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The Discourses of the Damascene Sunni Ulama during the 2011 Revolution Jawad Qureshi

The Arab Spring and Religion

The events that sparked the Arab Spring date back to December 2010 and occurred in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, where Muhamed Bouazizi, a street vendor who could not afford to pay the bribes needed for a permit, immolated himself after being harassed by the local police. Protests and rallies took off throughout Tunisia and led to the unexpected ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. Shortly thereafter, a wave of protests swept across the Middle East that resulted in the resignations of both Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh and the killing of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. Of the countries that saw mass protests, only two regimes have so far resisted being toppled, the monarchy of King Hamad al-Khalifa of Bahrain and the Syrian Baath Party under Bashar al-Assad. More than a year since the beginning of these events, the monarchy in Bahrain has successfully quelled the uprising while in Syria the Baath regime remains engaged in fighting an emboldened populace that does not appear ready to give up.

Over the past year, the role of religion and religious actors has been a recurring concern for many observers. At the start of the Arab Spring, analysts were keen to note that the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions were not led by Islamists and that there was a general absence of religion and ideology in the rhetoric of the protesters. In Egypt, the conspicuous absence of Al-Azhar's leadership from the demonstrations was made up for by images of Azharis—recognizable by their distinct white turban and red tarboush—standing alongside protestors, including also Coptic Christians, re-assuring many that sectarian fears and identity

politics could be put aside in order to deal with the more fundamental problems posed by the thirty years of the Mubarak regime. Even Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the famous Egyptian religious scholar based in Qatar, in his Friday sermon on February 18th in Tahrir Square, was congratulatory to the Egyptian revolutionaries for their display of national unity across religious lines. After the revolutions, religion remains an issue of concern. While theocracies and “the Iranian model” of *wilāyat al-faqīh* (the guardianship of the jurist) seem to be in little favour, the focus of observers seems to centre on the role of religion in shaping policy and law, and “the Turkish model” of Islamism has greater currency while the fear of Salafism looms large. This concern is certainly justified, particularly after the victory of the Islamist al-Nahda Party in Tunisian elections, the strong showing at the polls in Egypt’s elections of the Salafi al-Nur party and the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party, as well as the religious character of many of Libya’s revolutionary fighters.

At the time of writing, protests and government crackdowns continue throughout Syria, where men of religion and their institutions have played a prominent role in shaping both sides of the protests since they began. In an authoritarian regime such as Syria’s, where political gatherings are banned, Friday prayers are the only occasion when people can legally gather en-masse. There are two consequences of this. The first is that in a fairly religiously observant society such as Syria’s, ‘ulama have been uniquely situated in being able to address large public gatherings in a manner that other actors in society cannot. Secondly, mosques have been the primary sites from which protests are launched and also the targets of government crackdowns. Each Friday thus presented an opportunity for the ‘ulama to intervene in events. Also, as the government crackdown became increasingly violent and greater numbers of protestors were killed, the funeral prayers held at mosques re-inscribed the mosque as a site of opposition. Funeral processions carrying the bier of Friday’s dead to the graveyard often turned into protests, drawing further government repression. In this way, particularly in the beginning of the Syrian Uprising, mosques served as important sites for resistance and violence.

This paper presents a narrative of events in Damascus as protests emerged from the last week of March to May 2011, focusing on the public interventions of Sunni ‘ulama as events progressed.¹ Throughout this narrative, I pay attention to how the ‘ulama in question position themselves with respect to both the government and the protestors, concentrating on their modes of reasoning. Rather than categorizing the positions taken by the ‘ulama under general frameworks, I have chosen

to provide a linear narrative to convey a sense of the progression and escalation of events. The materials analyzed include sermons, public lessons and eulogies at funerals in addition to appearances on state and satellite television.² I focus on Damascus because, in addition to being the seat of power, it is difficult to gather and verify information from the cities and towns where protests and government crackdowns have been most marked—Daraa, Latakia, Douma, Banyas, Jisr Shughour, Hama and Homs. Also, the author was present in Damascus between March and April 2011 and witnessed a number of the events mentioned below first-hand. Some of the incidents not witnessed directly were verified shortly after their occurrence through interviews with eyewitnesses.

March, 2011: The Start of the Syrian Uprising

As protests were spreading throughout the Arab world in January and February 2011, a series of isolated events took place in Syria that unsuccessfully tried to spark the fire of revolution. These included the self-immolation of a man in Hasaka à la Bouazizi, a “Day of Rage” in Damascus on February 4-5, a protest in the Hariqa Souq in Damascus on February 17 after the son of a shop owner was hit by a policeman, protests in Damascus’ Marjeh Square on March 16th and an anti-Qaddafi rally in front of the Libyan embassy on March 22nd (at which over one hundred people were arrested). Each of these was put down relatively quickly and failed to inspire a mass uprising.

On March 6th in the southern city of Daraa, fifteen boys aged 10 to 15 were arrested for writing anti-government graffiti on the wall of their school, including the slogan of the Arab Spring, “The people want to bring down the government” (*al-sha'b yurid isqāt al-nizām*). Family members of the boys pleaded for their release with local authorities to no avail. On March 18th, several thousand protestors marched from the al-'Umari mosque after Friday prayers demanding the release of the boys as well as greater political freedoms. The government met the protestors with riot police, water cannons, tear gas and, eventually, live ammunition. Four protestors were killed that day and dozens more were injured. Throughout Syria, small protests flared up after Friday prayers, including the Ummawi Mosque in Damascus. Throughout the week of March 19-24, both the protests and the government crackdown in Daraa increased proportionately, with the former growing in numbers and the latter in violence. A circle of violence was created: each protest was met with a heavy hand from the government, resulting in more funerals, whose processions became protests, which were met with more violence and death. News from Daraa spread throughout the country primarily via

satellite channels, in particular al-Jazeera and BBC Arabic. Throughout the day, they aired gritty images captured on cell phone cameras accompanied by voice-overs from analysts still jubilant about events in Tunis and Egypt. The Syrian Uprising had begun.

March, 24th: Shaykh Said Ramadan al-Bouti's Lesson

On the evening of Thursday March 24th, Shaykh Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti³ made his way to Damascus' al-Iman Mosque in the Mazra' neighbourhood to deliver his weekly lesson. The main hall of the mosque was filled near capacity. Bouti's lessons are broadcast live on satellite television and are uploaded on his website, and thus have an audience greater than the few hundred in the mosque. That evening, Bouti broke from his scheduled lesson in order to address what had come to fill people's minds increasingly over the past week, saying, "Perhaps it is good, if I daresay not a duty, to say something concerning this strife (*fitna*) that has reared its head towards us."⁴

Bouti (b. 1929), an emeritus professor and former dean of the faculty of theology at Damascus University's Shari'a College, is Syria's most prominent religious scholar. A longstanding personal relationship developed between Bouti and Hafez al-Assad in the 1970s when Assad read one of Bouti's books, *Naqḍ awḥām al-mādiya al-jadaliya* (Critique of the Delusions of Dialectical Materialism). This led to a series of intermittent private meetings between the two men over the following decades. In the 1980s, after the Assad regime violently put down the uprising in Hama, religious practice in the public sphere came under harsh repression and membership in the Muslim Brotherhood became a crime punishable by death. Bouti was able to use his relationship with Assad to secure the release of thousands of prisoners in addition to opening of the public sphere to religion again in the 1990s. During this period, Bouti's ties to the regime became stronger despite the fact that Bouti has never held an official position in the state religious apparatus. Bouti's rank as a senior scholar and his influence with the government has led to a pragmatic relationship between Bouti and the Assad regime. This relationship however is seen by many of his critics, including those amongst the 'ulama, as reflecting Bouti's political naïveté and his co-optation by the state.⁵

That evening, his speech covered four points, which would foreshadow part of the government's narrative concerning the protests. The first dealt with what was ostensibly the reason why protests took place throughout the Middle East, namely, the question of reform (*iṣlāḥ*). Reform here referred to changing those laws that block people's

freedoms, as well as the corruption that results from such repressive laws. Bouti maintained that reform was a social and religious obligation, but posed the question: by what means is reform to be achieved? For Bouti, reform required two sides, those in power and those taking to the streets. He argued that the path of reform consisted in these two sides meeting (*talaqqī*), consulting (*tashāwur*), negotiating (*mudhākara*), cooperating (*ta'āwūn*), coming to agreements (*ittifāq*) and then setting out to execute those reforms (*inṣilāq*) on a timeline. Reform, he emphasized, cannot be one-sided and cannot be realized by a faction of people that take over some square or street, carrying banners and chanting slogans. “A revolution,” he said, “can destroy in hours, whereas building does not come to completion except in stages – [namely], those mentioned previously.”⁶

The second point that Bouti addressed was the new reform program that had ostensibly already begun in Syria, a program that he claimed entailed fundamental reform (*al-islāh al-jadhrī*) and that was a result of the steps just outlined. He was referring to a venture initiated by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, wherein the latter called a meeting (Bouti did not mention when this took place) with a number of 'ulama and Syrian intellectuals in order to hear the needs of the country and the shortcomings that those in positions of office needed to address. According to Bouti, in that meeting, “everything that might occur to the minds of those that are raising banners was laid out and discussed,”⁷ followed by pledges to see the proposed suggestions realized. He stated that in the immediate future, announcements of fundamental reform (*al-islāh al-jadhrī*) that the nation had been awaiting and was in desperate need of were going to be made.

