KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME CIVIL SOCIETY IN WEST ASIA

WORKING PAPER 1

TEIJE HIDDE DONKER

MOTH OR FLAME

THE SUNNI SPHERE AND REGIME DURABILITY IN SYRIA

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

people unlimited
HiVOS

Colophon

First published in November 2009 by the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, a joint initiative by

Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries
P.O. Box 85565 | 2508 CG The Hague | The Netherlands
www.hivos.net

Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam
Department of Political Science
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237 | 1012 DL Amsterdam | The Netherlands
www.assr.nl

Design: Tangerine – Design & communicatie advies, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Cover photo: 'Wall of Syrian Mosque' by Juliette Verhoeven.

ISSN 2210-3473

© University of Amsterdam and Hivos 2010
All rights reserved
The publishers encourage fair use of this material provided proper citation is made.

MOTH OR FLAME

The Sunni Sphere and Regime Durability in Syria

Table of Contents

Introduction

This paper investigates relations between the Syrian regime and the Sunni sphere by providing a brief policy oriented analysis of regime - sphere relations and their role in the resilience of the Syrian authoritarian regime. It adds to the emerging appreciation amongst scholars and practitioners in the field of civil society that civil activism does not necessarily have a positive impact on processes of democratization and/or socio-political liberalization. It does this by questioning the extent in which civil actors are independent in the Syrian authoritarian context and assessing what influence this has on stabilizing the Syrian authoritarian system. It argues that Sunni civil activists can (unintentionally) support authoritarianism by being drawn to the very regime that suppresses them – mimicking a moth drawn to a flame. Second, based on the outcomes of the research it provides recommendations aimed at international NGOs that hope to engage with civil actors in Syria. The paper focuses on the Sunni sphere as this has proven to be the largest and most resilient sphere of civil activism in Syria and in the Middle East in general.

In contrast to the academic article drafted on the same topic, *Enduring Ambiguity: The Civil Dynamics of authoritarian Upgrading in Sunni Syria* (Donker, Forthcoming) the present paper is focused less on an in-depth analytical analysis of the interaction between the Sunni Sphere and the Syrian Regime and more on the general findings and implications for practitioners in the field. For a more theoretical analysis of regime–Sunni sphere interaction that positions the current research in current debates on (resilience of) authoritarianism the reader can turn to *Enduring Ambiguity*.

The paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and other West Asian countries can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

Islamic civil activism forms a vast sphere in Syrian society – both in number of people engaged in it, geographic spread, and number of institutions involved. A strong focus has been necessary in this specific project.[1] The present paper focuses on the Sunni sphere and is based on academic literature and on over forty-five interviews in (predominantly) Damascus during the period February-May 2009.[2] Due to a strong gender bias in interviews (Sunni interlocutors were exclusively male) the

research does not have an in-depth focus on Islamic women's movements.[3] Additionally, it does not discuss radical Islam nor does it make any reference to violent forms of activism.

[1] It has, for example, not been possible to visit Sunni organizations in Aleppo due to severe restrictions by the Syrian regime. Additionally, the present paper does not discuss the history of Sunni sphere-Regime interaction. For more information on this history see: Batatu (1982), Abd-Allah (1982), Lobmayer (1995) and Barout (2000).
[2] Due to its size and strength regime supervision of the sphere is strict, also concerning foreign researchers interested in speaking to civil activists Due to the sensitive nature of the topic – Sunni activism in Syria – interviewees will not be named.
[3] The initial plan was to focus more on a specific Sunni women's movement (the Qubaysiaat) as an example of a movement retaining to large extent its independence in a strict authoritarian context – due to informal contacts with high level regime officials. The empirical

The paper is structured around six central questions concerning: 1) a typology of Sunni civil activism present the Sunni sphere, 2) the Syrian Sunni sphere and its position vis-à-vis the regime and secular civil society, 3) regime policies vis-à-vis the Sunni sphere, 4) an analysis of the implementation of regime policies, 5) an analysis of strategies employed by Syrian Sunni activists safeguard social activities, and 6) implications of these strategies on the resilience of the authoritarian regime. In the second part of the paper recommendations are provided for foreign civil society actors aiming to support civil activism in Syria.

focus of the following paper shifted away from the Qubaysiaat due to the gender bias of interviews, the increased repression of the movement and impossibility of gaining interviews.

The Syrian Sunni Sphere

Question 1: What constitutes the Sunni sphere? What typologies of institutionalized Islamic activism are distinguished by the Syrian state and what other (informal) forms of Islamic activism exist?

The Sunni sphere is a disaggregate entity of various formal and informal institutions existing in a network of informal contacts. The sphere to large extent is active within the boundaries of the nation-state (civil activists see Syria as the main arena in which they are active) but is not confined by it (many contacts exist between non-Syrian Sunni activists abroad). The Sunni sphere is mainly constituted by civil activists active in name of Islam, organized in groups and institutions. The sphere consists of very diverse actors – in size, level of institutionalization, formality, and (range of) activities that they employ. The center of this network is clearly defined: the most popular – and thus influential – sheikhs and Sunni institutions form its core group. These main actors in the Sunni sphere generally tend to know each other informally. At the fringes the sphere is less clear-cut: the level to which someone is active and/or in name of Islam can be very ambivalent.[4]

Most activities undertaken in the Sunni sphere are of an informal nature. The Sunni sphere is the result of the individual task of every (Sunni) Muslim to be socially active: by giving *zakaat* (alms), or any other means. It is safe to say – although official numbers are non-existent – that most *zakaat* is given from person to person, without any institutional in-between.[5] Hence, a basic property providing the Sunni Sphere with its cohesiveness is inter-personal trust: one individual trusting another to give money to help him, trusting a sheikh to follow his teachings or trusting people at an institution to provide schooling to ones children.

