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Hamza Meddeb (coordinator), **Silvia Colombo**, **Katerina Dalacoura**, **Lorenzo Kamel** and **Olivier Roy**

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ABSTRACT
Motivated by the need to inform the enduring and unresolved debates about religion and politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, this report focuses on the relation between social change and religious diversity and the challenges this poses for the state–religion relationship. It also draws attention to the pluralization of the religious sphere, the individualization of religion and the unlikely return of a state monopoly of Islam. In a context marked by growing instability (*coups d'état*, popular uprisings, conflicts, political uncertainty), this report examines the future of political Islam, a major ideological trend in the region. It aims to offer a detailed historical and sociological analysis of the different trajectories of moderate political Islam movements, the emerging processes of doctrinal transformation, electoral and governmental participation and the extent to which they have challenged both Islamist organizations (Muslim brotherhood-affiliated organizations, Salafi movements) and jihadi movements (ISIS, al Qaeda). Ultimately, the report analyses the relations between religion and politics within Shiism (one of the two major branches of Islam), within Christian communities and finally within the major non-Muslim majority society in the region, Israel. Strongly objecting to prevailing reductionist and essentialist misrepresentations of the region and their sweeping doom-mongering generalizations, the report sheds light on the distinct dynamics of local histories, inter-organizational competition, the arising ideological tensions and geopolitical rivalries.

INTRODUCTION

Growing concern over the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and more specifically over matters of religion and politics urges us to take a closer look at the relationships between these areas of interest. This report has a special focus on social change, politics and conflicts, and on the ways in which they are shaping religious beliefs in the MENA region in the post-2011 period; it also pays particular attention to forms of religiosity and their impact on political dynamics. By focusing first on the analysis of new forms of religiosity in Muslim societies, we aim at providing a better understanding of patterns of religiosity and processes of secularization. We then turn our attention to the fragmentation of political Islam to grasp the plurality of trajectories taken by the different Islamist movements in Tunisia, Morocco and in Egypt, and by other radical movements (ISIS, al

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Qaeda and affiliates). It is our contention that understanding the future of Islamist movements is all the more crucial due to the fact that political Islam has been and remains a dominant ideological trend and a prominent socio-political actor in the region. Lastly, while shedding light on the broader post-2011 geopolitical trends, we focus our attention on the internal developments of Shia Islam, the future prospects for religious minorities, and Israel.

The 2011 Arab uprisings play a pivotal role in our analysis and their influence should not be overlooked, as they can reveal much about the significant dynamics that organize the relationships between religion and politics in the Middle East, and about the emergence of new forms of religiosity and innovative understandings of Islam among the Muslim youth. The pluralization and diversification of the religious field that these emerging trends exemplify also illustrate the profound transformations that societies in the region have experienced in terms of demographics (there are now massive shares of young people in the countries' total populations), rampant urbanization, spreading globalization and increased access to new information and communication technology (ICT). The renegotiation of relationships between state and religion that derived from these changes represents a formidable challenge to the region, where postcolonial states have either administered or even held a monopoly over religion since the 1960s.

The major ideological trend in the Middle Eastern political and social landscape, political Islam, has undeniably undergone many challenges since 2011. Its vicissitudes have included winning elections and gaining power in the 2011–12 electoral campaigns, the subsequent withdrawal of Islamist movements after the overthrow of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt, the stepping down of the Ennahda movement in Tunisia, and finally the engulfing of large parts of the region in conflict. These developments have unmistakably challenged political Islam and Islamist movements, affecting their ideological tenets, their views regarding relationships between religion and politics, their political practices and most of all their fluctuating popularity. Yet, because each movement has had to adapt to its unique national context, Muslim brotherhood-affiliated movements ended up following different paths, and each trajectory contributed in its own way to current regional situations. The politicization of the Salafi movement and the creation of Salafist political parties to run for elections is one such example. The emergence of militant Islamism is another illustration and allows us to examine the ways in which jihadi groups have taken advantage of the vacuum left behind after regimes were overthrown, weakened or torn apart by conflict-fuelled divisions. As for the "Islamic State" organization, if its influence in Egypt and in Tunisia was limited, it took hold of large territories in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, reviving an old utopian idea (i.e. the creation of the Caliphate) and bringing jihadism to the forefront. There is no denying that this radicalism poses a serious threat to other forms of political Islam, as it feeds on internal infighting and on regional destabilization.

The wars and conflicts that have torn the Middle East apart have also rekindled geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, bringing the issue of sectarianism to the forefront, or between Qatar and Turkey on one hand and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the other. The alliance formed by Qatar and Turkey has shown support for Islamist movements in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, whereas the Saudi Arabia and the UAE alliance backed the Egyptian *coup d'état* financially and politically and provided support to restoration forces in Tunisia and Libya. These external interventions and support for different sectarian groups and ideological trends have shaped

local power struggles and fuelled divides in a region marked by overlapping divisions and lines of conflict. This report closely examines the effect of Iranian sectarian policies on Shia communities in the Arab world, as well as their internal divisions. Making religion a tool in pursuit of political struggle and geopolitical competition has led to the spread of all kinds of extremism, to the further polarization of local conflicts in Syria, in Iraq and in Yemen and ultimately has put in jeopardy the very existence and future of religious minorities. To sum up, this report sheds light on the three main dynamics that are reshaping the relations between religion and politics in the region today: first, the pluralization of forms of religiosity that has created a diversification within the religious sphere and a resultant need to renegotiate state–religion relations. Second, the transformation of the landscape of political Islam that has been represented by different trajectories taken by Islamist movements, balancing between moderation and radicalization in the case of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements, political participation and apolitical positioning in the case of Salafists and global versus local in the case of the jihadi movements. And last, the impact of the geopolitical landscape on reshaping the relations between religion and politics within the second branch of Islam, Shiism, and within the Christian communities that represent the most important minority in Muslim-majority societies, as well as within the Jewish-majority society in the region, Israel, and the prospects for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

1. THE RELIGIOUS SPHERE AND NEW FORMS OF RELIGIOSITY IN THE MENA REGION

Since 2011, fixation on the rise of radical Islam has upstaged the underlying forces at play within the religious sphere in the Middle East, and overshadowed the dynamics that structure relationships between religion and politics in the region. Fostered by the MENA countries' demographic transformations and the globalization of knowledge and information, a more individualized and diverse religious sphere has emerged as a result of new forms of religiosity that exist both outside the realm of state-controlled institutional Islam and independently of political Islam.

1.1 SOCIAL CHANGE AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

There are reasons to believe that the decline of militant Islamism that occurred during the 1990s in the aftermath of the Algerian civil war and the growing clash between those sorts of movements and authoritarian regimes, along with the rampant repression of Muslim Brotherhoods throughout the Arab world, have contributed to the emergence of novel forms of religiosity represented by the growing number of new popular figures such as TV preachers and female preachers (*dai'yat* movement) (Mahmood 2005) and by the growing phenomenon of massive youth participation in Islamic charity work and social activism. Indeed, while the interest of the younger generations in holistic ideologies, be they nationalistic, leftist or Islamist is dwindling, new forms of religiosity are being championed. In fact, the years preceding the Arab uprisings stand out – we observe an increasing diversity of religious forms distinct from movements related to political Islam: preachers with a style similar to American televangelists who are looking to promote moral values based on piety, discipline and self-esteem (Haenni 2005, Jung et al. 2014); Salafist and neo-fundamentalist movements that seek to resuscitate a traditional reading of religious texts; and a new social Islamic activism that is competing against official religious institutions in preaching,

religious education and for the provision of social services and charity work (Clark 2004).

These new forms of religiosity that mark an increase in religious practices and their associated symbols (Islamic veiling or headscarves, the burkini, halal dating, religious education, Koranic schools, websites dedicated to e-fatwa and e-preaching) demonstrate the dynamism of re-Islamization or Islamic revivalism, which represents a means to many ends: on an individual level, it enables social mobility, self-fulfilment and well-being for the new educated and practising middle classes who, unlike traditional people, are looking to combine Islamic values with modern lifestyles; while on a collective level, it contributes to the construction of a conservative society by means of individual piety and not through the establishment of an Islamic state.

The rise of this new "Islam of the market" (Haenni 2005) is based on codes of good conduct that emphasize religious symbols and seek to expand Islamic revivalism, not just into education through Koranic schools and religious courses but also into consumption and leisure activities (Roy and Boubekeur 2012). Pop singers, along with Islamic rap stars and heavy metal Muslims, provide good examples of the reconciliation between Islamic music and Western modernity, and so are places of leisure such as beaches and hotels that offer an alcohol-free environment and prayer rooms. The "burkini" worn by many women on beaches in the Arab world is a reflection of the compromise between faith and modernity, religiosity and Western lifestyle. Besides, this alliance of faith and modernity is not specific to one type of Islam, as it is common to both Shia and Sunni communities (Deeb 2006).

Many researchers readily agree that these dynamics illustrate a shift from Islamic-specific views of the world, and their associated obligation-oriented understandings, to new post-Islamist, inclusive ways of thinking that both acknowledge the existence of multiple interpretations of norms, and compromise over the performance of religious practices (Jung et al. 2014, Bayat 2007 and 2013, Roy 1999, Haenni 2005). In this view, post-Islamism shows that political projects have been relinquished in favour of new forms of piety that are more focused on salvation and morality in everyday life. This shift explains why charismatic preachers without formal Islamic religious training successfully promote a "faith and fun" religiosity, and can compete with the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood or with the sheikhs of al-Azhar. It also helps understand why new trends in Islamic fashion are supplanting more traditional and austere Islamic forms of dress (Jung et al. 2014: 120–21).

Since the 2000s, "evangelical" Islamic preachers, such as Amr Khaled, Khaled al-Guindy and, more recently, Moez Masoud, have come forward as representative figures of a casual religiosity, and whose messages are disseminated via ICT to a large audience throughout the Arab world. These preachers aim to address young people with a global awareness with a discourse focused on moral values, piety, virtue and success in life that breaks free from the outdated teachings of *ulama*[2] that emphasize punishment and Judgement Day. These new preachers appear on television and on the Internet, and they hold seminars in the Arab world as they hope to chart a third way distinct from both classical religious messages and the politicized discourse of Islamism. They embody a sort of "Islamic revivalism" that does not seek the politicization of society. This is in contrast with the

2 *Ulama* are religious leaders trained at the traditional religious institutions. They are regarded as the guardians and interpreters of Islamic doctrine and law.

historical objectives of Islamist movements who abide by the dictates of the Muslim Brotherhood and which aim to Islamize society through the state. They seem to answer a need for piety shared equally by the middle classes and the new bourgeoisie that has emerged in the Arab world as a result of the liberalization and globalization of the economy. Without conflating the political with the religious, nor denying access to the material goods of consumer society, these preachers insist that the youth develop their own moral compass when it comes to consumerism (Haenni and Holtrop 2002).