The third point concerned the origins of the protests in Daraa. Here, Bouti echoed what was the government narrative concerning the protests, namely that these protests did not truly reflect the concerns of the local citizenry and that they originated from outside Syria. He distinguished between the situation in Syria and what had occurred in Egypt, pointing out that the protests in Egypt had been organized locally, by individuals that were well known to the populace. The same, he argued, could not be said for Syria. Here he explained that the calls to protest were received from anonymous sources electronically, in a pre-packaged manner, delineating what days to protest, what to call those days (Day of Anger, Day of Honour, etc.), the chants to use, what slogans to write on banners and so on. Bouti mentioned that he had himself received a number of anonymous pleas to use the Friday prayer as an opportunity to stage protests and that he tried to determine the source of these communiqués. The effort proved futile and this,

according to Bouti, was reason enough to pause for consideration. The question that concerned Bouti was, given the anonymous and pre-packaged nature of these messages, how should one react in such a situation? For Bouti, the Qur'anic verse, "Pursue not that which you lack knowledge of," (Q. 17: 36) spoke to the current situation. The verse said to him,

"Do not follow those who would take you by the hand to whence you do not know; do not follow someone you do not even know who they are; do not put your hand in the hand of someone you do not know; and do not put your hand in that of someone you know, but you do not know to what end they will take you."⁸

Given the unknown source of these calls, a number of possibilities seemed reasonable to him. Reflecting a culture where conspiracy theories of all sorts are given credence, he asked: was it not possible that Zionist Israeli hands were instigating matters? Is there not a likely possibility that those that "lie in wait" against Syria are behind this? Could it not be conceived that the American right-wing is behind these protests? Similarly, is it not a possibility that they are using the name of "reform" and "rights" to ignite the fire of civil strife in Syria? (The possibility that the protests were based on legitimate long-standing political, social and economic grievances of the population is conspicuously absent.) Thus, based on the intimations of this Qur'anic verse just cited and the unknown sources of these calls, discernment (*wa'ī*) told him that it was not possible for him to blindly obey these calls.

He then described the situation of the previous Friday (March 18th), when a group of people had tried to start a protest after the prayer in the Umayyad Mosque. According to Bouti's account, the situation in the mosque after the prayer had ended was normal. However, outside of the mosque, according to Bouti, a group of people that had not been part of congregation lay in wait for the prayer to end and then had started shouting anti-government slogans. The congregation making its way out of the mosque sought to drown the protestors out by chanting religious invocations. Bouti's description of them—"their foreheads do not know prostration," "their bodies do not know how to bow," etc.—pointed towards their lack of concern for religion and the instrumental usage of the mosque as the communiqués had urged. This indicated to Bouti that these protests were ill intentioned, lacking any concern for religious teachings.⁹

For Bouti, the sum of all this, and this was the purpose of his intervention that night, was that such a method of reform (i.e. public protests) could only lead to violence and destruction and that the only way of attaining the desired reforms was through engaging the government through dialogue. The Sunni juristic principle that “preventing harm takes precedence over attaining benefits” (*dar' al-mafāsīd muqaddam 'ala jalb al-maṣāliḥ*) needed to be applied. Given that the harm from protests—civil strife (*fitna*) and destruction—outweighed any potential good that might come from protests, Islamic reasoning could not mandate the protests.

The fourth point of his lesson that night was a heart-felt plea for people to turn to God in supplication during this period of trial to help see the nation through it. He repeated these four points in an interview for Syrian national television, which only convinced the opponents of the protesters. The next morning Bouti travelled to the Emirates and then to Brunei to participate in a conference for the following two weeks.

March 25th: Shaykh Usama al-Rifa'i's Sermon

The day after Bouti's lesson, on Friday March 25th, the slow-brewing tension felt throughout Syria boiled over into Damascus. The day before saw the most violent crackdown in Daraa since protests began and human rights groups reported over one hundred people killed.¹⁰ That Friday, Shaykh Usama al-Rifa'i, one of Damascus' most influential 'ulama, made the demands of the protesters the subject of his sermon. Rifa'i is the eldest son of Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i (d. 1973), a Damascene scholar that set up a network of charitable organizations based at the Zayd Mosque in the Bab Srijje neighbourhood. In addition to his outreach and charitable work, Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim was a prominent figure in the revival of religious knowledge in the middle of the last century.¹¹ His two sons, Usama and Sariya, had lived in exile in Saudi Arabia from the 1980s onwards, during which the charitable organizations of their father functionally ceased working. Upon their return in the mid-1990s these charitable networks were infused with new life and activity and came to be important religious institutions. Based in their father's former mosque and the 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i Mosque (named after their father) in Kefer Souseh, the two brothers continue their father's method of outreach, focusing on charity and religious education. As Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik¹² have illustrated, the “Zayd movement” (*Jamā'at Zayd*) has maintained an ambiguous relationship with the regime. On the one hand, their charitable work

relieves poverty-related problems that the regime is unable to address, and for this reason is welcomed by the state. A sign of this approval is that president Assad met with Usama al-Rifa'i and that the organization has received various state benefits (permission to raise funds, control of mosques, etc.). Yet, the movement has successfully maintained its independence and has resisted becoming a mouthpiece of the regime. They have been able to do this because of the movement's middle class merchant social base from which it derives financial independence. This point—remaining free of state money or interference—was emphasized by their father and is an important part of the movement's image. Their ideological independence is manifest in their sermons and lessons, in which they openly criticized elements of the state that they see as acting contrary to Islamic norms.¹³ Rifa'i's sermon that Friday reflected this independence.

After opening his sermon with a short discursus on security and the duty of preserving security, he said, "What we see in our country—what is going on from a week ago, more or less, and continuing until today—in Daraa and in other places, all of this obligates us to consider the duty of *naṣīḥa* that the prophet has commanded us to perform." *Naṣīḥa* is the notion of "sincere counsel" or "advice" and in Islamic discourse derives from the hadith, stating that religion consists of sincere counsel "to rulers of the Muslims as well as the common Muslim."¹⁴ The act of *naṣīḥa* is a morally corrective form of criticism delivered when the advisor senses that a particular matter needs to be addressed. When directed to a sovereign by a religious scholar it is not an act of revolution or rebellion but rather an act of moral and "corrective" criticism. In his study of the *naṣīḥa* delivered by Saudi 'ulama to King Fahd during the Gulf War, anthropologist Talal Asad notes that their criticism did not offer a political alternative or attack the government but rather took the stance of a moral critic.¹⁵ Criticism of the ruler in this form should not be conflated with civil disobedience and certainly not rebellion (*khurūj*), which in fact is disclaimed and deemed strife (*fitna*). Rifa'i's sermon should thus not be seen as anti-regime or conflated with the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, which called for outright regime change—"the masses want to bring down the regime" (*al-sha'b yurīd isqat al-nizam*). Rather, his sermon should be seen as a moral witness to the regime regarding the events in Daraa.

In his calm and reflective tone, Rifa'i directed his sermon to "the president of the republic and to all those brothers in positions of responsibility (*al-mas'ūliyyūn*)" and then articulated the demands of the protestors. The key issue that everything rested upon was the notion of freedom. Freedom, Rifa'i argued, is an essential component to one's

humanity that distinguishes mankind from other creatures. To have one's freedoms taken away from them, completely or partially, is to lose part of one's humanity. He cited the saying of the second caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, rebuking one of his governors that mistreated a Coptic Christian, "Why have you enslaved people whose mothers gave birth to them as freemen?" The connection to Syria is clear: the population deprived of freedoms by the state has functionally been reduced to slavery and deprived of part of their humanity. The way in which Syrians have been deprived of their freedoms has been through the emergency laws implemented in 1963, which enshrined the authoritarian structure of the Baath government: "The emergency laws," Rifa'i said, "have curtailed all of the freedoms that should be enjoyed by any non-colonized nation." To restore these fundamental human freedoms and the humanity of the protestors, the emergency laws had to be repealed. Rifa'i provided an example of how the emergency laws suppress freedom by mentioning the countless political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Syrian jails whose crime amounted to little more than a thought-crime.