From the basic network of activists a large number of institutions and leading individuals emerge as "front office" of the Sunni sphere. The main types of institutions are mosques, Islamic schools and universities and charitable associations of various kinds and sizes. On the individual level, sheikhs are people with any form of popular religious authority. Additionally a number of formal religious position exist, such as the *mu'azzin* (announcer of prayers), *imams* (lead the daily prayers) and

khatibs (provides the Friday sermon). Another important religious position is that of mufti: religious scholars that are concerned with issuing religious rulings or *fatwas*. Their influence of sheikhs is dependent on their popular following, with no formal umbrella organization existing. In contrast, muftis are appointed on both district and state level – with the highest position being the *mufti al-'am l'il-jamhuria al-arabia al-suria* (Grand mufti of the Syrian Arab Republic).

To emphasize the importance of informal relation and clarify the position of Islamic institutions vis-à-vis the Sunni sphere the internal structure of the Ahmad Kiftaru Foundation is explored here. The Ahmad Kiftaru Foundation emerged as one of the main Sunni institutions under the leadership of the late Grand mufti of Syria (sheikh Ahmad Kiftaru) and is currently one of the largest and well known

[4] As result it is impossible to give a clear figure on how many people are part of the Sunni sphere. No statistics are given here.
[5] Interview, Damascus, 11 April 2009

Sunni institution in Damascus.[6] Simultaneously it is an example of the chaotic internal structure of many large Islamic institutions.

Annex 1 provides a simplified – though still complex – overview of the Foundation. What should be noted is that although the organization is perceived as one foundation, it actually consists of two interlinked organizations: the Ahmad Kiftaru Foundation and the al-Ansar charitable association. Daily management of mosque and schools related to the Abu Nour mosque is located at the Ahamd Kiftaru Foundation. Management of charitable initiatives is located at the al-Ansar association. Before 2007 educational activities were financed through the charitable association, since 2007 this is disallowed and currently educational activities are financed mainly through the Ministry of *awqaf* (religious endowments).[7]

The (informal) network of Ahmad Kiftaru's former students, first, provides the social capital necessary for collection of donation for the al-Ansar charitable association. These former students can be employed anywhere: at religious institutes, businesses or ministries. Secondly a board of notable former students has been instituted after the death of Ahmad Kiftaru that decides on main policy of the foundation. The members of the board have been chosen based on their popular constituency. These sheikhs often also preach at the Abu Nour mosque, but are further not exclusively related to the foundation or the mosque: they also preach at other mosques, thereby forming a bridge to other Sunni institutes and mosques.[8] Additionally it is striking that the chairman of the al-Ansar charitable association, Mohamad Alush, is a high official at the ministry of communication – on this later more. Finally it is apparent that various external organizations, including Syrian ministries and foreign Islamic universities, have direct relation with the foundation. The foundation is an example of the extent to which many Islamic institutions are part of a network of both formal and informal relation to other actors in (and outside) the Sunni sphere.

In Syria the most well known and influential Sheikhs are Said Ramadan al-Buti, head of the Sharia faculty of the Damascus University; Sheikh Muhammad Ratib an-Nabulsi, who mainly derives his fame from broadcasting his sermons three times a day on national radio, and the late Ahmad Kiftaru, until his death in 2004 head of the Ahmad Kiftaru Foundation.[9] Also the present Grand mufti of Syria,

Sheikh Ahmad Badr ad-din Hassoun, is an important figure although he lacks the popular following that the other sheikhs mentioned have.[10] The main Sunni institutes in Damascus are Hafez an-Naima, Al-Fatah al-Islam and the Ahmad Kiftaru Foundation: all three are a conglomerate of a mosque, charitable association(s) and school(s). The latter two also have colleges that are institutionally linked to foreign (Islamic) universities in the Middle East. The regime instituted *ittihad al-jamyiaat al-khairiya* (Union of charitable associations) and the related charitable *sunduq* (fund) branches provide an official structure concerning charitable associations and are further discussed below.[11]

[6] The entire foundation was called Abu Nour before sheikh Ahmad died in 2004, after his death the foundation was renamed to honor the late grand mufti of Syria.
[7] Interview, 4 April 2009.
[8] Interview, 30 April 2009.
[9] Also famous foreign Sheikhs, such as Yusif al-Qardawi, have a large following in Syria. The latter has been engaged in a long and heated religious debate with Ramadan al-Buti.
[10] See the following websites for more information on these individuals. Said Ramadan al-Buti: http://www.bouti.com/. Sheikh Muhammad Ratib an-Nabulsi: http://www.nabulsi.com/. Ahmad Kiftaru: http://kuftaro.org/. Ahmad Badr ad-din Hassoun: http://www.drhassoun.com/
[11] See the following websites for more information on these organizations. Hafez an-Naima: http://www.hifz.org/. Al-Fatah al-Islam: http://www.alfatihonline.com/. The Ahmad Kiftaru institute: www.abounour.net. The organizations all share the common goal of