Yet this post-Islamist religiosity is also described as "light preaching" (*da'wa diet*) or "air-conditioned Islam", and is deemed religiously inconsistent by sheikhs of al-Azhar and at the same time as too "a-political" and conformist by proponents of a more political Islam (Haenni and Tammam 2003). It represents a post-Islamist dynamic that illustrates the growing autonomy of believers in shaping their own religious practices (Roy 1999) and an autonomy that, as a central element of secularization, reflects the scope of the diversification and individualization experienced in the religious sphere over the past twenty years, and the extent to which each of these trends is tied to the social and demographic changes that have occurred in the region. In fact, a new generation is taking over and is changing faces: half of the Middle Eastern population is under twenty-four years old, two thirds are under thirty years old, and 70 percent of the population in the MENA countries now live in urban areas (Keulertz 2016). This new generation is a reflection of the demographic changes that have marked the region. In other words, young people are more educated than their parents and they are little inclined to respect traditional authorities. Gender relations also tend to be more egalitarian as girls' now have improved access higher education, get married later in life, bear fewer children and are able to enter the job market. Young people are becoming more self-sufficient as nuclear families are supplanting extended ones. This new generation is also more open to the world: they are more likely to learn foreign languages, to be connected to the Internet and be active on social media. Moreover, as they become the dominant generation, the chances are that they will come to assert their commitment to individual freedom and rebel against authority – in particular, against the classical religious authorities – all the more so because they are struggling to find their place within society in a tough economic climate (Khosrokhavar 2012). In turn, this could encourage further diversification of the religious sphere (Roy 2014). Since the 1990s, more individualistic and less warring (or not belligerent at all) forms of religion have emerged as the Islamist utopia was running out of steam and large collective projects were failing to deliver on their promises. These versions of religiosity are less interested in establishing an Islamic state than they are in forging compromises, in combining different forms of beliefs, practices, lifestyle choices and participation in public life.

Meanwhile, the development of neo-fundamentalism or Salafism contributes to this more individualist re-appropriation of Islam. Interestingly, Salafism and post-Islamist religiosity share the same concern for the moral purification of customs and local cultures. The former is occupied with weeding out *bid'ah* (heresy), calling for a return to the word of the Koran and to the time of the Prophet. The latter deems religion useful as a way to prevent the overt modernization and Westernization of societies. However, disagreements exist and changes do occur. In contrast with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism advocates, for instance, a strict and literalist application of the Koranic message that subjects human behaviours and conducts to certain norms (i.e. dividing things into licit or illicit/*halal* and *haram*). Salafists discard any kind

of traditional culture, even "Muslim culture", rejecting as they do so arts, theatre, poetry, music and even architecture by destroying tombs and historical buildings. Neo-fundamentalism aims at reconstructing imagined roots of Islam that will rebuild the community from within. In a sense, it formulates a new identity for people who feel themselves to be oppressed, marginalized and victims of injustice. This focus on norms combined with the dissociation between culture and religion, along with globalization, explain the capacity of neo-fundamentalism to expand beyond the MENA region and into Western societies (Roy 2010).

Moreover, the individualization of the religious sphere and the growing autonomy of believers in shaping their religious practices are things happening alongside the return of popular forms of religiosity that have reinforced the many national and traditional modes of expression of Islam among different social classes – for instance North African Sufism in the Maghreb region. Despite the attempts of the regimes in the Maghreb to homogenize Sufi spirituality, the practices of the Sufi orders have always been broad and diverse, ranging from "classical" orders close to scriptural Islam, popular religiosity with heteroclite practices, and, more recently, the emergence of liberal and modern spirituality promoting universal values depicted by critics as "*Soufisme à l'Américaine*" (American-style Sufism), particularly en vogue among upper classes (Werenfels 2014). And yet, with respect to the Arab world, the religiosity of a large share of the younger generation needs to be approached in a nuanced manner, for it is plural, hybrid and represents many interpretations of religious practices that range from the most radically conservative to the most liberal forms of belief. Often, practices still build on personal interpretations of what Islam stands for as a religion and belief system (Osman 2016). Overall, it is fair to say that the individualization of religion has influenced the pluralization of the religious sphere, which in turn is challenging both the state and the movements affiliated with political Islam. This leads to contestation of the legitimacy of the religious establishment, which has a long tradition of making deals with the de facto powers in the region, and hence appears to such powers to be a serious challenge. The co-optation of the religious establishment is no longer an effective way to rebuild the legitimacy of the regimes in the region. Furthermore, individualization of religion has gone hand in hand with the formation of a broader religious market, in which religious establishments are less able to compete and to influence people's beliefs.

1.2 CRISIS IN STATE–RELIGION RELATIONS

Paradoxically, the Islamic revivalism that has fostered the individualization of religion since the 1990s has also contributed to the de-legitimization of traditional religious institutions which, prior 2011, used to serve as moral backing in the political regimes' fight against Islamism (Brown 2017, Roy 2014). Historically, Islamist movements had challenged traditional *ulama*, and denounced the fact that they provided religious endorsements to authoritarian regimes (Burgat and Dowell 1993). With Islamic revivalism, the rationale for dissent is less politically grounded and more prosaically interested in damaging the traditional authorities. The assertiveness of new, self-taught preachers who have followed atypical career paths, and the circulation of religious knowledge in uncontrolled ways via the Internet, conferences, social media and television channels are a case in point. Indeed, this diversification within the religious sphere has increasingly challenged the authority of official religious voices. In the same way, the growth of religious products (books for a general audience, CDs, Muslim fashion clothing etc.), as well as in religious pilgrimage, tourism, recreation and

leisure is setting the stage for a new faith-based market that eludes the control of traditional and official religious authorities (Roy 2004).

This diversification contrasts with the efforts made by Arab governments to control the religious sphere, whether it be through the delimitation of Islamic organizations' freedom of action, as in Egypt, Algeria and Morocco, or through heavy restrictions on religious discourse, appointment of imams, administration of mosques and religious education to avoid dissenting voices, as in Tunisia. In fact, in the case of Egypt, the Mubarak regime was unable to monopolize the religious sphere, and had to put up with Islamic organizations such as the well-established *al-Gami'yya al-Shari'yya* and *al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya* (the Salafist Call). In exchange for certain leeway, these movements refrained from criticizing the government and its policies (Fahmi 2014). In Morocco, tension was also high between the monarchy and the *ulama*, despite the religious legitimacy of the king and the co-optation of dissenting religious voices: the prevailing "forced obedience" of the 1990s later turned into a "silent dissent" in the 2000s (Tozy 2015: 123–24). In Tunisia, state-controlled yet weak and de-legitimized religious institutions have kept their monopoly over the religious sphere (Fahmi and Meddeb 2015). The bottom line is that across the MENA region, the autonomy of religious institutions has always been a challenge that has shaped relations between the state and the religious sphere in different ways depending on each state's historical trajectory (Cesari 2014).

The Arab uprisings nevertheless altered the political and institutional balance and led to the end of the state's heavy-handed control over the religious sphere. The distrust of official imams and religious institutions that had been discredited by their collusion with fallen regimes left room for formerly banned organizations and movements to move in and take control of mosques. While in Egypt, for example, imams and more broadly al-Azhar protested the "brotherhoodization" of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and feared that the Muslim Brotherhood might take control of religious affairs (Fahmi 2014), in Tunisia, a battle for the control of mosques opposed the imams who had been appointed by the government against those appointed by Salafist movements or chosen by members of the mosque (Fahmi and Meddeb 2015). These episodes illustrate the prevailing unruliness of the religious sphere at a time when the scope of public space was widening, which in turn allowed a plurality of actors to protest and express their opinions.

The rise of jihadi movements, the closing down of the political space in Egypt after the coup and the launch of the fight against terrorism in 2013 in many Arab countries meant that the state returned to its old habits and tried to regain total control over the religious sphere, most evidently in Egypt and Tunisia. The al-Sisi regime in Egypt indeed opted to ban Friday prayers in many mosques and other smaller places, so as to evict the Muslim Brotherhood from the religious sphere and reduce the influence of affiliated organizations. This decision entailed a drop in the number of unlicensed imams. At the same time, the Ministry of Religious Endowments limited its recruitment to preachers who had qualified through the religious establishment of al-Azhar and other state institutions, massively increasing the ranks of imams from 76,000 to 96,000 in order to cover Friday prayers in all of Egypt's 80,000 mosques (Fahmi 2014). The war that the al-Sisi regime is waging against the Muslin Brotherhood to regain control of the religious sphere is extremely costly and there is no guarantee of success. Yet, considering the lack of human and financial resources, the ineluctable pluralization of the religious sphere and more generally because of

globalization, the odds are against the successful return of a state-monopolized Islam. If it were to return, the chances are that it would generate negative side-effects such as distrust in imams and in official institutions, similar to the situation that existed prior to 2011. Wanting to listen to a trustworthy discourse, worshippers are already turning to independent organizations and thus contributing to the growth of a parallel religious sphere available via social media and religious studies "online educational courses", such as those by Dar el-Emad in Egypt or Imam Malik's Salafist University in Tunisia, which are extremely popular across the entire Arab world.

The existing religious pluralism testifies to the diversification of Islam-related identities, which goes to show that the dominant patriarchal and authoritarian political culture is being challenged throughout the Arab world. This may well be a harbinger of an autonomous political sphere leading to democratization. The 2013 Egyptian *coup d'état* illustrates the power of that momentum, as the new regime rushed to thwart efforts towards diversity and pluralism so it could reinstate patriarchy and authoritarianism (Roy 2014). It also explains why the al-Sisi regime is continuously seeking to gain full control of the religious sphere. These efforts by the establishment may well be doomed to failure in the long term, for resistance is building and society is starting to rail against blindly following religious leaders who act merely as spokespersons for the political authorities. The thousand-year-old institution that is al-Azhar is well aware that the regime may yield to the temptation of organizing an official Islam to better control it; and although al-Azhar sheikh supported the military removal of President Morsi for fear of a hegemonic Muslim Brotherhood, he still refuses to be made a tool by the political authorities, and opposes state control of al-Azhar (Shams 2017).

Since 2011, Sufi orders have gradually reappeared in the political sphere of the Maghreb after decades of maintaining a low profile. The need of political parties to mobilize Sufi networks in electoral competition in Tunisia on one hand, and on the other, the attempts of authoritarian regimes in Morocco and Algeria to adapt to the new domestic and regional challenges in order to stabilize their rule in a climate of weakness in formal political institutions have opened the floor for Sufi orders to increasingly engage in the political sphere. Furthermore, Algerian–Moroccan competition and the economic ambitions of Morocco in Sub-Saharan Africa have pushed the authorities of both countries to strengthen transnational Sufi networks connecting these nations to those further south. The training of imams from Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb is considered a way to promote and export the Moroccan "brand of Islam" (Werenfels 2014). This brand is still ill defined; it focuses, however, on a concept of "spiritual security", based on containment of dissenting religious actors, promotion of Sufi orders and a genuine management of the diversity of the religious sphere by the state through a mix of control and co-optation of various religious trends.

