Religion and State in Syria

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

Thomas Pierret is a Lecturer in Contemporary Islam at the University of Edinburgh. He has edited two volumes on contemporary Islam and published numerous journal articles, book sections, and entries for the Encyclopaedia of Islam. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, he has been featured extensively in media such as the New York Times, Foreign Policy, Le Monde, the BBC, France 24, Al Jazeera English, and AFP.
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Religion and State in Syria

The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution

THOMAS PIERRET

University of Edinburgh
To the martyrs of the Syrian revolution

To Mériam and Loueï
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The last lines of this book were written in February 2012, at a time when the bloody suppression of the popular uprising in Syria had been ongoing for almost a year. During these past months, I have thought unceasingly of my many friends and acquaintances who live in, and in some cases have been forced to flee, this country that is so dear to me. It is to them that I address my greatest thanks – although, to my regret, the future is still too uncertain to allow me to mention the full names of people currently in Syria. At the top of the list are my guardian angels, the religious students who guided me through the mosques of Damascus and Aleppo: Mostafa, Bara’, ‘Ammar, Faris, Ali, Mahmud, Muhammad, and many more – may God protect you. Sheikh Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib has not only been incredibly helpful and generous, but he also taught me much about human values. I also had the chance to meet astute observers such as ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Hajj Ibrahim, Mohamad Berro, and Isam Abdulmola. Finally, I express my gratitude to the protagonists of this book, who agreed to receive me despite the difficult context, and especially to all those who granted me more time and attention than mere courtesy could ever demand.

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A Note on Conventions

TRANSLITERATION

Arabic words are transliterated according to a simplified version of the International Journal of Middle East Studies’ system (no special characters, diacritic signs, or long vowels). Arabic words in unabridged English dictionaries are not italicised. Other Arabic words are italicised only in the first instance.

NAMES

Arabic names are transcribed according to the preceding system unless a different transcription is dominant in English-language texts (e.g. Hussein, not Husayn; Abdullah, not ‘Abd Allah).

ELECTRONIC SOURCES

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