The internal cohesion of the Sunni sphere is perceived to be greater than in secular civil society.[12] This probably is the result of a strong sense of common purpose that activists in the Sunni sphere have. Despite their differences all activists in the Sunni sphere are some how actively involved in persuading people to arrange their lives in accordance to Islamic insights – and doing so themselves. This together with the size and abundance of informal contacts provides the Sunni sphere with its internal cohesion. This is not to be confused with internal unity: deep divisions exist within the Sunni sphere: both on religious issues (what form of religious jurisprudence to follow), "politics" (how critical one should be vis-à-vis the regime), educational background (what religious scholars one received its religious schooling), family (from what religious family someone is from) and city (traditionally strong division exist between the Sunni spheres in Aleppo and Damascus). Various Islamic movements exist within the Sunni sphere; forming alliances, neglecting each other or standing diametrically opposed to each other. Despite these differences though, Sunni civil activists all reiterate they are part of the same community and that informal contacts between activists transcend the various boundaries described above.

Question 2: What is the position and/or the importance of the Sunni sphere in Syrian Society – especially in comparison to the regime and secular civil society?

Most interviewees noted the importance of the Sunni sphere in current Syrian affairs. Not surprisingly when considering that around 70% of the Syrians are Sunni, and 15% Shia and 10% Christian.[13] Ibrahim Hamidi, a Syrian journalist, wrote in the Lebanese newspaper al-Hayat in 2008:

> *the assistant minister of* awqaf [religious endowments][14] *Abdulrazzaq Muannas told* [the newspaper] *that the number of mosques in Syria is between 7 and 8 thousand.* […] *This means that 30 percent of the Syrians go to the mosque every week.* [… As grand mufti Sheikh Hassoun further] *explained: 'Statistics show that behind each and every one there is a wife and children, which means that we address 12 million people* [out of approximately 20 million Syrians] *each Friday* (Hamidi, 2008; translation by the author).

An increasing number of Sunnis are turning to religion to become socio-politically active. An often heard explanation for this phenomenon is that Islam is the only option left as basis for (civil) activism. Other (socio-political) movements, as communism and socialism and pan-Arabism are socially bankrupt. Others, such as (secular) options for civil-political activism are effectively repressed.[15]

The wide range, high number of participants, and authentic character of the sphere makes Sunni activism the most (socio-politically) influential form of social activism in Syria today (Hamidi, 2006). The mere size of the inter-personal and institutional network that the Sunni sphere represents renders it politically significant – even though any initiative within the Sunni sphere that tends to

---

supporting and developing Islamic awareness in society, but differ in specific type and aim of activities. Hafez al-Naima is mainly focused on 'pure' charitable activities: aiding the poor in society in a variety of ways. Al-Fatah al-Islam is mainly aimed at (supporting) Islamic education and the Ahmad Kiftaru Foundation has traditionally supported inter-faith dialogue (or, in their own words, dialogue between civilizations).

[12] Interview, 17 March 2009; Interview, 9 April 2009; Interview, 22 April 2009.

[13] Exact numbers on confessional distributions are hard to come by, because of the political delicacy of the sectarian issue. These numbers are approximates of figures provided by the CIA world factbook (2008).

[14] The Ministry of *awqaf* is the ministry managing appointments of Imams at mosques, the appointments of muftis and the allocation of mosques where charitable associations can collect *zakaat* (alms) during Ramadan.

[15] Interview, Damascus, 27 April 2009

some political message is quickly and harshly repressed. As one interviewee stated it: "you have two superpowers in Syria: one is the state, the other is the Islamic sphere".[16]

Question 3: What formal legislative and bureaucratic framework exists to manage these institutions?

The legislative and bureaucratic framework vis-à-vis the Sunni sphere is first and foremost a conglomeration of various ministries, institutions and intelligence services participating in managing the vast sphere of Sunni civil activism. The regime does not and cannot control the Islamic sphere in its entirety: the Sunni sphere is too large. Projects are initiated by Islamic civil activists, but the regime has over the years developed a formal institutional structure that allows it to frustrate any organization to the extent it seizes to exist and, as such, has an effective "veto" over any Islamic initiatives.

This effective "veto" is build on, first, formal policies such as the obligation of every (Sunni) institutions to be registered at their respective ministry. Mosques are registered at the Ministry of *awqaf*, charitable associations at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, Islamic higher education at the Ministry of education and the various colleges are in contact with the ministry of higher education. For many organizations it proves impossible to obtain official recognition by their relevant ministry. They are publicly active but without formal approval. The regime often does not actively repress these organizations but has the possibility to close the organization at any time they want.

Other formal policies are the nationalization of appointing of Imams at mosques, creating a state structure for muftis (and thereby being able to appoint sheiks to these state positions), creating an umbrella structure for the charitable associations and influencing their *zakaat* income during Ramadan.[17] On top of this, Sunni civil activists are under strict observation by one or more of the five Syrian *mukhabaraat* (intelligence services).[18]

Question 4: How are official policies implemented vis-à-vis Syrian Islamic activism and institutions?