Despite the support of Sufi orders to authoritarian regimes in Algeria and Morocco to counter the forces of political Islam, the promotion of Sufism cannot be reduced to a simple co-optation or instrumentalization of these actors by the regimes. Sheikhs and orders have been able to pursue their own political vision, showing in some cases a rapprochement with Islamists or propagating messages that are not necessarily in line with the official discourse of the regimes (Werenfels 2014: 291). The post-2011 context (democratic transition in Tunisia and authoritarian upgrading in Morocco and Algeria) has enhanced the visibility of the Sufi orders in Maghreb politics and

expanded their margin for manoeuvre in a climate of diversification within the religious sphere and fierce competition with Salafism, Hizb Tahrir and other Islamist trends.

In other words, it stands to reason that, since the Islamic religious sphere exhibits such a diversity of ideas, actors and organizations, then national efforts to enforce strict and monolithic policies are less likely to succeed and more prone to generating ineffective and counterproductive side-effects. Creating an effective control mechanism requires the recognition of this diversity and to set out clear rules in terms of consensus and inclusivity.

2. THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL ISLAM

Additionally, the post-2011 political upheavals have engendered a far-reaching transformation of the landscape for political Islam. If the Arab uprisings brought an end to the long-term work put in by Tunisian, Egyptian and Moroccan Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements towards their becoming key players and active participants in the political process, the different national situations have nevertheless produced a variety of trajectories. Movements have been faced with heightened competition for the representation of political Islam now that Salafi organizations have started politicizing and jihadi groups have risen in importance.

2.1 THE TRAJECTORIES OF MODERATE ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

The 2011 Arab uprisings have impacted on "moderate" Islamist movements[3] in the MENA region in significant yet distinct ways. This section focuses on the moderate Islamist movements in the Middle East whose political fortunes were significantly altered by the events of 2011: namely, those in Egypt, Tunisia and to a lesser extent Morocco.[4] Naturally, all three of these movements have their own history and their trajectories have been shaped by the particular political, social and economic conditions of the nation-states within which they have emerged. Following the uprisings, they all underwent accelerated change and have had to reconsider ideological positions regarding religion, politics and their political practices, along the way experiencing significant fluctuations in their popularity. Although the Arab uprisings of 2011 drew inspiration and encouragement from one another, they followed different paths in each of the MENA countries, and were affected by local history and circumstances. This led to further variation and a pluralization of the trajectories of Islamist movements; and we can observe in the post-2011 period a yet even greater variation in the pathways and choices made by moderate Islamist movements (Volpi 2017, Cavatorta and Merone 2016, Lynch 2016a).

There is, however, an important dichotomy in the trajectories of moderate Islamist movements in the post-2011 period between the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which has been excluded from

3 We define "moderate" here as non-violent and being open to participating in the political process. "Moderate", like "centrist", is a relative term, in the sense that a movement or party is moderate only in relation to the context in which it finds itself, and in comparison with other Islamist movements. "Moderate" does not necessarily mean "liberal" or "democratic".

4 It would be impracticable, within the boundaries of this paper, to analyse moderate Islamist movements in the entire MENA region: this would require detailed analysis of the politics of all MENA states, each of which contains one or more moderate Islamist movements.

the political process, and the Tunisian and Moroccan Islamists, whose integration in the political process has only deepened. In Egypt, the Freedom and Development Party (FJP) – the political entity established by the Muslim Brotherhood after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak – assumed power in June 2012 when Mohammed Morsi, one of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders, became president of the Republic. The FJP was also successful in securing majorities in a series of national elections to the Parliamentary Assembly held in 2011–12 (El Houdaiby 2013). The considerable popular support that the FJP enjoyed, however, dissipated within one year. By July 2013, when the army stepped in to take over power in what was, to all intents and purposes, a *coup d'état*, massive anti-Islamist demonstrations proved its move to be a popular one. The Brotherhood/FJP was ruthlessly suppressed following the coup and the FJP was banned in August 2014. The leader of the July 2013 coup, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, was elected to the Egyptian presidency in May 2014, but it is worth noting that his widespread popularity, once an indication of the Egyptian electorate's support for the Brotherhood/FJP, has been an ephemeral affair.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's decision, in the months after the overthrow of Mubarak in January 2011, to establish a party and throw itself in the political fray to pursue power showed that it had overcome its previous ambivalence about full political participation (Mitchell 1993, Wickham 2013). This indicated that the movement was changing ideological direction apropos the relationship between religion and politics, in contrast with its previous positions (the latest being the decision to move away from politics towards the more religious activities of the movement taken in January 2010, one short year before the uprising).

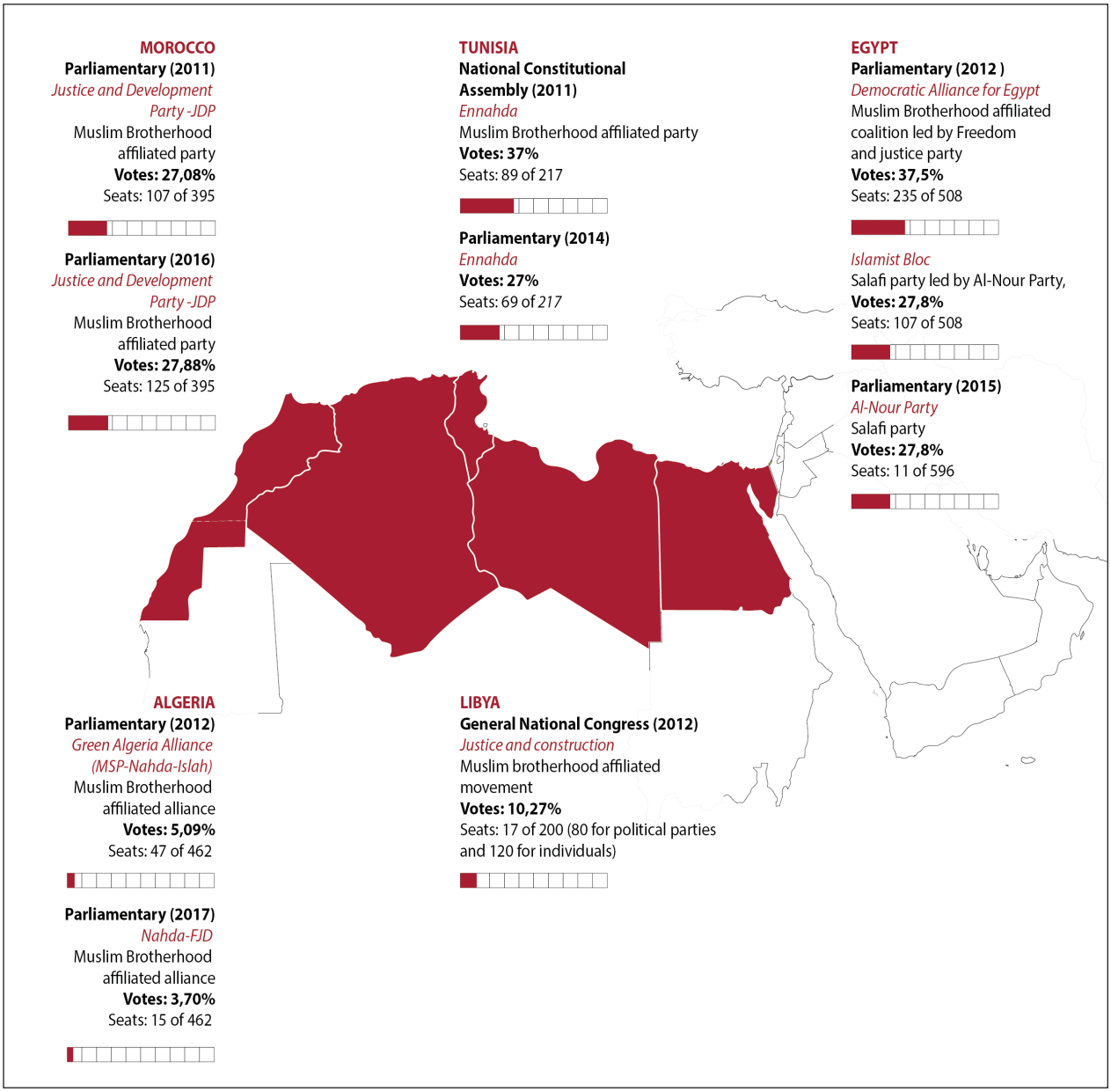
This important development in the direction of ideological moderation – in the sense of a further acceptance of the rules of the political "game" – was scuppered in the course of the Brotherhood's year in government. Upon assuming the reins of power – even though its control was in fact only partial – the movement showed a reluctance to engage with other political actors and it sought neither alliances nor links with them. There were limits, in other words, to what the Brotherhood understood as political participation and engagement. This was not only because of a decision on its part but was also due to the unwillingness of other political actors in Egypt to co-operate with the Brotherhood. The lack of consensus and dearth of political experience among the important political players in Egypt contributed to a catastrophic result (Masoud 2014),[5] with the coup of July 2013 signifying a reversal of the democratization process and initiating a period of greater authoritarianism in Egypt (Hamzawy 2017). It has also led to the (wrong) conclusion by many in the Brotherhood, that participating in democracy did not "work". While Brotherhood members did not take up arms, the situation still caused a de-legitimation of the political process in their eyes. It is fair to assume that the Brotherhood will think twice before opting again to participate in the political process, should the heavy hand of political repression be lifted in Egypt (Lynch 2016a).

At the same time, the trajectory of the Tunisian Ennahda movement has been very different from that of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Immediately after the removal of Ben Ali in January 2011, the Ennahda movement was legalized and contested the elections of October 2011, and it

5 There were other reasons for the Brotherhood/FJP's loss of popularity and, ultimately, power: Muhammad Morsi's lack of charisma; the inexperience of the Brotherhood's cadres; its inability to deliver on the implicit promise which had brought it to power, the realization of "social justice", which had propelled the masses to the streets in 2011 in the first place; and the fear that aspects of its Islamic agenda elicited, particularly among the Coptic minority.

won votes from a range of constituents. It formed a coalition government, which lasted until it was replaced by a national unity government in January 2014. Ennahda participated in the drafting of the new constitution, which was promulgated in the same month. In the elections of October 2014, Ennahda saw its popular vote diminish, coming in second behind the secularist Nidaa Tounes. The latter formed a new government that included Ennahda but did not grant it representation proportional to its electoral weight (Mersch 2014, Boukhars 2015).

Figure 1 | Islamist Parties' Performances in Elections since 2011 in North Africa



Source: CIDOB elaboration on Authors' data.
Note: In Egypt and Libya there are two kinds of seats: those dedicated to political parties and those dedicated to individuals. In other words, political parties and individuals compete for different seats.