Rifa'i turned his focus to speak about matters relating to religion, given that he was speaking from a pulpit as a preacher, and left it to specialists of other fields to speak about those. As an example of where freedoms relating to religion were curtailed, he mentioned the increasing secularization of public spaces that intruded on personal freedoms. Rifa'i was referring specifically to the 2010 ban by the Ministry of Education on female teachers in public schools and female students at university wearing face-veils (*niqāb*). The ban resulted in over one-thousand teachers being dismissed from their jobs. The Minister of Education, 'Ali Sa'd, said in newspaper interviews that these decisions were meant to preserve secularism by fighting fundamentalism and that they would be followed up by more decisions of this kind.¹⁶ The problem for Rifa'i was not secularism per se, which he understood as the state not adopting or promoting a particular religion; the problem was that the state was overstepping its bounds and obstructing personal freedoms, proscribing individual choice. Such acts, Rifa'i said, evoked memories of September 29, 1981 when the Daughters of the Revolution went through the streets of Damascus and tore off women's hijabs.

Related to this, the Ministry of Education had verbally given orders prohibiting any manifestation of religion in schools, in addition to prohibiting the promotion of any form of religious activity, such as reciting Qur'an on the bus to and from school, memorizing hadith, conducting prayers in school, etc. These decisions were particularly intrusive in that inspectors were sent to schools to ensure that they were

in conformity. In addition to repressing religion, this re-enforced a culture of spies and informants that has kept Syrians in a state of perpetual suspicion and mistrust for decades. Such orders were given verbally, Rifa'i claims, so that there would not be a paper trail and so that the Minister of Education could claim deniability.

Another example of the aggressive secularization pertained to the governor of Damascus, Bishr al-Sabban. Sabban purged the bureaucracy under him of dozens of employees because of their open religious practice. Further, Sabban changed ten of Damascus' neighbourhood parks (out of 120) from being women's-only to being inclusive of men as well. Rifa'i remarked that after sitting in extended meetings with the governor and his representatives, the latter were unwilling to recognize requests for such segregated parks as legitimate rights of citizens i.e. of the residents of the neighbourhoods that asked for such parks in the first place. What compounded the frustration was the disrespectful, dismissive and harsh treatment they received from Sabban and his office. While the particular examples mentioned by Rifa'i might not have been shared by his audience, they told a story that they were all too familiar with, namely, an intrusive and repressive state bureaucracy that curtailed individual and group liberties.

Lastly, Rifa'i mentioned the corruption that pervades every level of the vast state bureaucracy and how repressive laws are only applied to the poor while the wealthy few are able to bribe their way out of any legal problems. He closed his sermon saying,

“If our brothers that are in charge, and foremost amongst them the president, want to placate Daraa and places other than Daraa throughout the region, the key to placating them is in the hands of the president and all of those in charge. The key is in their hands! And it is to change all these things that I have just mentioned.”

He closed the first half of his sermon by thanking President Assad for freeing a number of political prisoners as well as for increasing the salaries of government employees but did not fail to reiterate the above-mentioned points.

Immediately after the prayers, the congregation—in the hundreds—started chanting slogans of solidarity with the people of Daraa as well as what has become a popular slogan of the Syrian protesters, “God, Syria, freedom and nothing else” (*Allah, sūriyya, ḥurriyya, wa bass*). Security around mosques had been heightened since February and as soon as the protesting congregation came within range of security forces, the latter first locked the doors to the mosque to prevent the congregation in the

mosque from joining the protest and then began beating the crowd outside with batons and tasers and rounding them up into buses. According to witnesses, Rifa'i made his way out of the mosque with a group of worshippers surrounding him and, when he came face-to-face with the security forces, he ordered them to stop the violence and to let the crowd protest peacefully. Witnesses state that the security forces ceased for a period until Rifa'i had left, at which point they renewed their crackdown.

A number of features from Rifa'i's sermon stand in contrast to Bouti's lesson. Rifa'i's sermon addressed not only the congregation present in his mosque but more importantly was directed towards the government, president Assad and those in positions of responsibility. By addressing the government, Rifa'i distanced himself from it but did not do so by adopting an oppositionist stance. Rather, Rifa'i's stance was that of a mediator between the government and the protestors. He was thus able to give voice to the protestors, articulating a number of their concerns while successfully managing to avoid establishing himself as an ideological leader of the protests. Further, his address to his congregation extended beyond those present to include inevitably those that would hear recordings of his sermons (which are regularly put online as well as distributed in bootleg copies) and he thus provided religious guidance pertaining to the protests. In addressing the government and the protestors, Rifa'i acted as a moral intermediary between the two, providing both sides with the requisite guidance to realizing security. Lastly, Rifa'i's stance vis-à-vis the protestors is one of qualified endorsement. Rifa'i said, in a statement that he has repeated many times that he supports protests so long as they are peaceful, demanding legal rights and the lifting of oppression. However, if the protests entail carrying weapons, killing, spilling blood, destroying public and private property (i.e. all of the things that constitute *fitna*) such protests are prohibited by Islamic teachings.

Bouti's lesson by contrast was aimed at the populace. This stance was not a mediating position like Rifa'i's, rather it placed him on the side of power, making a case by providing a series of reasons for why the general populace should not participate in the protests and in fact be suspicious of them. By re-assuring the populace that reforms were underway, Bouti rejected the possibility of protests achieving reforms because whatever one might hope to gain from protests was already ostensibly in the process of being realized. What is absent from Bouti's lesson was any sense of the demands of the protestors besides a vaguely conceived notion of reform. Where Rifa'i's sermon sought to have the government soften its heavy-handed crackdown and to give ear to the

protestors, Bouti's lesson sought to reduce the protests by having the protestors give ear to the promise of reform. Both however did not take the government to task for its use of violence.

These differences notwithstanding, *naṣīḥa* as a means of engaging the government is not precluded as an option for Bouti or any figure that takes a stance with the government. In the case of Rifa'i, this *naṣīḥa* is very public, made on the pulpit in front of hundreds and distributed to wider publics through electronic media. *Naṣīḥa*, however, can also be carried out in private and in most situations this is favoured because it safeguards other aspects of Islamic ethical teaching, such as protecting people's reputation, saving them from slander, backbiting, tale-bearing, etc.¹⁷ In the case of *naṣīḥa* to the state, delivering the *naṣīḥa* in private safeguards against riling up the populace and does not publicly question the authority of the state. Bouti, for his part, has shown that this is how he employs *naṣīḥa* and his ability to influence the regime in the past demonstrates the utility of this approach.

March 25th: Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi's Sermon

That same Friday, Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi delivered a sermon in Qatar that also focused on the uprising in Syria.¹⁸ The Azhari trained scholar has a history of political agitation from his youth and had been arrested by King Farouq of Egypt and the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser a number of times. He left Egypt in the 1960s to head the Qatari Secondary Institute of Religious Studies and has lived in Qatar since. As a prolific writer, many of his key books have been re-published by local presses in the Arab world, ensuring greater distribution and readership, and have even been translated into European and other Islamicate languages (Urdu, Malay, Turkish, etc.). When the al-Jazeera network was launched in 1996, the weekly show *al-Shari'a wa al-Hayat* (Shari'a and Life) became a stage for Qaradawi to reach a greater audience and convey his message of Islamic modernity. Through these means, as well as tireless lectures given throughout the world, Qaradawi is undoubtedly one of the foremost transnational 'ulama today. Additionally, he is perhaps the most prominent and vocal champion of the Arab Spring amongst the 'ulama. In the heat of the protests in Egypt, many protestors looked for support from Egyptian 'ulama that had become popular in the last decade amongst a new generation, in particular the Mufti of the Republic Shaykh Ali Gomaa and the Shaykh of al-Azhar Shaykh Ahmad al-Tayyib. Both scholars however, cautioned the populace against descending on Tahrir Square and in fact told the protestors to return home.¹⁹ Qaradawi, by contrast, encouraged not only the youth but

the entire country—Muslims, Copts, secularists, young, old, the entire spectrum—to descend on Tahrir Square. It is with little surprise that days after Mubarak's resignation it was Qaradawi that led the Friday prayers at Tahrir Square, crowning him, in a sense, the shaykh of the revolution.²⁰

An important element of Qaradawi's thought dovetails with his transnationalism, namely his vision of pan-Islamism. The entirety of the Muslim *umma* thus falls under his sphere of concern. Reflecting this, three days after his sermon at Tahrir Square, Qaradawi pronounced a fatwa during an al-Jazeera interview, calling on the Libyan army to turn its guns away from the people and to turn them on Qaddafi. This pan-Islamic concern was also reflected in how Qaradawi conceived of Syria's status in the Arab Spring. For Qaradawi, there was an intrinsic bond between Syria and Egypt and for this reason he argued staunchly against the notion of Syrian exceptionalism. This notion had been articulated by various voices (including president Assad in a January 31st, 2011 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*²¹) to different ends but essentially maintained that Syria was somehow different from its neighbours and thus immune to the protests and the awakening that was sweeping the Arab world. While Syria clearly resisted the initial revolutionary surge in January and February 2011, the reactions throughout the country after the March crackdown in Daraa proved for Qaradawi the ineluctability of the revolutionary spirit and Syria's place in it. "Today the train of the revolution reached a station that it was bound to reach," he said, "it is the station of Syria."²²

He spoke directly about the crackdown in Daraa and belittled the government's efforts to address the problem. The previous day, Bouthaina Shaaban, president Assad's political and media adviser, announced that "the Regional Supreme Council of the Arab Socialist Baath Party was considering lifting the emergency laws and considering implementing a law of political parties."²³ Qaradawi was dismissive not only of these "considerations" and the Regional Supreme Council, but the entire way of thinking.

