship on religious authority, such research is perennially valuable to members of the intelligence community. He therefore encouraged the conference's contributors to promote their work, particularly among intelligence officials who can benefit from more information on how religion plays out in daily life in the Middle East. In addition, this Luce study could further be expanded into a longitudinal survey project to provide more information. Repeated surveys over time to measure changes in attitudes toward religious leaders could ensure that the research remains durable and relevant for anyone specializing in religion and foreign policy.

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<sup>1</sup> "U.S. Department of State – Office of International Religious Freedom," U.S. Department of State, accessed November 25, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-civilian-security-democracy-and-human-rights/office-of-international-religious-freedom/>.