The fundamental political decision made by Ennahda, which differed from that of the Brotherhood in Egypt, was to go beyond mere participation in the political process and to join forces and form alliances and coalitions with other secular parties (Cavatorta and Merone 2013, Merone 2015). Notwithstanding the polarization and animosity in Tunisia between secularist and Islamist camps, at both the political and social levels, opponents were somehow able to strike on a middle ground and work together to some extent. While the presence of an Islamist extremist movement did create further polarization, the national consensus never broke down completely (ICG 2016, Fakir 2015). This scenario explains why Ennahda opted to move further to the political centre, in view of its history and past choices – which also reflected the leadership's conscious decision to steer the movement in a particular direction. These shifts resulted in its announcing in May 2016 that it would leave behind "political Islam" and declaring itself a "Muslim democratic" party, marking the separation between its religious and political activities (Souli 2016).

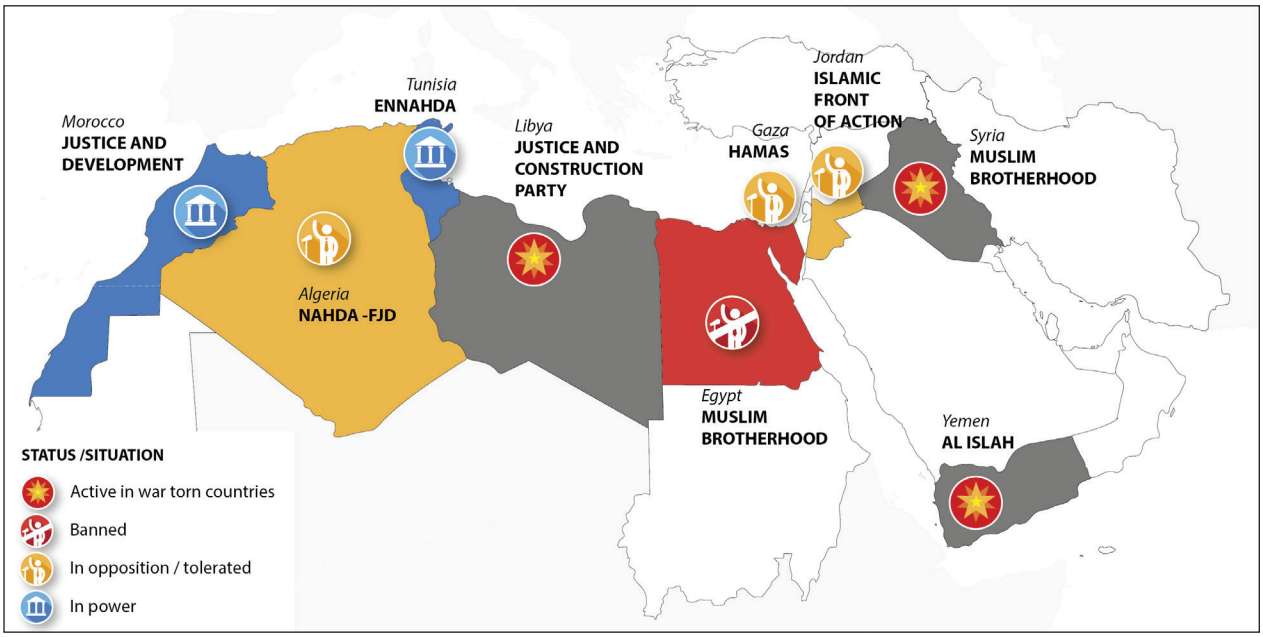
As for Morocco, the domestic political developments post-2011 only confirmed the already settled position of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) as a mainstream political player and reinforced its centrist orientation. The fact is that the PJD has been operating in a stable political context insofar as the monarchy continues to dominate Moroccan politics. However, liberalizing steps were taken when the constitution was amended in June 2011, in an effort to prevent the region-wide turmoil from spreading to Morocco (Spiegel 2015) – the implication being that the regime "began to use the PJD to stave off the winds of political change that might blow from other parts of the Arab world" (Maghraoui 2015). In the November 2011 elections, if the PJD did not win a majority, it did gain the largest percentage of votes, enabling it to form a government. Like the Tunisian Ennahda movement, the PJD has thereafter moved towards delineating the boundary between religion and politics; in particular, it took steps to separate the party from the religious movement that created it, namely the Unity and Reform Movement (MUR) (Masbah 2017b). The situation changed again following the most recent elections in October 2016, as the PJD has been unable to form a government and is since locked in a power struggle with the palace (Monjib 2017, Masbah 2017a). It is undeniable that this kind of politicking has brought to light the politicized – as opposed to the religious – nature of the PJD as an entity.

The Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements appear to have reached an impasse (Roy 1999): unable to move their political and societal project forward, and incapable of implementing their programme for an Islamist government in Tunisia and Morocco or completely excluded from the political arena in Egypt. All evidence shows that they need to change, revisit their ideological tenets and pay close attention to their constituency as confusion sets in.[6] Throughout the 2000s, these movements saw the experience of the AK Party in Turkey as a model representing a success story for an Islamist party that came to power through elections and succeeded over years to combine democracy with Islamic and conservative values, resisted the pressure of a powerful secularist establishment, achieved economic success and met middle class expectations (Osman 2016). However, the context post-2013 (i.e. *coup d'état* in Egypt and political compromise in Tunisia) is totally different from the 2000s; Arab Islamist movements are struggling to survive in a hostile regional environment, adopting lower-profile approaches in Morocco and Tunisia or simply trying to preserve the very existence of the movement, as is the case in Egypt. The situation in Turkey

6 The leaders of the Ennahda movement usually insist on the fact that between the elections of 2011 and 2014, the Islamist movement lost half a million votes.

is different from that in the 2000s too. The AK Party's successful image was tarnished after the restrictions it imposed against opposition movements, intellectuals, journalists and the Kurdish population transformed Turkey into an illiberal democracy.

Figure 2 | Muslim Brotherhood-Affiliated Movements (2017)



Source: CIDOB elaboration on Authors' data.

2.2 SALAFI MOVEMENTS AND THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The ensuing wave of popular uprisings after 2011 has undoubtedly affected Salafist movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen in more ways than one. The emergence of Salafist political parties, although already present in Bahrain and Kuwait, was a striking novelty for these countries, and resulted from Salafi movements being pressured into adapting quickly to new political contexts (Cavatorta and Merone 2016). In Egypt, a few of the quietist Salafis who had gathered under the umbrella of the *al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya* movement (the Salafist Call) and forgone political participation on ideological and theological grounds, to focus instead on preaching and social work, decided to opt into the political game and create the Nour Party (Hizb Al-Nour) (Al-Anani 2016).[7] In Tunisia, the most significant of all the small Salafi political parties that came into being, the Reform Front Party, never gained the level of electoral support that the Egyptian Nour Party had reached in the 2011 elections after Mubarak's fall (24 percent of votes), coming second after the Freedom and Justice Party (Zelin 2012, Fahmi 2015). As for Yemen, the first Salafi party created in March 2012, the Al-Rashad Union, also embraced *hizbiyya* or party politics (Bonnefoy 2016).

7 According to Wagemakers (2016: 15), quietists "do not believe in engaging in parliamentary participation, want to refrain from political debate and activism in society and do not want to develop policies on either domestic or foreign issues. This does not mean that they have no political views or never comment on political issues; rather, it means that they believe these should be expressed only in religious terms and privately or in discrete advice to the rulers of their countries, to whom they are sometimes explicitly loyal, and focus on *da'wa*, education and preaching instead."

Paradoxically, the emergence of these Salafi parties has contributed further to the fragmentation of a movement that was never really monolithic or unified. In fact, quietist Salafis have been accusing the newly organized and politicized Salafi groups (also called *salafiyya al-hizbiyya* or *al-harakiyya*) of deviating from Sunni orthodoxy (i.e. of too much *bida'*, innovation), introducing dissension between political factions in the *Umma* (Islamic community) and sowing discord (*fitna*), and doing so even though they share the same doctrinal tenets. Quietist Salafis are in fact self-proclaimed upholders of *salafiyya al-'ilmiyya* (scientific Salafism, or purism) and they commend obedience to the power in place, be it authoritarian or not. They also advocate that Islamization be conducted in society via preaching (*da'wa*) and education, and they condemn violence. In other words, they are not so much turning their back on politics as preferring to give discreet advice to rulers (*nasiḥa*) following the broader principle of *sama' wa-ṭa'a* (listening and obedience). They believe that Salafism is the authentic Islam in a world where religion is marred by corruption originating from both internal (Sufi, Shia) and external sources (Western culture) of deviance (Adraoui 2013). Furthermore, in opposition to both these trends of Salafism stand the jihadi Salafis, who answer to the name of *salafiyya al-jihadiyya*. These latter hold the view that quietist Salafis are to blame for turning a blind eye on corrupt regimes, and they accuse politicized Salafis of heresy for believing in political participation and forgoing the use of violence to bring about an Islamic society (Wagemakers 2016).

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, these evolving ideological and doctrinal tensions have translated into acrimonious debates over participation in the political game, the necessity of an organizational restructuring of the Salafi movement and the urgent issue of whether or not to take an active part in the post-2011 political recomposition to avoid marginalization (Al-Anani 2016). These tensions have led to the creation of new Salafi political parties in Egypt (Al Fadhila and Al-Watan came out of the division of Nour Party) and Tunisia (Al-Rahma and Al-Assala are still failing to do better than the Reform Front Party), while in Morocco, a debate opened up about whether the existing network-based organization should engage in party politics.

Above all else, the emergence of Salafi political parties since 2011 cannot be explained without referring to the competition and rivalry between Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood. This long-standing religious rivalry is growing further as different trends of Salafism have gained ground in the areas of charity work, religious education and social work. In Egypt, this rivalry motivated Salafis to master the workings of elections and run a rule-abiding electoral campaign, and to provide support in the July 2013 *coup d'état* led by General al-Sisi; conversely, in Tunisia, such competition prompted instead a battle for control over mosques and the appointment of imams, and did so because of the religious vacuum left by the fall of the regime. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that in Egypt the different Islamist movements that had benefited from a relative freedom of action under the Mubarak regime easily turned to the political field after 2011 to express their internal differences of opinion, whereas their Tunisian counterparts sought instead to fill the gap left by the fallen regime in both the religious and political fields.

There is no denying that the Salafi movement's decision to reconsider its political participation owes a lot to the overall instability of national political environments, marked respectively by the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013, the withdrawal of Ennahda from the ruling coalition in Tunisia and the chaos that has engulfed both Libya and Yemen starting from 2014.

In this way, the decision of the Nour Party to support the ban of the Muslim Brotherhood has created a rift among the different factions of the Salafi movement, who did not all accept the intervention of the military in politics. Instead, they were at loggerheads over the very relevance of political engagement and a possible return to a quietist self-preservation strategy, after the al-Sisi regime imposed political restrictions that curbed activism (Al-Anani 2016). Similarly, after losing elections, Tunisian Salafis have come to reconsider their political engagement and redirect their energy towards social work and preaching. In contrast, Moroccan Salafis who had not organized themselves as a political party instead took an active role in the "February 20 Movement", and a few leading Salafi figures such as Abdelwaheb Rafiki (known as Abu Hafs) stood as candidates in the legislative elections in 2016. In other words, these cases indicate that political participation is not always an irreversible endpoint but that it depends, rather, on national political contexts (pluralism versus authoritarianism) and on the outcomes of internal debates among the Salafi movement, which themselves tend to intensify within a climate of political openness.