What is this body? Who gave them authority over Syria? The Baath Party has ended in the entire Arab world! All of these old political parties, their time has passed, their end has come. The Constitutional Party in Tunis, the National Party that is in authority in Egypt – these parties are finished. [...] What remains? The Baath Party [...] Who are you, Baath Party? [...] These people are backward. They live in a different time than we live in. We are in the age of the Arab revolutions! These people have not opened their eyes or ears! They do

not open their eyes to see, or their ears to hear. They do not open their heads and minds to think. They think with a different mind!²⁴

After dismissing the Assad regime's efforts to quell the uprising in Daraa, he turned his attention to Bouti, not mentioning his name explicitly but clearly intending him. He criticized Bouti on two accounts, what Qaradawi saw as Bouti setting himself up as a lawyer making the case for the government and Bouti's pejorative description of the protestors – "a mob," "foreign infiltrators," "their foreheads do not know prostration," etc. Qaradawi held the accomplishment of the Egyptian youth in the highest esteem and saw the Syrian youth as being essentially the same. To disparage the reputation of the Syrian protestors was to disparage the Egyptians and their revolution. Referring to Bouti's criticism of the Syrian protestors, Qaradawi said,

"How unfortunate that the 'ulama have lowered themselves to this level! Rather than telling the tyrant to stop his oppression of people, to establish justice amongst the people, he praises him and insults those youth! The youth that established the Egyptian revolution, the youth of Tahrir Square!"²⁵

More brazen than this however was his swipe at the Assad regime's sectarian affiliation and the real power in the country. One sentence, said almost in passing, was to become the focus of much ire in Syria. Recounting a rare visit that he made to Syria during the Gaza War in 2008, Qaradawi described the relationship between the Syrian people and the Assad regime as follows: "I saw that the Syrian people treat him [i.e. Bashar al-Assad] as though he were a Sunni!" He expanded on this with an observation about Assad, namely that, despite being an intelligent, cultured and capable young man, he was "the prisoner of a cadre, the prisoner of a group that he cannot free himself of," and as a result saw everything through their prism. This is no doubt an allusion to the power structure that Bashar al-Assad inherited from his father's tenure as president, namely the army, the Baath party and the infrastructure of secret police. Qaradawi thus hits at the minority religious affiliation of Assad as well as the political arrangement of power at the top of the Syrian regime. For these reasons, Qaradawi was convinced that the problems could not be solved at their source.²⁶ However, his call for the Syrian people from all of its religious and ethnic groups to rise against the Assad regime fell on deaf ears. The sectarian swipes and calls for solidarity were all understood as sowing *fitna*.

Mufti of the Republic, Shaykh Ahmad al-Hassoun and The Regime's Narrative

In Bouti's absence, the Mufti of the Republic, Shaykh Badr al-Din Ahmad Hassoun (b. 1949), stepped up his own media appearances to get across the narrative of the government. Hassoun was formerly the mufti of Aleppo and succeeded Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro (d. 2005) to the position of mufti of the republic upon the latter's death. A cadre of prominent senior 'ulama (including Bouti, Wahbe Zuhayli, Mustafa al-Khinn, Mustafa al-Bugha, etc.) were stepped over to appoint a more junior figure. One explanation circulated regarding his appointment is that the senior 'ulama were offered the position but had each declined. His short tenure as mufti has not been without controversy, as we shall see. Contrary to Kuftaro, who functioned as a spiritual leader of thousands of Syrians and was quietist and accommodationist in his engagement with the government, Hassoun functions more like a politician and spokesperson for the government than a mufti.

Hassoun began his March 26th al-Jazeera interview by saying,

“We in Syria, dearly beloveds, rejoice in a joy that cannot be exceeded because we have attained—as a people and as leaders—that which our brothers in Tunis and Egypt and the rest of the Arab world have attained, without their being anguish and spilling of blood, [contrary to what] many brothers have claimed and as many noble scholars have called people to [spilling of blood] yesterday in their Friday sermons throughout the Arab world.”²⁷

He referred to such people, with Qaradawi clearly in mind, as “sermonizers of *fitna*,” that want “the Syrian people to be torn apart with sectarianism.”²⁸ When asked about the reported deaths of dozens of protestors, Hassoun promised swift justice against the excesses of those involved in the Daraa crackdown but stayed on point about the foreign source of the protests. Throughout the interview, images from cell phones showing the crackdown of protests spoke louder and clearer than Hassoun's narrative.

That week, Hassoun made a trip to Daraa and visited the 'Umari mosque, which had become the centre of the protests and thus the scene of the most violent crackdowns. After seeing matters with his own eyes, he seems to have been deeply moved, as is testified to by the recording of a speech that he gave there and as some of my contacts close to the mufti informed me. Thereafter he maintained a low profile, working

behind the scenes to calm the masses and appeared on Syrian television only occasionally, staying on point with the government's narrative.²⁹

The government's narrative against the protestors was in full swing by this time. Syrian television had replaced its regular programming with almost round the clock coverage of events from the government's Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). Their narrative of the events was that the source of the protests was not Syrian in origin, but was instigated by foreign infiltrators (*mundassin*)—Israel, America or someone else—preying on the naïveté of teenagers. Syria, the argument continued, was unique in the Middle East because of its stability, its security and the absence of sectarian fighting. This foreign hand, so the logic of the narrative went, was seeking to disrupt these achievements through protests and civil strife because of Syria's oppositionist stance in world politics (i.e. anti-Israeli and anti-American expansionism). In other versions of this narrative, the protestors were being instigated by the Assad regime's bogeyman, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi-cum-Jihadi activists or the global bogeyman, al-Qaeda. Regardless of who exactly was the source of troubles in Syria, this looming threat necessitated the emergency laws, whose fruit was the relative stability and security that existed in Syria.

April 1: More Protests in Damascus, Shaykh Kuraym Rajih's Sermon

The following week, on Friday April 1st, protests occurred in Damascus again, this time in two locations: again at the Rifa'i Mosque in Kafar Souseh after Rifa'i's sermon and, this time also, in the Midan neighbourhood after Shaykh Kuraym Rajih's sermon at the al-Hasan Mosque. Rajih (b. 1926) is an internationally recognized authority in Quranic recitation, which has a strong popular base in Midan. He is also an heir to the efforts of Shaykh Hasan Habannaka (d. 1978), who, along with Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i, was instrumental in reviving Islamic practice in Damascus during the middle of the last century. Habannaka, in addition to being the teacher of a generation of Damascus' most pre-eminent scholars (including Bouti), is also noted for his opposition to the political moves made by the Baath Party in the 1960s and 70s that consolidated its control of the state. In 1965, for example, Habannaka led a march of 20,000 people through the city as a response to an anti-religious article published by an army magazine. When Habannaka was arrested, the souqs of Damascus closed in protest, demanding his release.³⁰ Rajih was Habannaka's most valued student and had accompanied his teacher in these various incidents.