The regime's reaction to Sunni activism is ambiguous – at best. Consider the following quote from an interview with a regime critical Damascus sheikh:

[16] Interview, Damascus, 22 April 2009. Additionally, there is a (re)emergence of radical Islamic fringe groups on the Syrian socio-political stage, with a number of violent outbreaks occurring since 2000. Information on these incidents is scarce; with many people unsure what, if any, Islamists groups are behind these events (Moubayed, 2006).

[17] In more detail: the state appoints Imams to mosques. As such, it can also bar Sheikhs to be imams: a strategy that is widely used by the regime. Concerning the state structure for muftis: each city, *muhafaza* (district) and the country itself has a state mufti position. Sheikh Badr ad-Din Hassoun is the present *mufti al-'am l'il-jamhuria al-arabia al-suria* (mufti of the Syrian Arab Republic). He succeeded Grand mufti Ahmad Kiftaru after his death in 2004. Concerning charitable associations a state structure has been implemented in which a proxy organization *itihaad jamiaat kharia* (Union of Charitable Associations) is instituted as *muhafaza* wide umbrella organization for all Islamic charitable associations. The union is part of the MoSAL and it is required that all charitable associations to transfer 5% of their cash before Ramadan to the union. From this money three main *sunduqs* (funds) are financed that serve as privileged charitable associations in the Syrian society. Simultaneously the Ministry of *awqaf* decides where associations are allowed to collect *zakaat* during Ramadan: each organization is assigned specific mosques. If no contribution is made to the Union, no places are assigned to that specific organization. Favored associations receive the largest mosques, more critical ones are through allocation of minor mosques in the *muhafaza*.

[18] Syria knows five main *mukhabaraat* branches: the *askari* (military), *dawla* (general) *siasa* (political) *jawia* (air) and the *shurti* or *dahali* (police or internal) security branch. Although the political and general branches are mostly involved, all branches are involved in monitoring the Islamic sphere and interfering where deemed appropriate. Although an umbrella structure exists, Ikhtiar is the current general head of the various branches, the five intelligence services are described as "little kingdoms": each forming a powerbase on its own (Interview, April 2009; *al-watan al-arabi*, 2007: 19-21).

> [In January 2008] *I, with a number of other sheikhs, was called to the ministry* [of Social Affairs and Labor] *and was told that I and the others would have to resign as head of our associations. This was argued to be the implementation of a new law disallowing an Imam to be director of a charitable association. I personally complained to the minister of MoSAL, not because of the new law but because I have been barred to preach for more than 20 years... I am not an Imam – and haven't been so for all those years! The response, of course, was a simple one: if he would complain further the complete association would be closed.*[19]

When focusing on the actual implementation of (new) laws, a discrepancy exists between formal laws and their actual implementation. The development of an ambiguous policy implementation is best seen as not a deliberate strategy of the Syrian regime vis-à-vis the Islamic sphere. It is rather a result of, first, competing elite political considerations: on one side there is real fear amongst regime elements of the strength of Syrian Islamists, resulting in fierce suppression;[20] at the other side the increasing strength and authenticity of Islam makes it impossible to ignore and suppress completely and makes it ideal for tapping its legitimacy for regime purposes.[21] As such, Islamic activists find themselves both needed and feared by the regime. The result is a constant movement in implementation of policies vis-à-vis the Sunni sphere.

Second, the high number of ministries (and ministers) and *mukhabaraat* active with the Sunni sphere results in a fragmented bureaucratic system. Considerable discrepancies between various ministries and intelligence services exist. The current minister of culture is considered to be pro-Islamic sphere – both by seculars and various activists in the Sunni sphere.[22] The current minister of MoSAL is known as a strong critic of the Sunni sphere. The same accounts for the secret services: repression that activists experience differs greatly between services and is often dependent on what is written in their intelligence files at the relevant services.[23] Hence an individual political figure or high ranking civil servant working at a ministry or *mukhabaraat* can influence how laws are (not) implemented. As such, it can be positive for an activist to know regime actors personally.

A number of "red lines" exist concerning (Islamic) civil activists in Syria: criticizing the president and touching upon inter-sectarian tensions present in society are two issues that are strictly forbidden. But these red lines are not fixed. They are an outcome of political consideration at political elite levels and strategic consideration by actors in regime institutions, at all levels. Hence, what is permitted or forbidden is perpetually unknown. The infamous "red lines" of a regime thereby resemble more shifting "red areas" in the sense that red lines are blurred to such an extent that only a few fixed "forbidden" issues remain. Practitioners on the ground have no other option than to test, by trial and error, what is permitted at what time. Trial and error is done with considerable stakes at play: as

[19] Interview, Damascus, April 2009.
[20] Examples of this extreme suppression can be found in the Sadnaya prison that is filled with Islamists (Levant news, 2008). Also any other (non-political) Islamic activism is closely monitored and controlled – and increasingly so during the past years. If activism tends to any political message it is immediately quelled. A recent law stipulating that individuals in official Islamic positions are forbidden to take seat in any board of directors of other Islamic CSOs is an example of this increased pressure.
[21] These regime affiliated initiatives range from founding umbrella organization for all Islamic CSOs (sunduq al-afia), and supporting regime friendly institutions (a prime example is the Abu-Nur Islamic educational Institute of the late Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaru in Damascus), to personal visits to mosques to bolster the Islamic credentials of the state (Tishreen, 2008).
[22] An example brought up by one of the interviewees is that, after the mufti of Aleppo ruled a fatwa against a play portraying a mufti as visiting prostitutes, the minister of culture followed the fatwa and vetoed the play. Apparently the mufti of Aleppo had the phone number of the minister and called him directly Interview, Damascus, 9 April 2009.
[23] Interview, Damascus, April 2009.

economic, and bureaucratic resources are controlled by the government; and many associations are active without formal approval of their respective ministries and can be closed at any time.