There is reason to believe that political participation will remain a contentious point for the Salafi movement, all the more so in that it is under-institutionalized and built around networks rather than having a typical pyramidal structure. Moreover, the movement is split along generational lines and the young cohort tends to favour party politics (Merone and Cavatorta 2012). The Salafi entry into post-revolutionary politics has sparked many debates – theological, over its Islamic lawfulness, and political, over its necessity – which in turn have affected not only doctrinal principles but also its relationships with the holders of power (Fahmi 2015).

2.3 THE RISE OF JIHADI MOVEMENTS AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The post-2011 landscape has been significantly marked by the rise of jihadi movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. The transformations experienced by Salafism should be read in light of the challenge it poses in terms of political participation and also, as previously mentioned, in light of the repercussions of its fragmentation for conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Libya. It is, however, crucial to refrain from referring to "jihadism" (a political ideology) or "Jihadi-Salafism" (its ideological root) as monolithic ideologies. Both "jihadism" and "Salafism" are in fact umbrella terms without a clear-cut meaning or fixed definition (Weismann 2017: 64). There are, after all, about 50 million "Salafists" in the world and they more than likely bear marked differences in terms of policies and perspectives among themselves and across borders.

The increasing destabilization of the region, largely connected to the medium and long-term consequences of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (Kamel 2016),[8] has prompted a profusion of new Salafi groups. It is enough to mention that the number of Salafi-jihadist groups in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean doubled (a 58 percent increase) between 2010 and 2013. Slightly lower figures can be inferred for the following period between 2013 and 2017 (Jones 2014: 26). These data are all the more striking if one considers that al Qaeda numbered in the hundreds fifteen years ago (while absent in Iraq until the 2003 US invasion). Today, in addition to ISIS (absent in Syria before 2011), its affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra counts tens of thousands of fighters and supporters in different countries.

8 According to the US State Department, "incidents of terrorism" increased by 6,500 percent since the "war on terror" began in 2001: half of them have been registered in Iraq and Afghanistan.

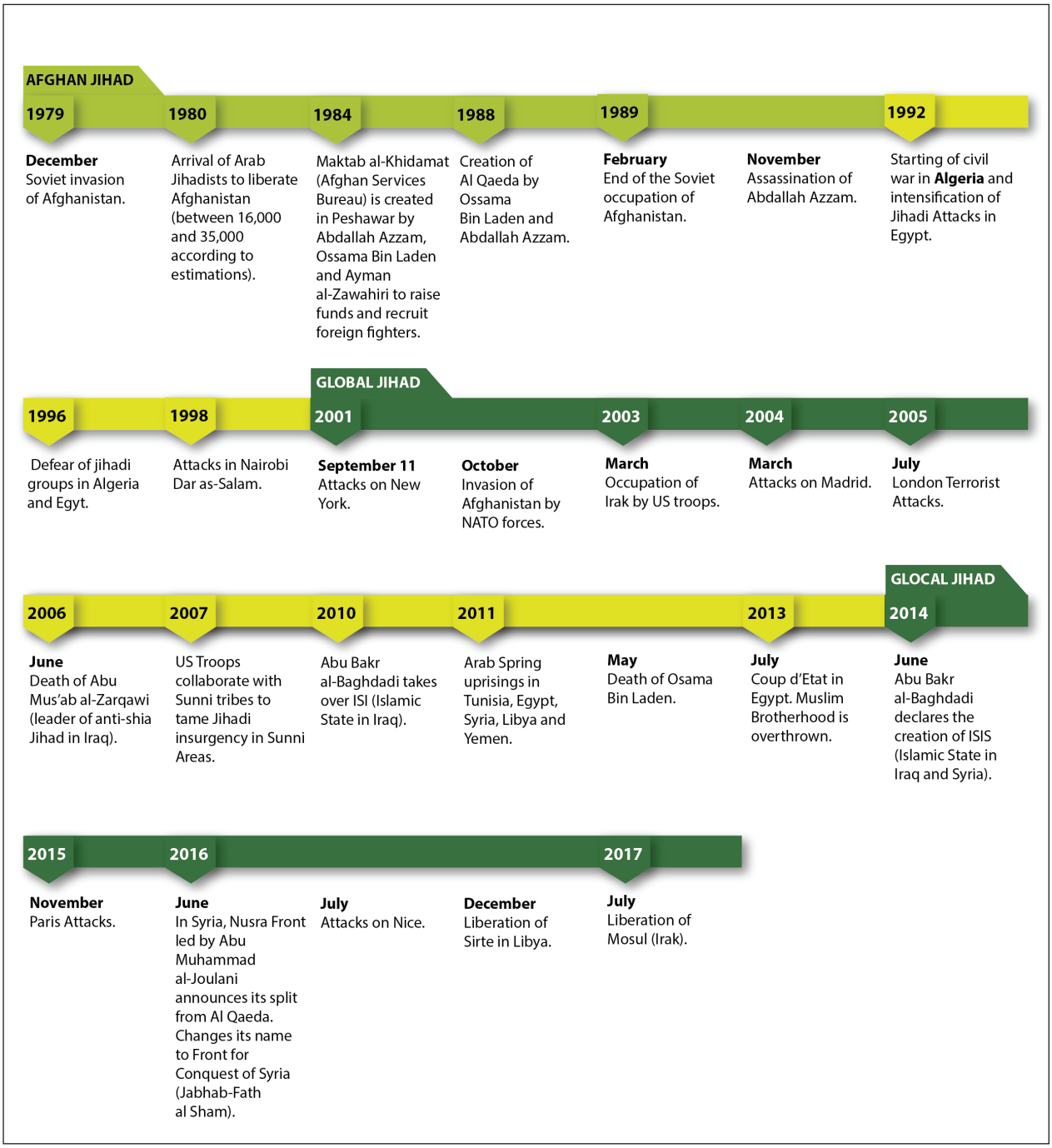
This mixed picture confirms, if need be, that national specificities and practical conditions shape the proliferation and development of these groups to a much greater extent than the sole interpretation of religious texts could ever hope to. In a relatively stable country such as Morocco, for instance, the jihadi leaders who had rejected violence did take part in the parliamentary elections organized in 2016. In contrast, in Tunisia, the jihadi group Ansar Sharia preferred investing its time and energy in charity work and preaching. Conversely, the wars raging in Syria and Iraq appear to have empowered more extreme sectarian Salafi and Salafi-jihadi trends at the expense of more pragmatic approaches, and have done so in spite of previous attempts to de-Ba'athify these countries, which many had perceived as a form of "de-Sunnification" (Luizard 2015).

However, it remains the case that the influence of ideologies should not be overlooked. Prominent figures such as Ibn Taymiyya, most likely the first to issue fatwas urging Muslims to fight or wage jihad against Muslim rulers suspected of being detrimental to Islam (Timani 2013: 58), continues to exert a huge influence on global jihadists, thus corroborating the praise that this Sunni scholar once received from al Qaeda's founder, Osama bin Laden, as "the original inspiration of jihad against a corrupt regime" (DeLong-Bas 2004: 273). And yet again, ideology is more often than not likely to bend to tactical considerations and local circumstances, as illustrated by al Qaeda's Syrian representatives' decision to rebrand themselves as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) in July 2016. Their aim was unmistakably clear: demonstrating first and foremost a total dedication to the local cause, and not to any transnational jihadi project.

All in all, in different areas of the MENA region and six years after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, "rebels have never been weaker – and jihadis have never been stronger" (Lister 2017). The war in Syria, in particular, is widely considered to harbour the single-most important power base for attracting Salafi-jihadist fighters. Regarding the situation there, a growing number of scholars and observers alike seem to agree with the French historian Jean-Pierre Filiu and support his ideas that jihadism will not end or be controlled until there is a complete capitulation of the self-proclaimed capital of ISIS, Raqqa, and of other major jihadist strongholds (Filiu 2016).

Yet it is worth noting that this somewhat consensual idea falsely conflates causes, symptoms and solutions all at once. As possibly the most media-friendly and influential Salafist-jihadist organization in the world of the past fifty years, ISIS certainly makes a powerful case study, and when it comes to assessing its future prospects, its international ramifications are just too extensive to narrow the focus solely onto the fate of Raqqa. Saudi Arabia is in fact its place of birth and Saudi nationals account for the second-biggest number of jihadist fighters in both Syria and Iraq, owing largely to an identity shaped by two key historical developments. The first development was the adoption by Muhammad ibn Saud, the founder of the First Saudi State, of the radical "puritan" views of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the mid-18th century – views that came to be known as Wahhabism and continue to define Saudi politics and society. The second was King Abdulaziz's decision in the 1920s to institutionalize the original Wahhabi vision. In the view of many Saudis, ISIS's rise represents a return to the true origins of the Saudi–Wahhabi project. And, indeed, it is Wahhabism that forms the core of ISIS's ideology. In point of fact, ISIS distributes copies of texts written by ibn Abd al-Wahhab in areas of Iraq and Syria under its control, and draws its most important lessons from them (Kamel 2015). In other words, and from an ideological perspective, defeating ISIS would require addressing both the role and legacy of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.

Figure 3 | Timeline: Milestones of Jihadism (1979–2017)



Source: CIDOB elaboration on Authors' data.[9]

Additionally, and from an operational perspective, ISIS's future prospects are also linked to Tunisia, the country that has sent the greatest number of jihadist fighters to Syria and Iraq. This can be partly explained by the failure of the Tunisian authorities to offer sufficient economic opportunities for its youth at a time when its nascent democratic transition has raised expectations. Reducing the

9 For further details see Robinson (2017).

number of fighters flocking to join ISIS's ranks thus demands the economic and social integration of marginalized regions of Tunisia; otherwise, young Tunisians (and others) are likely to keep on despairing and will turn to jihadi groups like ISIS, who by comparison appear to be the most reliable socio-economic equalizers.

ISIS and other less "popular" Jihadi groups' future prospects also have much to do with France, the European country that supplies the most fighters to the organization – a fact that probably reflects its aggressive form of secularism. France is, for instance, one of only two countries in Europe (Belgium being the other) that bans the full veil in its public schools. Not only does France rank low in comparison with other Western European countries (other than Belgium) on democracy indexes, according to Polity data, 70 percent of France's prison population is Muslim, which, in a context of open hostility towards religion in public spaces, lends a hand to extremist recruiters (McCants and Meserole 2016, Alexander 2015).

Finally, the last key determinant of ISIS's survival relates to countries' willingness, particularly in the West (and especially the United States), to recognize that oppressive regimes like those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt are part of the problem, not part of the solution. As one Israeli ex-general exclaimed in 2015 to Michael Oren, his country's former ambassador to the USA, "Why won't Americans face the truth? To defend Western freedom, they must preserve Middle Eastern tyranny" (Oren 2015:302). These kinds of approach, increasingly common in our times, further strengthen the ideological soil on which perverse ideologies can thrive.