Rajih's sermon, like Rifa'i's, did not actively promote protests; rather, he framed his sermon in a call for people to turn to God and for there to be a greater place for religious practice in people's lives. He then spoke at length about freedom and the demands of the people. In doing so, he targeted two elements of the government's narrative vis-à-vis the protests. The first was the government's claim that emergency laws guaranteed the security that all Syrians enjoy; he said, "We want to live, we want freedom, we want dignity – [we want] that people feel that they can sleep at night without any fear in their heart that they might be called in [the next morning], to go there, to go here, etc. The emergency laws are a problem; if they go and are replaced with laws against terrorism, this is worse!"³¹ (This was what the government was considering and eventually did enact)

More importantly, he targeted the claim that these demands were a result of instigators from outside:

I hope that this sermon which I delivered with the intention of a brief word, from the mouth of a man giving sincere counsel (*nāṣiḥ*), from the mouth of a man that has jealous concern for Syria, jealous concern for the Arab world, jealous concern for the Islamic world. Right now, I do not hold a position, nor do I run a centre [of learning], nor do I demand a greater salary than what I have; I am on the edge of my grave, so understand that with these words I intend an exhortation. It is fitting for a person after reaching 90 years of age to address the ruler of the land, to address the leader of the people, to address the army and to address the secret police. A man that has reached this age, who has lived close to a century of time, with everything that has happened to him, he has the right to say these words. Indeed, so take my words as those coming from a sincere counsellor. I am a Syrian man, I live in Syria, my father is in Syria, my grandfather is in Syria, my great grandfather is in Syria, my children are in Syria, my family is in Syria, I desire of Syria that Syria be the leader of the world. Syria, *Syria!* That Islam lead the world, that *la ilaha illa Allah* (there is no deity except for God) lead the world. [...] This is what I want.³²

By emphasizing his age, his words invoked in the audience the respect due to an elderly and revered scholar; coupled with his emphasis of his autochthonous lineage it allowed him to take a nationalist stance justifying demands that could be claimed by the government to threaten the sense of national unity. In this rhetorically powerful manner he refuted the claim of foreign infiltration and grounded the demands of the protestors in the Syrian people. After addressing the government, he turned his address to the attendees demanding of them not to confuse matters (i.e. not to participate in protests), warned against using the

mosques for other than devotions and threatened to not give sermons anymore should they protest from his mosque. Despite his request, that afternoon, a group of over 200 people made their way from the mosque to a local police headquarters. This protest was eventually broken up.

Bouti's Return

Bouti returned from his overseas travels to deliver his April 4th lesson at the al-Iman Mosque and used it to address the escalating events in Daraa.³³ His tone was sombre as he expressed his condolences to the families that had lost relatives in the crackdowns. He re-iterated the argument that he had laid out before his travels, namely that the only path to true reform was that of dialogue between the state and representatives from civil society. A revolution, he re-iterated, and the protests that precede one, are one-sided attempts at reform that will require the nation to pay a price that will far outweigh the benefit that might conceivably be achieved through a revolution. The point of his talk that evening was that real reform was attained through dialogue and he wanted to illustrate that point with a real example. He informed his audience that, *before* the protests, he had sat with president Assad and mentioned the need to open the door to freedoms and that the time of single-party rule was over. According to Bouti, Assad had agreed to these suggestions and stated that he was going to take steps towards realizing these goals. The president had initiated a series of meetings with prominent figures in Syria's civil society wherein the path to reform was laid out. As evidence of the success of these dialogues, Bouti announced the following reforms that the Assad regime had promised pertaining to religion:

All women that lost their jobs as teachers in the previous year for wearing the *niqāb* would be allowed to return.

The establishment of a national institute for Arabic and Islamic studies with campuses throughout the country, whose degrees will be recognized by the government.

The establishment of an Islamic satellite channel based in Syria that teaches "true Islam."

As for political reforms—specifically the lifting of Syria's emergency law, eliminating single-party rule and changing laws that limited freedoms—Bouti mentioned that the president has already enacted changes and that all that remained was to announce them, which would happen in the immediate future. Bouti closed the first half of his talk by

asking rhetorically, “So let me ask you now, did dialogue benefit or not?”³⁴

The second half of his talk focused on Qaradawi’s sermon from ten days before. Bouti and Qaradawi have a history of disagreement, an important aspect of which pertains to relations to their respective governments, so it surprised no one that Qaradawi would make reference to Bouti in the same way that it surprised no one that there would be a response. Bouti expressed surprise at Qaradawi’s encouragement of protests, what Bouti called a “mob method” of reform. He wondered at how a scholar of Qaradawi’s calibre could prescribe a destructive method instead of a constructive one embodied in dialogue. He further expressed wonder that Qaradawi had not employed *naṣīḥa* when he had visited Syria in 2008 and had an audience with president Assad. Rather than singing praises of Syria as a resistance state and its continued opposition to Israel and America, he should have spoken frankly while in the president’s presence instead of from a pulpit in Qatar. Bouti pleaded with Qaradawi to not let sectarianism cloud his thinking and to let religion arbitrate.

Lastly, Bouti closed the evening by praying *ṣalāt al-ghā’ib*, a funeral prayer for those who have died in a distant place. This sent a mixed message. On the one hand, to pray *ṣalāt al-ghā’ib* for the dead in Daraa and Douma was to treat them in some form or another as martyrs. To suggest that they were martyrs further entailed that they were killed unjustly, which was suggestive of the government’s culpability. Thus, rather than deflecting from the government’s excesses and heavy handedness, the prayer in fact brought the question of the moral status of the government and the protestors to the fore, valorizing the latter and blaming the former.

The exchange between Qaradawi and Bouti is particularly significant because it figures prominently and exemplifies the war of narratives surrounding the Syrian protests. As noted above, Qaradawi made indirect reference to Bouti and the Syrian ‘ulama that stood by the regime to which Bouti and Hassoun responded, directly and indirectly respectively. The regime maintains that foreign agents are the cause of problems and can point to figures such as Qaradawi as examples of irresponsible foreign sermonizers sowing discord and sectarianism in Syria. Bouti’s dispute with Qaradawi however is different in nature than that between Qaradawi and the regime. Qaradawi, as noted earlier, is a pan-Islamic transnational scholar and is therefore not bound to a nation. He can thus maintain ideals of Islamic governance and adopt a confrontational stance because he is a scholar in exile.³⁵ Bouti, however, is a scholar bound to a nation. When the majority of Syria’s most

prominent scholars fled in the late 1970s and 80s, Bouti and a few others stayed behind and fought to keep Islam in the public sphere. Despite having a transnational influence (though substantially less extensive than Qaradawi's), Bouti's particular concerns are tied to the interests of the Syrian nation but not necessarily the Syrian state. In his own way, he distances himself from the regime and uses his influence to ensure that the goods of religion are realized, but he does so with a concern for Syrian society in mind. His pragmatic approach to engaging the Assad regime therefore requires a far more diplomatic posture than that of Qaradawi. The national concerns thus impose a constraint on Bouti's discourse that Qaradawi does not have.

April 8th: Shaykh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi's Sermon

In early April, Maher al-Assad, the president's younger brother and head of the army's Fourth Division and the Republican Guard, was dispatched to Daraa to deal with the protests. His forces led a systematic and brutal crackdown. Images and reports of the violence spread quickly throughout the country and evoked memories of the Hama Massacre in 1982. The parallels were not lost on anyone: Rifat al-Assad, who oversaw the month long crackdown in 1982, is the younger brother of then-president Hafez al-Assad. Outrage at the escalation of violence was widespread. Shaykh Muhammad Abu al-Huda al-Yaqoubi (b. 1963), who used to give sermons in the al-Hasan Mosque in the heart of Damascus, was one of the few Damascene 'ulama to express this outrage and demand that the violence cease. Yaqoubi is a descendant of the Prophet (*sayyid*) and comes from a family of 'ulama. He studied at the graduate level in Sweden and has a large international following as a result of years of teaching in North America and Europe. Upon returning to Damascus in 2006, Yaqoubi taught at various mosques, including the Umayyad Mosque, the mosque-shrine of the Sufi Muhyiddin ibn al-'Arabi and most recently the al-Hasan Mosque in the Abu Rumaneh neighbourhood in the heart of Damascus.

Yaqoubi directed his sermon in the al-Hasan Mosque on April 8th to the state administration. "Dear brothers," he said,

"our land is being afflicted with strife (*fitna*) such that those near and far are speaking about what they see and hear, namely strife, affliction, killing and harm. We must provide an answer and advice (*nushh*) to the big and the small, the ruler and the ruled, the leader and the lead. The best advice is that which comes from the heart of a lover, one jealous of the religion of God, a lover of the country, jealously concerned that

it might be torn apart, jealously concerned about the blood of Muslims that it be shed unjustly.”³⁶

Yaqoubi explained the origin of the protests as follows:

“We had hoped that path to reform would be hurried, because people are led by their aspirations. People were led to the streets [in protest] by long years of state oppression, when all they want is a bite to live on and freedom of expression. Between this and that, however, they took to the streets and we saw that our own people were being killed one after another in Daraa and in Douma, as though there were no dignity to human life.”³⁷

Yaqoubi proceeded to recite a litany of Quranic verses and hadiths about the nobility of God’s creating man, the prohibition against oppression and the killing of innocents and the freedoms that God has made intrinsic to humanity. These textual citations were interspersed with commentary relating to the state of affairs in Syria pertaining to freedom of speech, to the information revolution that belied the state’s narratives as well as to the equality between Muslims and non-Muslims in Islamic teachings in matters of justice. He advised the protestors and those witnessing them to stay within the bounds of Islamic teachings; that is, to keep the protests peaceful. The sermon was bold because many of the textual sources that he cited judged violence, oppression, the killing of innocents and tyranny as being tantamount to disbelief. While Yaqoubi never stated this conclusion explicitly, his sermon was meant to serve as a warning to the state of its grave moral position.