Question 5: Can Syrian Islamic activists and institutions themselves strategically navigate (in) formal relations to the authoritarian regime, in order to safeguard their activities against repressive policies?

Yes they can and yes they do. Pragmatism in the face of ambiguous and unpredictable policy implementation forces Islamic social actors to mirror the regime's ambiguity and actively seek relations with and within regime actors in an attempt to safeguard existing projects and sustain activism in the strong authoritarian and repressive context they find themselves. Consider what a Sheikh, who is also a member of parliament, said:

> *Of course it has helped me* [being a member of parliament]. *Although being an MP does not give me any direct power to change policies: as an independent I am always a minority against the Ba'ath MP that vote as one block. But being an MP has helped my project. There are a lot of conservative Sheikhs that oppose me, and the position of MP has protected me against repression, I have been able to care for my centre and constituency and I have been given a platform to voice my thoughts.*[24]

There are various examples in which these dynamic in the Syrian practice emerges: some sheikhs merge regime roles with their religious position, the above quote from Muhamad Habash is an example. Others foster informal contacts at the *mukhabaraat* or ministries. Some institutes, such as the Ahmad Kiftaru Foundation actively search for joint ventures with the regime.[25] These strategies are, for the most part, taken for granted by Syrian Sunni actors. Activists know in what context other individuals and organizations have to survive, and that different people choose different strategies. In the words of a Damascus based sheikh when talking about the various position that Sunni activists choose vis-à-vis the regime:

> *We are all like ships sailing on two currents, finding the best options for our projects: actually all being pragmatic. It is clear that some Sheikhs have to take another position as I did – I am against the wall and with every little mistake I make I am harassed* [by the regime]*. Others know people in various branches of the ministries and intelligence services – there by some Sheikhs have a little more room to be active than others do - but to what price?*[26]

The strategic value of informal contacts might also be relevant relating to contacts with the political elite. The Muslim women following Munira al-Qubaisi (the so-called Qubaysiaat) have for a long time been able to organize home teaching, outside the watchful eye of the intelligence services.[27] This is surprising in a context where no independent Islamic initiatives are normally allowed. What might

[24] Interview, Damascus, 11 March 2009.
[25] Interview, Damascus, 4 April 2009. That this strategy does not provide complete protection is sadly proven by the recent freezing of all assets that belong to Salaah Kiftaru, head of the Ahmad Kiftaru foundation, and his wife. The formal reason is that they are charged with corruption. Additionally all members of the board of directors of the the al-Ansar charitable association (related to the Ahmad Kiftaru foundation) are under investigation. The corruption charges are widely believed to be a smokescreen for political repression (Mardini, 2009).
[26] Interview, Damascus, April 2009.
[27] Interview, Damascus, 15 April 2009.

have played a role is that among the Qubaysiaat are wives of prominent regime officials. It was reported that the wife of Ahmad Jibril, one the founders of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command that resides in Damascus, was a member of the movement (Hamidi, 2006b).[28]

The above clarifies the Islamic sphere has an interest in seeking relations with the regime. Just as the regime can have an interest in seeking relations with the Sunni sphere. A continuing interaction exists between Islamic civil and regime actors in which both sides attempt to protect and support their own interests by engaging with the other. These informal arrangements seem to create the tendency of the regime and Sunni sphere to grow towards each other – with Sunni actors taking up regime roles, and increasingly regime actors being marked "Sunni sphere friendly" by both secular and Sunni actors. This happens to the extent that dividing lines between regime and Islamic social actors become blurred.[29]

Strikingly this dynamic can be strengthened through mounting repression. The need for benefits provided through regime relations increases in times of increased suppression: more information, political and economic resources are needed in such cases to sustain Islamic initiatives. These resources are present in regime circles. It seems that in searching contact with the regime the Sunni sphere is as a moth to a flame: being drawn to (and sustaining) the very regime that suppresses it.

Question 6: What are the implications of the above for Syrian authoritarian maintenance strategies?

Sunni activists search and/or foster relations to regime actors as survival strategy, which results in a social dynamic that enforces a public show of obedience by Sunni actors – and if not that – at least recognition of the supreme power of the regime. It shows an implicit subservience to the regime through the recognition that everyone is forced to work with, instead of work against, the regime as a mere survival strategy in the context of ambiguous authoritarian repression. Additionally it provides an auto-pacification of the Sunni sphere as, almost always, activists opt for compliance over non-compliance in their dealings with the regime.