To sum up, even if the fall of Raqqa and Mosul were to mark a major victory against ISIS, there are many reasons to believe that this would neither seal that organization's fate, nor put an end to its jihadist strategies that are most likely to survive in different forms. To defeat ISIS once and for all, along with a number of other new and old jihadi groups operating in the region, it is necessary first and foremost to acknowledge and eliminate their many sources of sustenance.

3. GEOPOLITICS AND RELIGIOUS TENSIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Conflicts unfolding in the MENA region since 2011 are particularly influential in reshaping relations between religion and politics, not just in Islam but also within Christian communities and in Israel. Indeed, the post-2011 geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has polarized the division between Sunnism and Shiism. The growing importance of jihadi groups in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, and their success in recruiting fighters across the entire Middle East was made possible by massive support provided from the Gulf States, partly due to a wish to undermine the hegemonic aspirations of Iran. Tehran, for its part, is seeking to expand its influence as a self-proclaimed protector of Shia communities in the Persian Gulf. Conflicts are also crucially impacting the future of minorities, especially the Christians. The changing attitudes among members of Christian communities vis-à-vis established religious authorities are challenging the political role of the Church as historical representative of these communities in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Far from being specific to Muslim-majority societies, the evolving relationship between religion and politics is also a characteristic of the single Jewish-majority society of the region, Israel, where the rise of religious parties is contributing to the radicalization of Israeli politics.

3.1 RELIGION AND IDENTITY POLITICS WITHIN SHIA ISLAM

The analysis of the changing dynamics between religion and politics in the MENA after 2011 and their mutual relations with prominent geopolitical trends at the regional level necessitates looking into Shiism's internal developments. This minority branch of Islam, whose followers are scattered throughout a number of countries in the MENA region and across the Asian continent, amount to a percentage ranging between 10 and 20 percent according to most statistics.[10] They have been undergoing significant transformations since the 19th century, when a sustained process of politicization started and reached its apex with the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 (Nasr 2006). This particular event has heightened the perception of Shiism as a revolutionary and highly political force. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq marked yet another historic turning point for Shiism; as sectarian tensions rose, Sunni regimes – Egypt, Jordan and the other Gulf states – kept pointing fingers at Shiism and at its allegedly expansionist stances, denouncing it as a major threat, thereby misrepresenting it as a homogenous religious group with an absolute allegiance to Iran. This misrepresentation, however, fails to account for Shiism's politicization and religious pluralization process. Yet these misconceptions prosper in a context marked by the regional intensification of sectarian strife (Hashemi and Postel 2017). Relationships between religion and politics are in fact evolving in parallel with the changing attitudes among members of Shia communities apropos the established religious authorities, their respective governments and Sunni fellow citizens who, in most cases, form the majority where they live.

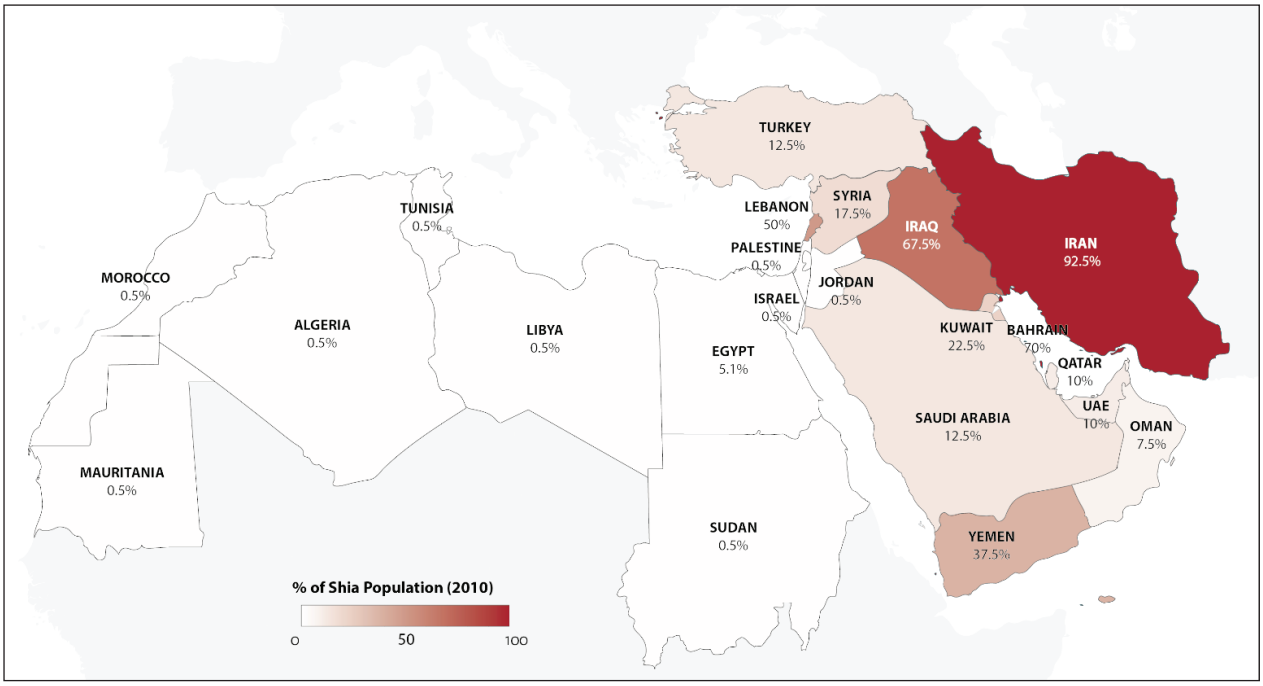
The religious dimension has always been a very important way for Shia populations to define their identity and political preferences in the MENA countries. Historically, Iran has monopolized the discussion and always spoke on behalf of the Shia communities living outside its borders, despite the fact that many Arab Shia disagree with the Iranian authorities' tenets, for example in the Gulf region and in Lebanon. In particular, many Shias do not believe in the notion of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, which is a cornerstone of the Iranian regime.[11] They also have their own *marja'*s (religious authorities) and lean towards civic and secular orientations, and their national affiliations stand at odds with those of the Iranian religious and political authorities. For Twelver Shias (*Ithna 'Ashariyyah*), who, as in Iran, represent the majority of Shias in the Arab world, the established *marja'* is that of Najaf in Iraq and not the *marja'* of Qom in Iran. This situation is the result of increasing and successful attempts made since the 2000s to establish an independent Arab Shiism in opposition to Iranian Shiism or Safavid Shiism (the latter in reference to the Safavid dynasty established in 1501), which triggered fierce competition between Najaf and Qom for control over

10 One of the most accurate and up-to-date reports on the size and distribution of the Muslim population at the global level is a 2009 report by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life (Pew Research Center 2009). The report indicates that most Shias (between 68 and 80 percent) live in only four countries: Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq. Furthermore, sizeable numbers of Shias (1 million or more) are found in Turkey, Yemen, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Nigeria and Tanzania. Shias constitute a relatively small percentage of the Muslim population elsewhere in the world. About 300,000 Shias are estimated to be living in the United States and Canada, constituting about 10 percent of North America's Muslim population. In only four countries – Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Iraq – do Shia Muslims make up a majority of the total population.

11 The doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih* forms the central axis of contemporary Shia political thought. It advocates a guardianship-based political system, which relies upon a just and capable jurist (faqih) to assume the leadership of the government in the absence of an infallible imam. This doctrine is linked to the concept of Marja' al-Taqlid, meaning the highest-ranking authorities of the Shia community, who execute sharia law. The position of *marja'* is informally acquired and depends on patterns of loyalty and allegiance.

the source of religious authority among Shias.

Figure 4 | Percentage of Shia Population by Country (2010)



Source: CIDOB elaboration on Pew Research Centre (2012) data.

This trend towards greater pluralization and differentiation within Shia communities at the regional level is made visible by the proliferation of religious figures and sheikhs. The majority of Shias outside Iran follow Ayatollah Al-Sayyed Ali al-Sistani who, himself, does not believe in *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Nasr 2006). Others followed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, who was known for his moderation and intellectual convergence with Sunnis until he died in 2010. Only a minority of Arab Shias follow the *marja'* in Qom in addition to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Among Arab Shias, there is a growing tendency to follow the Akhbari School that opposes the use of reasoning in deriving verdicts. In some countries, such as Kuwait, followers of the Shirazi movement can be found. They refer to Mohammad bin Mohammad al-Shirazi (1928–2001), who began a revolutionary movement before the 1979 Iranian revolution ever took place.[12] If he anticipated some of the ideas later put forward, he distanced himself from both Khomeini (who died 1989) and later Khamenei (Matthiesen 2014). In Lebanon, the Shia community increasingly looks to Ali al-Amin, an independent figure from Hezbollah (the "Party of God"), appreciating his moderation and ability to address everyone across sectarian divides (Mishal and Goldberg 2014).

Nevertheless, the most significant regional trend within Shiism after the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s, the 2003 war in Iraq and the 2011 Arab uprisings, is the increased politicization of Shia communities. The regional importance of this trend comes from the fact

12 Al-Shirazi was a leading Shia political theorist who initiated the movement under his name. The political theory of al-Shirazi was in favour of a "consultative system of leadership" composed of senior clerics, and not just one cleric alone, to govern the Islamic state.

that this process sometimes takes a stand in direct opposition to Iran. The diverging opinions among Arab Shias on civic and ideological matters have a long history. Arab Shias have played key roles in leftist and nationalist movements in the countries of the Gulf region, especially Lebanon and Iraq, in the past decades. It is important to emphasize that certain leaders of the national Shia movements have taken part in regimes hostile to Iran: for example in the 1960s with the Baathist regime in Iraq and Syria with Saadun Hamadi and Fuad al-Rikabi. Today, many of their activities remain incompatible with Iranian orientations and those of its allies in the region: such is the case of Muqtada al-Sadr, the religious and political leader of the Sadrist movement in Iraq, who is one of the most prominent figures of Iraqi nationalism and an opponent to the Islamic Republic's religious and political hegemony. These nuances are key if one is to understand current Iranian attempts to sectarianize the political conflict with other governments in the region and its efforts to speak on behalf of all Shias. Indeed, regional transformations, including the increased politicization of Shia communities throughout the MENA, have happened against the backdrop of mounting sectarian Sunni–Shia tensions covering up a much deeper Iranian–Arab/Saudi Arabian power struggle with far-reaching political ramifications notably for Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon and Iraq. This power struggle has manifested itself in the proxy-wars that make tools of existing conflicts – often represented by minority local communities or ad hoc political and/or military groups – as a means to advance the competitors' regional hegemonic aspirations.