This sermon was uploaded to YouTube and created a buzz amongst Damascene and overseas watchers. Because of his April 8th sermon, Yaqoubi’s mosque drew a substantial crowd the following week. Attendees from outside of the Abu Rumaneh neighbourhood came to al-Hasan Mosque, expecting to become an epicentre for protests in Damascus. The secret police had expected the same and were out in great numbers. Yaqoubi however diffused the situation, giving a five-minute sermon, stating:

Many new faces have come to this mosque from various parts of the city. Some are expecting that there are going to be protests here and some have come to put an end to those protests, should they start. Let me state clearly, that I delivered a message last week that was my duty as an imam to give. The people of this neighbourhood are pleased with the leadership of Bashar al-Assad and are not interested in causing sedition and trouble. We welcome his efforts of reform and support him in that. If you came here for other purposes, please return back to

your own neighbourhoods and do what you want over there. We thank the president for his listening to the people and hope in his promise to implement reforms.³⁸

This move by Yaqoubi should not be seen as a retraction of his previous position. Rather, it is consistent with the form of Sunnism shared by Yaqoubi, Rifa'i and Rajih, namely that provoking state-violence would be a greater harm than failing to hold the state morally accountable.

The Question of Sectarianism: Shaykh Moaz al-Khatib's Eulogies

The 'ulama thus far considered—Bouti, Hassoun, Rifa'i, Rajih and Yaqoubi—avoid the question of sectarianism almost completely, only addressing it as a danger to be cautioned against. This fear has promoted a culture that seems convinced that, if the Assad regime falls, Syria's heterogeneous religious and ethnic population—Sunnis, Alawis, Druze, Christians and Kurds—will turn against one another. The Assad regime, according to this logic, holds their mutual hostility at bay and in exchange for loss of certain freedoms it guarantees a certain amount of safety and security. For an older generation of Syrians, the civil war in Lebanon in the 1970s and 80s made the case for the previous Assad regime, while the sectarian fighting that has torn apart Iraq in the past decade looms large in the minds of many Syrians today. In such a milieu, Qaradawi's passing mention of the 'Alawi religion of the Assad's is construed as instigating civil war.

Shaykh Moaz al-Khatib (d. 1960) is one of the few 'ulama that has tackled the issue of sectarianism head on. As Maher al-Assad's forces cracked down in Daraa, Douma, a town on the northern outskirts of Damascus, erupted as another centre for anti-government protests that were also put down violently. Khatib is a scion from a family of 'ulama and is a geographer by training that worked for a petrochemical company for six years. He is the current president of *Jam'iyat al-tamaddun al-islami*, a reformist society formed in the late 1930s that published an influential journal.³⁹ He delivered a series of impassioned speeches at the funeral receptions in Douma, touching on a variety of issues. In one eulogy on April 6th, he addressed the fear of sectarianism in the following manner:

We, in Syria, dear brothers—and this is not a blessing from the government but rather a blessing from God—we have lived all our lives as Muslims – Sunni, Shia, Alawi and Druze – with one heart;

alongside us, our noble brothers, those guided by the teachings of Jesus. [We have lived] with love, brotherhood and affection. The heart of one of us is not closed to his brother – he opens his heart, house and home to him. This is what we must persist in at all times. Our emotions should never make us leave this noble principle that we live by and that, God willing, we will die by.⁴⁰

In the same eulogy, Khatib aptly expressed the feeling of the protesters vis-à-vis the discourse of fear:

“We do not look at anyone in this country in our emotions or in our hearts, with any kind of dislike or hatred. God forbid! We do this not out of fear of the government, nor from the secret police. The age of fear has ended. This is your country and you must save it” (ibid).

The previous day, Khatib had delivered another eulogy that sought to further refute the fear of sectarianism. In it, he went on the offensive against the regime by highlighting how particular Alawi tribes have been favoured at the expense of others.

It is no sin, dear brothers, for someone to be Sunni, Shia, Alawi, Druze, Ismaili or to be Arab, or Kurdish. The value of a person to God is based on their piety. We are all one body. I say to you that the Alawis are closer to me than many people. I know their villages and the misery and injustice that they live with. We speak with freedom for the sake of every person in this country, for every Sunni, Alawi, Isma'ili, Christian, the Arab people or the great Kurdish people.⁴¹

The result of these speeches was that Khatib was called in for questioning by the security police on May 5th and was not heard from for over a month. He has remained silent since his release.

Protests Spread to the Outskirts of Damascus

Many of the large families in Douma had relatives living in other villages and towns surrounding Damascus, such as Saqba and Kafar Batna, and protests spread to these villages as well. With matters slowly nearing the city, stories of firsthand accounts of protests and government violence gained more circulation in Damascus. One such story that spread extensively in the circles of Damascene 'ulama was that of Mu'tazz-billah al-Sha'ar, a twenty-two year old law student at the University of Damascus whose family had links to the ulama. He was killed on April 22nd at a protest in his native Daraya. His story is illustrative of why many Syrian youth took to the streets. Sha'ar had

attended Friday prayers at the mosques of Rifa'i and Rajih the previous weeks and had seen the government's violence against unarmed protestors firsthand. According to his father, witnessing these acts of violence politicized his otherwise apolitical son. On April 22nd, after Friday prayers at Rajih's mosque in Midan, the bulk of the congregation of a few hundred started chanting slogans of solidarity with the martyrs and made its way to a local police station. The young Sha'ar could not help but join. His father said that participating in the protest made him feel like he had lived for the first time in his life. Later that evening, returning to their home with his father and two brothers, security forces blocked the road into Daraya because a protest was taking place. Mu'tazz asked his father to join and as he made his way to the crowd, security forces opened fire. With nothing in his hand, chanting slogans of freedom, Mu'tazz stood his ground before the security forces and was shot twice in the chest. His father and brothers saw this from a distance and rushed to his body. The security forces prevented them from taking his body to a hospital and beat his father with batons as he repeatedly tried to take his son's dying body. Mu'tazz' two brothers, aged 15 and 17, were taken away and his father was finally able to take Mu'tazz' remains.⁴²

This story spread quickly amongst many of Damascus' 'ulama because of the Sha'ar family's ties to various 'ulama. Given the familiarity of the people involved, this gave greater credence to this account as opposed to other stories filtering into Damascus about atrocities by the government. Yaqoubi referred to Sha'ar's story in another sermon on May 6th sermon, calling it "the story of one person, but it is in reality the story of dozens, and who knows, maybe hundreds of people."⁴³ He titled that week's sermon "The Illness and the Cure" and was unflinching in his criticism of the regime's failures, not only in the current crisis but also since the inception of the current regime. Yaqoubi emphasized that all of the problems that have led protestors to the street had their root "ten years ago," alluding to the failed Damascus Spring when democratic hopes were dashed by Bashar al-Assad's government. For Yaqoubi, matters had reached a point of no return because of the levels of violence.

The problems of the past ten years could have been solved by the people and the government. [...] But the problem today between the government and the masses has reached a point of perhaps becoming unsolvable because it has reached the point of spilling innocent blood. Where can we get those innocent souls to give life to them again? A poor person can be made happy with an increase in livelihood, an

oppressed person can be made happy by freeing them; but how do you please someone whose son was killed? Someone killed by a sniper? Or a soldier killed by a civilian? Or an empty-handed protestor being killed? Or those who have been taken to hospitals wounded and then killed on the hospital bed? How can these be healed?⁴⁴

Like Rifa'i and Rajih, Yaqoubi defended the rights of people to protest but emphasized that protests should not lead to *fitna*. He closed his sermon insisting (1) that the tanks and armed forces be called back from residential neighbourhoods and from around the townships, (2) that political prisoners and prisoners of conscience since the 1980s to the present be released and (3) that Syrians living in exile be allowed to return, mentioning the Muslim Brotherhood explicitly. At the end of this Friday prayer, he led a prayer for the martyrs that week. Unlike Bouti's performance of the prayer weeks before, Yaqoubi's prayer sent no mixed messages. The regime was the cause of people's grievances, was responsible for the violence and was unjustly killing its citizens who thus became martyrs.

As a result of this sermon, Yaqoubi was dismissed from his post on 12th May and was banned from public speaking. This was not an unfamiliar position for Yaqoubi. In the previous year, he had had a public dispute with Hassoun over comments that the latter had made that many felt were contraventions of Islamic teachings. Addressing a delegation from George Mason University's *Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution* in January 2010, Hassoun had said, "If our Prophet Muhammad asked of me to disbelieve in Judaism or Christianity, I would disbelieve in Muhammad," and also, "Had Muhammad commanded me to kill people I would have said to him that he was not a prophet." This meeting was reported in *al-Quds al-'Arabi* and was widely covered in the Arab and even Israeli media.⁴⁵ It was met with universal condemnation throughout the Middle East by 'ulama of virtually every orientation, including Qaradawi and Bouti. The most vocal critic of Hassoun on this issue however was Yaqoubi, who delivered a sermon in which he called for Hassoun to resign. In response, Yaqoubi was dismissed from giving sermons but was reinstated shortly thereafter but forbidden to teach. Thus, by being banned from delivering sermons, Yaqoubi was in familiar territory.