There *is* a catch for the regime. As the Syrian Sunni sphere moves closer to the regime, and formal and informal contacts increase, the influence of the Sunni sphere on the regime can also increase. Many interviewees noted a (perceived) Islamization of the Syrian regime. Examples of high placed officials with a positive attitude vis-à-vis the Sunni community abound. Seculars accuse various MPs of being "Islamists", for example the current Minister of Culture. The same applies to the Damascus Municipality that is perceived to be increasingly influenced by the Sunni community.[30] The social dynamic sustaining the authoritarian regime might not only be changing the nature of Sunni activism to its core – but also the regime that it is sustaining.

[28] Currently though, the Qubaysiaat have been subject to stricter supervision and repression – a policy change that the position of Qubaysiaat members obviously did not have an influence on. According to one interviewee, the position of high-placed women in the Qubaysiaat has only played a marginal role: providing some security to the prominent women themselves, but not the movement as a whole (Interview, Damascus, 11 March 2009).
[29] Consider the example above of the sheikh who is also an MP. He belongs both to regime circles – by being an independent MP in the Syrian parliament – and to the Islamic sphere – by being a prominent Sheikh. As the latter he is subject to regime repression, at the same time he takes actively part in that same regime.
[30] Interview, 12 April 2009; interview, 9 March 2009; interview, 18 April 2009; interview, 20 April 2009; interview, 27 April 2009.

It is debatable to what extent this dynamic is real or perceived. As noted above, specific examples of "Islamists" in the Syrian regime are provided by interviewees, but to what extent these are noteworthy exceptions on a largely insusceptible regime or examples of a broader dynamic is hard to ascertain. At one level the true extent is irrelevant: the fear of Islamization amongst many seculars (and the appreciation of the increased 'respect' amongst Islamic activists) is real and influences the position of the Islamic and secular activism vis-à-vis the regime. The mere fact that regime Islamization is currently a point of discussion amongst Syrian activists should make it a dynamic to be taken into account – it is irrelevant whether it is a perceived dynamic or not.

At another, it *is* perceived likely that influence of the Islamic sphere on regime circles is substantial and will probably increase in the future. It is highly unlikely that closer co-operation between Sunni actors and the regime will come to a halt with increased repression. On the contrary: increased repression makes demand for state 'security' only higher and thereby increases the importance of fostering en developing regime related contacts. Secondly, influence of Sunni activism on regime actors is mainly exerted trough informal contacts that are largely insusceptible to formal policies and/or increased repression. For example via a Sheikh who knows people at the *mukhabaraat* or people working at the ministries that were students of a specific religious scholar and still regards him/her as a guide to how they should live their lives. It is unlikely that on a personal level bureaucrats will sever contacts with Islamic activists they know – as long as this does not directly affect their individual professional positions. This is currently not the case. With the number of these contacts probably not diminishing and influence via informal contacts remaining, it is expected that the Sunni sphere will remain influential for the time being even in times of increased repression.

On a more general note, it should be clear that supremacy does not mean insusceptibility. The Syrian regime, as mentioned earlier on in this report, has the implicit ability to veto any civil initiative it deems unwanted. It is an ability that the regime actively uses. This supremacy is unquestioned and strengthened through the dynamic described above. At the same time, this does not have a direct relation to how (informal) relations between mainstream Sunni activists and regime actors develop. Hence, the seemingly contradictory situation emerges where an unchallenged regime that, at the same time, probably cannot remain unmoved by Sunni civil activism it is repressing. It does not mean that Syria will become an 'Islamic State' but rather will remain susceptible to Sunni demands made through informal channels.

As said above, in searching contact with the regime the Sunni sphere is as a moth to the flame: being drawn to, and sustaining, the very regime that suppresses them. But, at the same time, many Syrian seculars are afraid of an increasing Islamization of the Syrian government. It can be that by "opening up" to the Sunni sphere the regime has created a fire to which it will burn itself. With the Sunni sphere slowly gaining more influence in regime circles there is a possibility that the Syrian regime is slowly being transformed. In that respect it can be asked: who is the moth, and who is the flame?

Recommendations

The following paragraph provides a number of recommendations derived from the description and analysis above. They are aimed at international NGOs that hope to engage with civil actors in Syria. Recommendations are all related to the Syrian Sunni sphere but can also apply to a broader spectrum of civil actors.

Recommendation 1: in programming the often ambiguous relations activists have with the authoritarian regime should be acknowledged. To the extent this is already done, it should be continued.

A social dynamic has emerged where Sunni civil activist actively develop relations to regime actors. "Independence" in this respect becomes a very ambiguous concept: Sunni activist often have some form of relation to the regime.[31] It does not render these activists puppets of the regime, but they don't remain completely independent either. The same applies to any other group of civil activists. In general terms activism does not *a priori* has to stand opposed to authoritarianism. For instance, the dynamic of civil activists actively developing relations to regime actors can help stabilize the authoritarian regime. This paper provides an extensive and practical example of the fact that civil activism does not *a priori* stand opposed to an authoritarian regime, but can in certain contexts actually provide opportunities for regime maintenance strategies.