The fact that most Shias outside Iran live in Sunni-dominated countries, or in countries where the sectarian balance is particularly complex and a source of profound tension, has important repercussions for their living standards and politicization. Indeed, the way that Arab governments deal with the Shias, individually and as a community, has to be understood if we are to assess the extent to which Iran is able to exploit this minority to serve its geopolitical interests. Attention must be paid to the ways in which states handle Shia minorities' demands and problems, and promote their civil, political and socio-economic rights, as discrimination and marginalization are rife, and likely to turn such minorities into a source of domestic (and regional) instability. When it comes to politicization, the situation varies greatly from one country to the next: while some Shias speak out against government discrimination in Bahrain, others in Kuwait are business entrepreneurs who take an active part in public life, while more again demand greater representation in government and lend their support to the incumbent Sunni regime (Al-Marashi 2015, Azoulay 2013), and others have yet take part in the government of Iraq (Louër 2008). In Saudi Arabia, where Shias live predominantly in the oil-rich eastern part of the country, demands target the improvement of socio-economic conditions, appointment to senior positions in the cabinet and in the diplomatic, military and security agencies, and greater representation on the Shura Council. The conditions and claims of the Saudi Shia community became increasingly visible and fiercely debated within the scholarly community after 2011, when a series of violent protests broke out in the province of Qatif, confronting Saudi Arabia with fully fledged domestic sectarian tensions. To provide a more accurate picture still, emphasis should be given to the rights and freedoms that have been granted since the 2000s to Shias throughout the region. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the monarchy has asked prominent Shia figures to take part in the National Dialogue sessions, and has agreed to establish separate municipal councils for Qatif and for neighbouring Shia-majority villages (ICG 2005, Matthiesen 2014). A few members of that community also won seats in the 2005 municipal elections. Outside the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, two examples of Shia politics stand in stark contrast to one another. On the one hand, the Shias in Yemen, who belong to the

Zaydi branch and are religiously and politically represented by the Houthis, have traditionally been a marginalized minority. On the other hand, another heterodox branch of the Shia, the Alawites, holds political and military power in Syria and is currently struggling to preserve it. Interestingly, these heterodox Shia groups, and not many of the mainstream movements named above, are supported by Iran against the backdrop of the regional intensification of sectarian strife. The "twelveimamization" of distant crypto-Shia groups, such as the Alawites, Zaydites and Alevis, operated by Tehran is more the result of geopolitics than of any rapprochement between religious doctrines. The challenge for these crypto-Shia groups is currently to preserve their doctrinal autonomy from both Sunnism and Shiism in the context of deep polarization between these two streams of Islam (Dorlian 2017).[13]

In conclusion, the stances of Shias throughout the MENA vary greatly as a result of the double processes of pluralization and politicization intertwining with increased regional sectarian strife. Overall, and quite strikingly, Shia demands focus on domestic social and political matters, and they have little to do with Shia ideology, religious doctrine or with a regional Shia-led opposition movement. Arab Shias appear committed to the country they live in and, contrary to a common preconception according to which they represent a threat to Arab countries' unity and stability, Shia political loyalties rarely transcend national borders.

3.2 RELIGION AND POLITICS WITHIN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

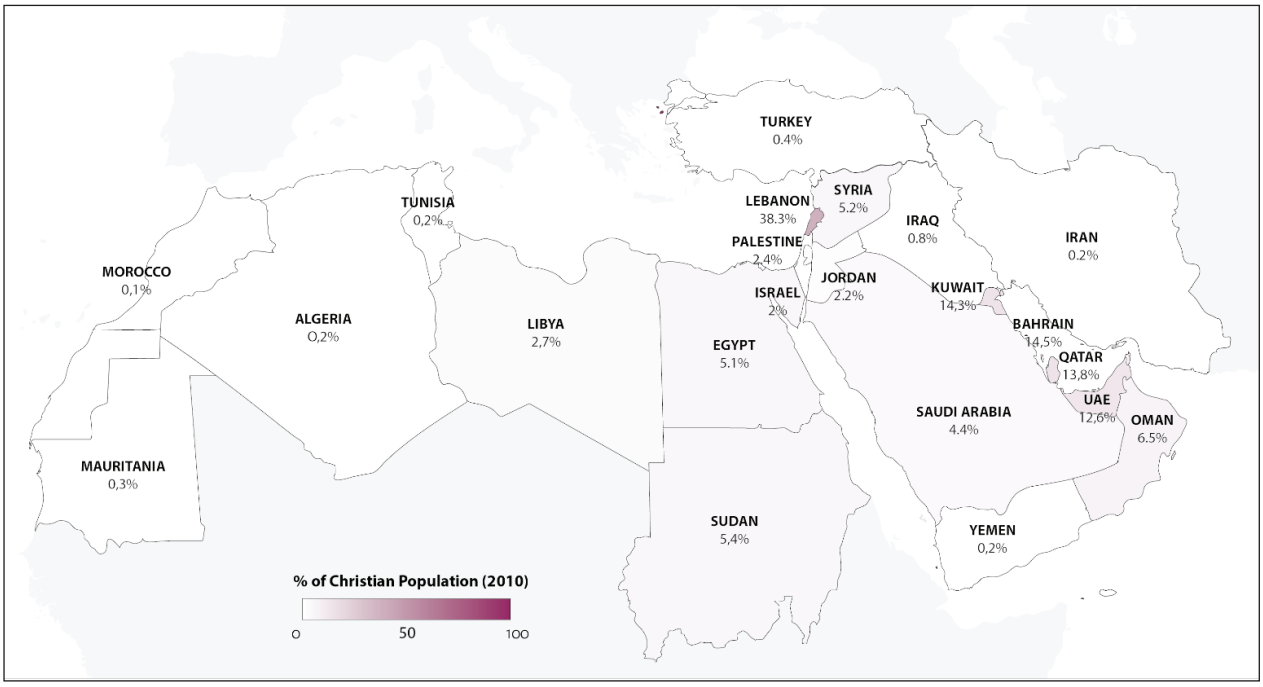
Christians have lived alongside Jews and later Muslims since the birth of their religion, and their lives are tightly woven into the histories, societies and cultures of the Middle East and North Africa. Ethnically and religiously diverse, Christian populations in the Middle East are geographically concentrated in Egypt, the Levant (Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria), Iraq and Iran. Their numbers are negligible in Turkey and the Maghreb but are growing in the Gulf States due to a recent wave of worker immigration (Pacini 1998). Christians' historical social and political status in relation to Muslim populations remains a bone of contention.

Compared with the Muslim majorities that dominate the MENA region, the number of Christians has declined steadily over the past hundred years, and this trend has recently accelerated (Johnson and Zurlo 2014, Economist 2016, Connor and Hackett 2014). The reasons for this are threefold. Firstly, Christian women tend to have fewer children than Muslim women. Secondly, Christian communities maintain closer links with their large diasporas in Europe, North America and also in Africa and Latin America, which in turn has facilitated the emigration of people hoping to make a living or others seeking more favourable economic prospects. Lastly, Christians have also been driven out of the MENA region by a host of political and social pressures that started with the Turkish Republican secularist-nationalist intolerance that targeted "others" in the early years, and continued through Nasser's socialist policies that targeted trading communities in Egypt, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and, last but not least, the rise of Islamist movements since the 1980s.[14]

13 Samy Dorlian noted that in the case of Zaydites, the Houthis in Yemen published a document in 2012 that attests to a sort of doctrinal rapprochement with Twelver Shias, representing a shift in the direction of this group that has always tried to preserve its autonomy from the two main branches of Islam.

14 Although Islamists have added to the sense of persecution and discrimination in the MENA Christian communities,

Figure 5 | Percentage of Christian Population by Country (2010)



Source: CIDOB elaboration on Pew Research Centre (2009) data.
Note: When the data was expressed within a range of two numbers, we use the average of both. When the estimation falls under 1 percent and is imprecise (<1 percent), we use 0.5 percent as the average between 0 and 1.

The 2011 Arab uprisings that erupted in the aftermath of the 2003 crisis in Iraq and the deteriorating living conditions in many countries of the region resulting from the conflicts have only exacerbated these trends and accelerated the emigration process. The ensuing turmoil and rise of insecurity have encouraged the most able and resourceful people to seek refuge abroad. More importantly, Christians have become the direct target of extremist groups, and even more so since the regimes' downfall and ensuing power vacuum. Shia and Muslim minorities – the Yazidis – have been specifically targeted and persecuted alongside Christian communities ever since al Qaeda and ISIS took hold in Mesopotamia respectively in the mid-2000s and 2014 (estimates of the exodus vary widely but, roughly, the number of Christians in Iraq declined from 1.2–1.4 million in 2003 to 300,000–400,000 in 2017) (Wright 2017, Gardner 2017, Mansour and Jabar 2014). Moreover, since civil war engulfed Syria, communities have been forced to take a position, sometimes extreme. Christians, who turned to Bashar al Assad for protection against an emerging Sunni threat, have therefore come to be identified with his regime.[15] Although Jabhat al-Nusra, an al Qaeda offshoot, and later ISIS, which extended its hold from Iraq to neighbouring Syria, have mostly targeted fellow Muslims, Christian communities have not been spared (Economist 2016). In Egypt also, the

it must be emphasized that it is not the case that "secular" regimes have treated Christian minorities better than "Islamist" ones. For example, even though they are considered second-class citizens, the experience of the Armenian community in Iran under the Islamic Republic after 1979 has been better than that of Armenians elsewhere in the region. This is a complex issue that defies easy generalization.

15 It is important to note that the situations of Christian minorities in Syria and Iraq under that Baath party have historically been very dissimilar, with Christians in Syria being more integrated into the polity and society and those in Iraq more marginalized (Pacini 1998: 15).

Coptic Christians have fallen victim to various tensions and political tribulations following the 2011 uprising and the overthrow of the Mubarak regime. While Copts have paid a high price since then, it should be noted that similar patterns of discrimination and persecution used to prevail under the Mubarak regime. Yet the situation did take a turn for the worse in 2016 as the armed terrorist group Ansar Bait al Maqdis, affiliated with ISIS since November 2014 and based in Sinai, started victimizing the Copts (Awad 2017).

The crisis experienced by Christians of various denominations in the MENA region since 2011 has influenced the ways in which these communities are considering the relationship between religion and politics. For a variety of historical reasons, Church leaders have held leadership positions in Christian communities in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt but also in Iraq and the Palestinian lands, and have done so not without resistance through history (Braude and Lewis 1982a and 1982b). Overstepping the role generally adopted by laymen in a similar position, Church leaders took responsibility for the relationships with the incumbent regimes – or, in the case of Lebanon, between confessional groups. They have also held extensive social and legal powers in countries where constitutional arrangements were not secular (in Turkey, where the state is secular, the patriarchate has led the Christian community). In Egypt, the regime encouraged this state of affairs and dealt with the person they perceived to be the more pliable Coptic pope, striking a so-called "Church–state pact" (Monier 2014: 172–3).