Yaqoubi left Damascus for Egypt, then the UK, and was active in opposition meetings in Istanbul by the National Salvation Congress. He has since based himself in Morocco. In September 2011, the al-Jazeera television show *Al-Shari'a wa al-hayāt* (Sharia and Life) had an episode on the Arab revolutions titled, "The Revolution: *Fitna* or Mercy?"

Qaradawi was present in the studio and Yaqoubi was interviewed briefly by phone where the latter made the case for not only the legality but the obligation of protesting against oppressive rulers (*al-imām al-jā'ir*).⁴⁶ Further, Yaqoubi explained that those 'ulama in Syria that remained silent vis-à-vis the Assad regime were to be excused because of the tremendous amount of pressure they are under. However, in regards to those figures that have spoken in defence of the government and authorized the latter's activities, Yaqoubi deemed them as being just as guilty as the government in tyranny and killing. The allusion to Hassoun was not lost on anyone. He closed by addressing the problem of the concept of *fitna*. Sunni thought has always held civil strife as anathema but Yaqoubi explained why this attitude did not apply in this situation:

“The hadith and the words of the Prophet (upon him be peace and blessings) concerning civil strife (*fitna*), that is widespread, pertains to that [form of] strife wherein truth is not known from falsehood. As for this [case], truth and falsehood are clear now. Truth and falsehood are clear. Turning away from tyranny and disavowing tyrants, this is well known and understood. Likewise, supporting tyrants is forbidden, while helping the oppressed is obligatory.”⁴⁷

As events progressed in the uprising, Yaqoubi's stance as moral witness quickly gave way to moral condemnation of the continued and escalating violence. Though in exile, Yaqoubi's opposition to a state that he clearly deems illegitimate takes the form of providing discourses that authorize and, in fact, obligate protesting against the regime. Few of Damascus' 'ulama have taken such an oppositional stance against the government. The successes of the Arab Spring had emboldened some that have adopted this strategy, but for those like Yaqoubi, the regime's violence left them no other choice.

Developments over the Year 2011

The previous pages have documented developments amongst Damascus' 'ulama during the initial weeks in which the Syrian uprising began. Over the course of the year, many other 'ulama in Syria and outside have come to voice their opinions on the Uprising, virtually all of them condemning the government's violence.⁴⁸ During this time, the above considered positions taken by the various 'ulama have become more differentiated. The unrestrained violence against protestors has contributed to the hardening of the position of 'ulama like Rifa'i and Rajih. Their discourses have shifted from pressuring the regime to cease

violence and enact reforms to total condemnation and demands for regime change. This shift, as the above narrative has documented, occurred much earlier for Yaqoubi.

The 'ulama that have remained in Syria, such as Rifa'i and Rajih, have been prohibited from speaking publicly at different times throughout the year while Khatib has been effectively silenced since release from his month-long incarceration in June. Perhaps the most telling sign of the regime's frustration with Rifa'i and Rajih occurred in Ramadan 2011. Violence continued throughout the sacred month and on the 27th night of Ramadan (August 27th, 2011)—one of the most sacred nights in the Islamic calendar—the Rifa'i Mosque was attacked by the government loyalist militia known as the Shabbiha. Rubber bullets were fired on the congregation, the mosque was ransacked and Rifa'i was wounded.

Bouti and Hassoun have become increasingly isolated and the target of harsher criticism by many inside Syria as well as sympathizers with the protestors outside. Hassoun has drawn even closer to the government after his 22-year-old son, Sariya, was killed in the town of Idlib on October 2nd. His son's killing has rhetorically been used by the regime to claim victimization and thus to justify its violence as a form of self-defence. Further, word of foreign powers potentially assisting the protestors in toppling the Assad regime (similar to NATO's role in Libya earlier in 2011) provoked the Mufti to say that Syria and Lebanon would send its sons and daughters to carry out suicide attacks on Europe and Palestine (i.e. Israel).⁴⁹ Bouti has come under harsh criticism from the Syrian public and also by other 'ulama for his continued denigration of the protestors and stubborn insistence on the government's account of events. In late June, he issued a fatwa on the impermissibility of protests that was met with scorn by the protestors.⁵⁰

From the above narrative, I do not mean to suggest that 'ulama that are part of the state apparatus—whether officially like Hassoun or unofficially like Bouti—are unable to contest the state. Illustrative of this is the case of Shaykh Ibrahim al-Salqini, the mufti of Aleppo. As events were escalating in Tunisia and Egypt, Salqini had warned president Assad of the effects that the Arab Spring would have in Syria and told him to take pre-emptive action to avoid civil strife. In August, he and other 'ulama of Aleppo issued a declaration condemning the government's atrocities during the protests. Additionally, he had given a series of sermons condemning in strong terms the escalation over the summer. Salqini passed away on the 6th of September under conditions that many felt were suspicious, suggesting that the visits by the secret

police during his final illness contributed to his demise. Despite being the mufti of Aleppo, Salqini contested the state's activities.⁵¹

By emphasizing the role of mosques and Friday sermons in the preceding pages, I do not mean to suggest that the protestors were all necessarily religious people. Despite the criticism that Bouti received, he accurately described the instrumentalization of the mosques. As protestors became more emboldened and widespread, mosques no longer served as the primary launching point for protests and other sites emerged alongside them, such as public squares and souqs. Further, the 'ulama seem to have lost (or perhaps never had) the ability to lead the protests or guide them, particularly after the emergence of the Free Syrian Army and other similar groups. The lack of reaction from the protestors to the attack on Rifa'i in Ramadan is suggestive of the 'ulama's inability to become symbols or even leaders of the protests. Finally, there are many more engagements between Syrian 'ulama and the regime that will need to be considered once the history of these events is written, particularly in the cities where the protests and crackdowns were at their largest.

Closing Thoughts

By way of conclusion, a few observations can be gleaned from the narrative provided above. Damascene 'ulama have taken a variety of stances vis-à-vis enacting change, shaped by the constraints imposed by the regime. Quietism is the predominant position adopted by Damascene 'ulama. As Yaqoubi explained, many have taken this position as a result of the intense pressure placed on them by the government. There are others still that are guided by Islamic teachings that label these events a *fitna*, wherein, according to tradition, 'the one sitting is better than the one standing', i.e. do not get involved.

The practice of *naṣīḥa* however counters quietism by imposing a moral obligation to, at minimum, not remain a silent observer. It presents a way of engaging the government as a moral critic, though (as discussed above), not placing one in confrontation with it. In the case of Rifa'i, Rajih and Yaqoubi, this *naṣīḥa* was done in a very public manner. The relationship of public *naṣīḥa* to protests is a complicated one. While *naṣīḥa* is not explicitly a call for protests, Rifa'i and Rajih's mosques had become centres for civil disobedience in Damascus. An unintended consequence of public *naṣīḥa* in an authoritarian regime, it seems, is that it feeds protests. Where freedom of expression has been suppressed for decades, voicing the opinions of the masses publicly turns into an unintended rallying cry. In this way, it feeds the opposition

but remains detached from it; Rifa'i, Rajih and Yaqoubi did not march with the protestors or lead the protests.

This practice of *naṣīḥa* however can also be carried out in private, as Bouti mentioned in his lessons, noting that he had employed it. In this manner, it is consistent with a third option of engaging an authoritarian regime, namely to work pragmatically with the government. As we have seen, there is a difference in how this plays out as well. 'Ulama such as Hassoun act as part of the state, whereas Bouti has a more complex relationship. He stands apart from the official state apparatus but has an influence within it that he exploits towards securing goods pertaining to religion (banning of casinos, freedoms of religious expression, etc.). Working within the state apparatus thus does not preclude 'ulama from working towards change. As noted above, the mufti of Aleppo, Salqini, took active efforts to have the regime change its behaviour while holding office.

The constraints that the state places on the 'ulama cannot be emphasized enough. 'Ulama like Khatib have been thoroughly silenced because of these constraints, while Yaqoubi, not willing to accept such a fate, has been forced to leave Syria. 'Ulama in exile, such as Qaradawi and Yaqoubi, are able to be far more subversive and brazen in their attacks on the government. Other series of constraints however come into play, such as discursive ones relating to the particular Islamic traditions of learning the 'ulama in question adhere to.