This should not be taken to mean that any contacts or engagements with Syrian civil activists should be avoided. Rather, it should be noted that a black and white distinction between "co-opted" and "independent" organizations does not do justice to the complexity of civil-regime relations in Syria and that this is the reality that international NGOs have to work with. Many local activists have very little room to maneuver – and some strategic choices have to be made if one wants to be (socially) active. It should be recognized by foreign actors that most civil activists have to make strategic socio-political and economic considerations to keep their project afloat. If an international NGO decides to engage with Syrian civil activists than this is the context they will find themselves in. They can support activists – but this reality has to be taken into account. How this is done, what activists are worked with (and what not) depends on the specific goals of the international NGO.

Recommendation 2: know the Islamic sphere. When an international NGO is active in the field of civil activism in Syria the broader Syrian (activist) context should be known – including the Sunni sphere. Currently, the Sunni sphere remains to large extent an unknown factor amongst Western NGOs.

From the interviews and observations it became clear that the Syrian Sunni sphere constitutes a vast network of civil activists that dwarfs any other network of Syrian civil activism: including secular civil society. Arguably the Sunni sphere is currently the only entity that has the potential to destabilize the Syrian regime. As an interviewee from a secular Syrian NGO commented "there are two super powers in Syria: the regime and the Islamic sphere. We, secular civil society, are a very small group that kind of hangs in between these two."[32]

[31] Activist can also be drawn to other powerful actors for protection: for example to powerful economic actors. One can debate the extent to which other powerful actors are actually also part of the Syrian regime.
[32] Interview Damascus, 20 April 2009.

If a foreign non-governmental actor wishes to support forms of (secular) civil activism in Syria with the aim to alter or support societal processes, it is pertinent to understand the wider Syrian context. One of the main actors (or better: *the* main actor) in this respect is the Sunni sphere. In the authors view it is therefore essential for any NGO active in Syria to gain knowledge about, and contacts in, the Syrian Sunni sphere. It has become clear though, that knowledge of the Sunni (or Islamic) sphere is lacking in many international NGOs active in Syria.

Another reason to focus on the sphere is that there is, amongst secular civil activists, a real fear of Islamization of Syrian society and government. At the same time there is little to no research done on what constitutes the Islamic sphere in Syria, what its boundaries are, and to what extent one can say that the government is becoming "more Islamic". As such, more research is on Islamization of Syrian society and to what extent fears are grounded. There is a (draft) proposal by two local (secular) actors to investigate these issues further. It can be a possibility to follow up on this..

Recommendation 3: sustain contacts in the Islamic (and Sunni) sphere and build a continuing dialogue with actors in the Islamic sphere. These contacts will have a positive effect on knowledge about the Sunni sphere amongst international NGOs and knowledge about international NGOs amongst actors in the Sunni sphere.

As mentioned in recommendation 2, if a foreign non-governmental actor wishes to support forms of (secular) civil activism in Syria it is pertinent to understand the wider societal context in Syria and as such the Sunni sphere. It is therefore important that regular contact with the Sunni sphere are developed and sustained. Through these contacts, first, general insights into the Sunni sphere are generated. Second, sustaining contacts keeps possibilities open for possible future initiatives. Although at present it is advised to be cautious with developing co-operation projects (see recommendation 4) sustaining contacts at least ensures that if the general authoritarian context changes in the future a basis exists on which shared initiatives can be build.

It is suggested here that the best way to do this is by showing a general interest in the Islamic sphere, for example through a further research project. A proposed research can be on different (forms of) civil activism between the Sunni, Shia, Ismaeli, and Allawite sphere and how these differences can be explained.[33] This enables a broad general scope of the Syrian Islamic sphere. Also, the Sunni sphere and secular Syrian civil society can be compared, asking why there is a clear discrepancy in level of inter-personal trust between both communities. A third proposed project can focus on perception of the Islamic sphere, Syrian secular civil society and international NGOs of each other.

Muslim contacts can be interviewed to gain these insights. Through these interviews contacts are fostered between international NGOs and the Islamic sphere. These contacts are best drawn in small numbers, to limit investment necessary to sustain them. At the same time they should be drawn from a wide spectrum of Islamic denominations and forms of activism, to gain a rich insight into the sphere.[34] It should be mentioned that any contact between a foreign entity and the Syrian Sunni

[33] The Ismaeli, and Allawite faiths are (officially) a branch of Shia faith, and marked by a very liberal interpretation of Islam.
[34] More specifically, ideally it would be between 5 and 10 contacts; with most from the Sunni sphere, but also Shia and other Islamic denomination represented. The head of one of the larger Islamic institutions could be approached, one or two Islamic scholars, regime

sphere is sensitive at the moment, mainly due to "foreign contacts" radicalizing the Syrian Sunni sphere. These reports mainly imply Saudi and Wahabi influence, but also western contacts with the Sunni sphere are met with suspicion by the intelligence services.

Recommendation 4: foreign organizations should be cautious with developing co-operation projects with (Syrian) Islamic activists: problems with the intelligence agencies are expected, too little information on the Sunni sphere is currently available, and aims probably differ between Islamic activists and international NGOs.