It should be noted that these options—quietism, pragmatic engagement and moral witness and opposition—are not unique to the 'ulama. A decade before the Arab Spring reached Syria, the same options played out in the failed Damascus Spring, albeit not cloaked in the garb of religion.⁵² On September 27th, 2000, ninety-nine prominent figures from Syrian society published a manifesto that came to be known as *The Statement of 99*. This statement addressed virtually the exact same issues as those of the Arab Spring (as Yaqoubi alluded to in his last sermon). It was prefaced with three paragraphs, a list of four demands (repealing the emergency laws, amnesty for political prisoners, implementing state laws guaranteeing freedoms and freeing public life from restrictive laws) and a concluding paragraph. The tone was conciliatory and hopeful throughout. The statement did not spark protests but an increase in civil society, with the proliferation of informal gatherings and discussions on the future of Syria's politics throughout the country. Two distinct approaches emerged as discussions ensued. One sought to engage the regime through a tacit alliance that would work toward gradual reform, consistent with *The Statement of 99*. The second took a confrontational stance towards the regime, based on

the conviction that the regime was incapable of reform. In January 2001, a second statement was released, titled *The Statement of 1,000*, which reflected this second approach. This statement was prefaced by an essay that rehearsed how civil society was destroyed in Syria, implicating the regime of Hafez al-Assad throughout, and was strongly worded in its demands. The writing of this statement was contentious amongst the civil society activists and its release was not without controversy, given that a Lebanese newspaper leaked it before all the names associated with it signed it. The reaction of the regime was to turn the Damascus Spring into the Damascus Winter; the few steps towards liberalization taken by Bashar's government were pulled back and the most vocal opposition figures were imprisoned. The differences between the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring are many, but the parallel that I am drawing attention to is how the 'ulama and the proponents of civil society sought to engage the regime in similar manners.

¹ For a broader picture of the various positions adopted by religious actors inside and outside Syria see Thomas Pierret's, "Syrie: l'Islam dans la révolution," *Politique étrangère*, 4 (2011): 879-891.

² Many of the sermons and public lessons that I analyze have been recorded and uploaded to social media websites such as YouTube and Facebook as well as websites maintained by followers of some of the 'ulama in question. By way of documentation I provide the web addresses to the relevant pages. All translations in this essay are the author's.

³ For more on Bouti, see Andreas Christmann, "Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: A Portrait of Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti." in *Islam and Modernity. Muslim Intellectuals Respond* (I. B. Tauris, London, 1998): 57-81. Also Jawad Anwar Qureshi, "Islamic Tradition in the Age of Revival and Reform: Said Ramadan al-Bouti and His Interlocutors" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, forthcoming).

⁴ This lesson was placed online on a website that hosts recordings of Bouti's lessons, <http://www.naseemalsham.com/> but has subsequently been edited to include only the last ten minutes of Bouti's speech. The author was present at this lesson and has his own recording upon which he relied.

⁵ See Thomas Pierret, *Baas et Islam en Syrie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011), 99-105.

⁶ Personal recording.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ It should be mentioned that eyewitnesses whom the present writer has spoken with have disputed Bouti's recollection of events. Videos uploaded to YouTube confirm their version of event. See for example <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oD-YduvMM58> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

¹⁰ For an account of this, see Human Rights Watch, "We've Never Seen Such Horror" *Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011), 20-21.

¹¹ See Muhammad Muti' al-Hafiz and Nizar Abaza's *Tā'rīkh 'ulamā' Damishq fi al-qarn al-rābi'* "ashar al-hijri" (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1986), 2:905-906.

¹² See their, "Limits of Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria: Private Welfare, Islamic Charities, and the Rise of the Zayd Movement," *IJMES*, 41 (2009): 595-614.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The entire hadith reads: The Prophet said, "Religion is sincere counsel (*naṣīḥa*)," three times, to which the Companions asked, "To whom, messenger of God?" He responded, "To God, His Messenger, the leaders of the Muslims, and their laity."

¹⁵ See Asad's "The Limits of Religious Criticism in the Middle East: Notes on Islamic Public Argument," in his *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 200-238. Compare with Malika Zeghal's study the *naṣīḥa* of the Moroccan Sufi Shaykh Abdessalam Yassine to King Hasan II in her *Islamism in Morocco: Religion, Authoritarianism, and Electoral Politics* (translated by George Holoch, Princeton: Markus Weiner Publications, 2008), 95-118. Yassine's *naṣīḥa* is more complex than that of Rifa'i or the Saudi 'ulama considered by Asad in that it functions as an admonition that de-sanctifies the Makhzan (Monarch) and is thus is more confrontational and subversive.

¹⁶ "Wazīr al-tarbiya yaṣḍur qarār al-munaqqabāt min ḥaql al-ta'līm ḥifāẓan 'ala al-'almāniya," *France 24*, January 1, 2010, last accessed April 20, 2012, <http://www.france24.com/ar/20100701-religious-laic-interdiction-niqab-syrie-education>

¹⁷ Cf. Asad's "The Limits of Religious Criticism," 223-227 for a discussion of *naṣīḥa* by Saudi 'ulama.

¹⁸ For more on Qaradawi, see *Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī* (edited by Bettina Grad and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen London: Hurst & Co, 2009).

¹⁹ Cf. Malika Zeghal, "What Were the Ulama Doing in Tahrir Square? Al-Azhar and the Narrative of Resistance to Oppression." *Sightings*, February 17, 2011. Last accessed April 20, 2012. http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/sightings/archive_2011/0217.shtml

²⁰ I use this phrase because he is the most prominent religious scholar to give unconditional support to the Arab Spring and based on conversations with activists in Egypt that have embraced Qaradawi because of this. The title of "shaykh of the revolutions" however has since been attributed to Shaykh Emad Effat. An Azhar graduate and senior official in Egypt's Dar al-Ifta', Effat attended every protest at Tahrir Square from the beginning of the revolution in January. He was killed during a protest on December 16, 2011, by a gunshot to the chest.

²¹ “Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, last accessed April 20, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html>

²² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJQnE9XuR4o> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARhCWDjnI3o> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

²⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJQnE9XuR4o> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

²⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vqcuIOXEks> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teQj_1aSRbg Last accessed April 20, 2012.

³⁰ See Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 115.

³¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmMhGC-rTYQ> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

³² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oito-uIOBOQ> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

³³ For a transcript of this talk, see <http://www.naseemalsham.com/ar/Pages/download.php?id=9716&fid=&file=../Component/word%20new/Arabic/Activities/syria.pdf>

³⁴ Ibid., 7.

³⁵ It should be noted that in all of his talks about the Arab Spring, Qaradawi has been conspicuously less vocal about the protests in Bahrain, which suggests his concern for Qatar’s geopolitical interests.

³⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTQHummyN5kM> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Personal recording.

³⁹ See Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib, “Al-Tamaddun al-Islami: passé et présent d’une association réformiste damascène,” *Maghreb Machrek* 198 (2009): 79-92.

⁴⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQJfz1DtSpk> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

⁴¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAbBrpC8bWE> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

⁴² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VM9o64sfbA> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

⁴³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7Ozu1xDIgm> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Haaretz News Service, “Syria’s Mufti: Islam Commans us to Protect Jusaism,” *Haaretz*, January, 19, 2010, accessed February 5, 2012,

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/syria-s-mufti-islam-commands-us-to-protect-judaism-1.265712>

⁴⁶ For a transcript of this program, see <http://www.qaradawi.net/2010-02-01-08-43-29/5181.html>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ In this capacity, it is worth mentioning the Salafi Shaykh 'Adnan al-'Ar'ur, based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Through his satellite show, he has called for armed revolt against the Alawite Assad regime. Closer to the positions of Rifa'i and Rajih is another Saudi based Syrian scholar, Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali al-Sabuni. Through YouTube and through al-Jazeera interviews, he has spoken out against the crackdown, accused Bouti and Hassoun of being "'ulama of the sultans" and hypocrites, and championed the rights of protestors.

⁴⁹ <http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/3142.htm> Last accessed April 20, 2012.

⁵⁰ All4Syria, "*Al-shaykh al-Būfi: al-tazāhur ḥarām...*," *All4Syria*, June 25, 2011, last accessed April 20, 2012, <http://all4syria.info/web/archives/14878>

⁵¹ Roula Hajjar and Ellen Knickmeyer, "Syria: Death of Popular Sunni Cleric Stirs Unrest in Aleppo," *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 2011, accessed February 5, 2012, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/09/syria-aleppo-sunni-cleric.html> See also Thomas Pierret, "Le décès du Mufti d'Alep, coup dur pour l'opposition syrienne," *Le Blog de Thomas Pierret*, September 8, 2011, <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/thomas-pierret/080911/le-deces-du-mufti-dalep-coup-dur-pour-lopposition-syrienne>.

⁵² See Flynt Leverett's *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2005), 91-94 and 203-212.