In engaging Islamic civil activists the difference between sustaining contacts, co-operating with, or financing (projects of) civil activists should be taken into account. Recommendation 3 urged international NGOs to initiate contacts among the Islamic sphere in order to develop knowledge of each other and foster mutual respect and recognition. Here it is argued that foreign organizations should – for now – make sustaining contacts with the Islamic sphere their primary goal and develop mutual initiatives at a (much) later stage. This is recommended for three reasons:

First, the Syrian *mukhabaraat* (intelligence agencies) are expected to be more sensitive to support provided to Islamic civil activists than to their secular counterparts. As is well known amongst international NGOs active in Syria repression is severe and foreign financial support to (secular) NGOs is problematic. Giving aid to (critical) Sunni organizations is even more so, as the Sunni sphere is deemed more of a threat to the regime than secular civil society. Any support to an individual or organization in the Sunni sphere will draw attention from the regime in general and the Syrian intelligences services specifically. As such, risks related to giving some form of financial support for the international NGO and – even more so – the local counterparts are high.

Secondly, it is the authors opinion that currently too little detailed knowledge is available about the Syrian Islamic sphere to responsibly and effectively initiate co-operation projects. The abundance of informal contacts within the Sunni sphere makes it difficult to determine with whom someone or an institute has contacts. There is a probability that support given can end up supporting actors that do not share the general aims of the international NGO or that might create a scandal in the

Netherlands/EU as aid money is given to "radical" and/or "fundamentalist" Islamic groups. Larger institutes may seem a safe alternative (and are easier to identify) but often have close relations to the regime – thereby increasing risks of indirectly supporting authoritarianism.

Third, the general aim of Islamic activism – Islamization of society – and specific programming originating from this can conflict with aims set by international NGOs; issues concerning gay and women rights are problematic in this respect. This is not to say that any Islamic civil initiative *a priori* conflicts with aims set by an international NGO. It is argued though, that large differences do exist and that time and extensive mutual knowledge are indispensable for finding and navigating common ground between Islamic activists and their foreign counterparts. This is expected to be a long and frustrating process that starts by building contacts and trust. As such, for international NGOs that

---

critical sheikhs and Islamic scholars from the Damascus Sharia faculty. Additionally an organization can specifically aim at fostering contacts with activists at smaller organizations and/or lower ranks.

hope to engage with Islamic civil actors in Syria it is recommended that the first priority should be finding and sustaining these contacts. From these relation then – over a number of years – might develop co-operation projects.

Conclusion

Summarized the paper has argued that the Sunni sphere is a vast network of individuals and institutions active in name of Islam. This network dwarfs any other network of civil activism in Syria. Being one of the largest fields of civil activism, the Sunni sphere has political significance – even though political initiatives are strictly forbidden by regime authorities. A large bureaucratic and legal system has been build to “manage” this Islamic civil activism.

Strikingly then, the implementation of his legal structure is highly ambiguous. Although this ambiguity is not a deliberate strategy, from it emerges a social dynamic where pragmatism in the context of perpetual uncertainty persuades civil activists to actively engage with the regime. This provides the regime support in authoritarian regime maintenance strategies through 1) better possibilities for controlling these activities and 2) an implicit recognition of the supreme power of the regime and statement of subservience to it. By actively searching for contact the Sunni sphere supports the very same regime that suppresses them – like a moth drawn to a flame. The Islamic sphere can also influence the regime. Fears are present amongst secular parts of Syrian society that by “opening up” to the Sunni sphere the regime will become more Islamic itself. In that respect the question was asked: who is the moth and who is the flame?

Recommendations made have been drawn from the research focused on the Sunni sphere but may apply to the wider field of civil activism. The main recommendations are that 1) international NGOs should acknowledge the ambiguous relations that Syrian civil activists often have to the regime 2) the general context in which (secular) civil society exists in Syria should be better understood especially in relation to the Islamic sphere. 3) NGOs should foster contacts in the Islamic sphere aimed at creating better insight on the Syrian civil activism but 4) without the direct intention of (financially) supporting these actors.

About the author

Teije Hidde Donker is currently a PhD candidate at the European University Institute in Florence, supervised by Donatella della Porta and Olivier Roy. Concurrently he is a Research Fellow at West-Asia research programme of the University of Amsterdam. He has a MSC in Conflict Studies at the University of Amsterdam, lived and worked in Syria and Egypt for two years, reads Arabic and speaks it fluently.

About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

For more information contact:
Juliette Verhoeven
General Coordinator
Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia
University of Amsterdam
Department of Political Science
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237
1012 DL Amsterdam The Netherlands
E-mail:J.C.Verhoeven@uva.nl

Kawa Hassan
Knowledge Officer West Asia
Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries
P.O. Box 85565
2508 CG The Hague The Netherlands
www.hivos.net
E-mail: khassan@hivos.nl

Other papers in this series are also available on www.hivos.net:

Working paper 1: Moth or Flame: The Sunni Sphere and Regime Durability in Syria, by Teije Hidde Donker.
Working paper 2: Civil Society Activism in Morocco: 'Much Ado About Nothing'?, by Francesco Cavatorta.
Working paper 3: Civil Society and Democratization in Contemporary Yemen, by Laurent Bonnefoy and Marine Poirier.
Working paper 4: The Downfall of Simplicity, by Stephan de Vries.
Working paper 5: Democratization through the Media, by Francesco Cavatorta.
Working paper 6: Business in Morocco, by Farid Boussaid.
Working paper 7: Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan, by Curtis R. Ryan.
Working paper 8: Package Politics, by Aurora Sottimano.