Yet the prominent role of the Church within the Coptic community in the years leading up to 2011 has been challenged, and during the uprising many Copts, especially among the younger generation, disregarded the pope's advice and took part in street demonstrations against a regime they deemed illegitimate, alongside their fellow Muslim citizens (Monier 2014: 174–6, see also El-Issawi 2011). Faced with the after-effects of the crisis and a perceived heightened threat from the Muslim Brotherhood (in power in 2012–13) and later from ISIS, the Church was able to regain its leadership over the Copt community (BBC 2017). In the cases of Syria and Iraq, the descent into violence has led Christian communities to turn to the military for protection, rather than religious leaders. If Christian political parties emerged in 2003 in Iraq (Fahmi 2017: 2), the Lebanese sectarian system remains essentially unchallenged, meaning that traditional community leaders, including religious leaders, are still handling matters between communities.

3.3 THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR IN ISRAELI POLITICS

The relationship between religion and politics, which constitutes the subject of this report, is varied and constantly evolving in the Muslim-majority (both Sunni and Shia) societies of the MENA region and also in the context of the minorities of the MENA (both Shia and Christian). It is similarly significant in the single Jewish-majority society of the region, Israel, which constitutes the focus of this section. Analysing the changing relationship between religion and politics in Israel requires paying special attention to the political context marked by the dominance of the Likud-led government of Benjamin Netanyahu, elected to power in 2009, and renewed in 2013 and 2015. This emphasis brings to light the increasing role played by religion in politics and the complex ways in which this has evolved and contributed to a shift to the right, and to undermining the prospects of finding a resolution to the ongoing conflict with Palestinians.

Israel was established as a Jewish and democratic state in 1948, but no agreement has ever been reached with regard to "the appropriate relationship between religion and the state", nor on that "between the religious and secular authorities" (Reich 2002: 274). There is no uncontested answer to the question "who is a Jew?" and this absence of definition has direct implications for immigration and citizenship. Even if the government is secular and there is no established religion, rabbinical authorities determine matters of personal status (such as marriage, divorce and inheritance). They also promote observance of the Sabbath and religious dietary restrictions, and play a considerable role in education. This state of affairs indicates the continuing power of the religiously observant minority and raises questions as to its relationship with the majority. Furthermore, the electoral system in Israel requires political parties to build coalition governments from the outset, further increasing the power of religious political parties – such as SHAS (Sephardi Torah Guardians) – which tend to play the role of kingmaker (Reich 2002: 275–6).

Information produced in Israel since 2013 about religiosity and secularization is also contradictory at first sight, and this is partly because every analyst tends to focus on a different aspect of social change. The country's Jewish religious landscape remains diverse: divisions between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews (originating from Europe and the Middle East respectively) cut across the religious–secular divide, and the nationalist right is not exclusively religious but also secular (Pew Research Center 2016). Israeli society, for its part, is nevertheless becoming more secular and so, in spite of the fact that the rabbinate's established monopoly over matters like marriage and burial continues, "in the last two decades [...] religious Orthodoxy seems to have lost some of its hold over public life and secularization of the public sphere can be observed in the proliferation of non-kosher restaurants and food shops, an annual, crowd-drawing gay parade, and the rapidly growing commercial activity on the Sabbath" (Ben-Porat 2013: 243). Others underline the persistence of religiosity (Peled 2017). Whichever way one interprets the sociological picture, it must be noted that secularization does not entail political liberalization, as shown by the failure of the prevalent secularization to prevent Israel's political shift to the right. Contrary to its lesser role in Israeli Jews' daily lives, religion functions more than ever as an identity marker (Ben-Porat 2013).

If the role of religion in Israeli politics has grown in recent years, it has done so in a multidirectional fashion. Cleavages over religion intersect with the lines of conflict between right and left, as indicated by the summer of 2011's social protests that brought together secular and religious segments of society against declining living standards (Krouwel and Rajmil 2013). The religious segment has become more prominent among the political elite, for example with the head of Shin Bet (the Israeli Internal Security Agency) from 2011 to 2016, Yoram Cohen, and the Attorney General from 2016, Avichai Mandelblit, both hailing from religious backgrounds. The influence of religious elements in the Israeli Defence Force has also increased (Levy 2011). Nationalist and religious parties have become increasingly prominent partners in the three coalition governments of Benjamin Netanyahu. Naftali Bennett's Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home), a right-leaning, religious, Zionist and pro-settlement party, represents "the return of the national religious camp to mainstream Israel" (Sachs 2013). Avigdor Lieberman heads Yisrael Beytenu (Israel is Our Home), an ultra-nationalist, secularist and anti-Arab party (Tharoor 2015). SHAS also continues to play an important role. The political fortunes of these parties have ebbed and flowed. Overall, however, their prominence is evidence that the secular advances of the 1990s have been reversed and that

the secular mainstream is shrinking.[16]

The shift in the balance of religion and politics in favour of the former among Israel's Jewish majority has contributed to Netanyahu's continued stalling of the peace process with the Palestinians (Aran 2015). Half of Israeli Jews think that Arabs (the Arab minority) should be expelled or transferred from Israel; many Israeli Jews (42 percent) believe that settlements on the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem help the security of Israel, as opposed to 30 percent who disagree and 25 percent who say that they make no difference (Pew Research Center 2016). The occupation of the West Bank is intensifying, and this is in line with the objectives of the religious right, in particular Naftali Bennett. However, this does not mean that Bennett's "annexationism" has become the dominant position in Israel. It is true that Israel's shift to the right is connected to disillusionment with the peace process, either as cause or as effect (Economist 2015). That being said, the two-state solution is still the preference of the majority (Mualem 2017).

CONCLUSION

Understanding the dynamics that structure the relationships between religion and politics in the Middle East allows us to not only fully understand the background of their changing relations and different trajectories in the various countries of the MENA region but also to grasp the broader geopolitics. Three main factors are determining the evolution of relations between religion and politics in the region today: social change and the pluralization of religiosities; the transformation of the Islamist landscape; and geopolitical dynamics unfolding in the region since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and that have been exacerbated after the Arab uprisings in 2011.

The individualization of religion fuelled by social change and globalization has influenced the pluralization of the religious sphere in the MENA region, which in turn is challenging both the states and the movements affiliated with political Islam. Large groups of young Muslims consider Islamist ideology to be excessively dogmatic and its organizational structures too rigid. Many choose to practise religion outside the oversight of the official religious establishment, thus undermining the authority of these institutions that have a long tradition of making deals with the regimes in the region, and hence challenging the authority of the latter too. The co-optation of the religious establishment is no longer an effective means to rebuild the legitimacy of the regimes in the region. Since the religious sphere exhibits great diversity of ideas, actors and organizations, the regimes' efforts to enforce strict and monolithic policies are unlikely to succeed. Such authoritarian attempts will most probably foster the creation of an informal and uncontrolled religious sphere, thereby opening the floor for radical ideologies to expand.

The second noteworthy element of change is related to the implosion and fragmentation of Islamism, as the Muslim Brotherhood is no longer the exclusive representative of Islam in the political sphere. The politicization of Salafism in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and the support that some Salafis have lent in Egypt to the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has divided political Islam and destroyed the sacred aura of religion. Actors representing different trends in political Islam display a wide variety of political opinions, ranging from supporting restoration to advocating

16 Private communication with Amnon Aran, Senior Lecturer in International Relations, City University of London, 2017.

pluralism. The alliance forged between Islamists and secularists in Tunisia and in Morocco, on the one hand, and the support of part of the Salafi movement for the overthrow of the Muslim brothers in Egypt, on the other, have both weakened the secularist versus Islamist cleavage. Two main trends structure the Islamist landscape in the MENA region today. One is peaceful, advocating for the compatibility of Islamism with modernity and liberal market economics; its existence and success depend on the consolidation of a pluralistic political system, which is the case in Tunisia and Morocco. The other trend is tempted by the violent option, presenting a high risk of getting fragmented and divided in terms of which attitude to adopt as repression and the closure of the political sphere goes on, as it is the case in Egypt.

Additionally, the inclusion and moderation of Islamist movements in many Arab countries is not without challenges. Islamists' access to power, brief as it was, has undermined these movements' efforts to hold the banner of contentious politics, and thwarted their desires to become legitimate ruling parties. In Tunisia, the turning point occurred when the Islamist movement made major concessions and accepted the secular constitution in 2014 before forging an alliance with representatives of the old regime. In Morocco, it came about when the Islamist movement distanced itself from social movements and from demands for radical change, becoming an element of the status quo and *makhzen* (palace)-dominated politics. In playing the political game by the book, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements have lost their drive to be at the forefront of political protest, and have become instead a force that can neutralize the changes that have descended upon the Arab world since 2011. These movements, that have represented social and political protests for over fifty years, organized the masses and embodied hope for change, no longer do so. The Arab uprisings have put an end to that, and left a void that no other ideology can fill – apart from jihad and its call to arms targeting the young. They make an easy target, since they have been hit hard by the socio-economic crisis and by political repression, and have been left to wonder what to do in the conflicts that are tearing their countries apart. This situation explains why the question is not the radicalization of Islam but the Islamization of radicalism (Roy 2017), and why the absence of an ideology that could unify protest movements towards change and hope is clearing the way for the more radical and nihilistic forces.

The broader Islamist landscape is likely to remain fragmented and divided. Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements will, however, remain a political and popular force in the immediate future, even in Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood has lost its organizational prominence (El-Sherif 2014). Whether under repression, as it is the case in Egypt, or attempting to reinforce their political inclusion through doctrinal changes and compromises of political positioning, as in Tunisia and Morocco, Islamist movements have proven to be resilient and able to take advantage of the ideological vacuum in the region. Yet political participation is likely to remain a contentious issue for Salafi movements. Their political parties have been marginalized in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, and Salafi movements were not able to take advantage of the vulnerability of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements. Ultimately, some quietist trends turned violent and adopted armed forms of action, such as those of the Madkhali in Libya, while others opted for detachment from society and an a-political form of religious activism that refuses to engage in politics, as in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

The post-2011 context has been significantly marked by the rise of jihadi movements in the MENA region. The wars raging in Syria and Iraq appear to have empowered more extreme sectarian religious groups and Salafi–jihadi trends. The operational choices among jihadi movements in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen are in balancing between global and local priorities. ISIS articulates these two priorities through its strategy of "lasting and expanding" (Khatib 2015). States in the region have always had different perceptions of the threat that ISIS represents, preferring to give priority to confronting direct rivals and threats. Even if ISIS collapses in Iraq and Syria, new strands of jihadi movements will likely arise in the "areas of limited statehood" (Risse 2011) that are mushrooming in the region, where power vacuums and state failure open the floor for these movements to gain a foothold.

Conflicts in the MENA region are shaping relations between the two branches of Islam. The post-2011 geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has polarized the division between Sunnism and Shiism. Since the Islamic revolution, Tehran has been seeking to mobilize "Arab Muslims" against their corrupt regimes but succeeded only in mobilizing a part of the Arab Shia minorities (i.e. Hezbollah in Lebanon). This had the consequence of reinforcing the idea among conservative Sunni circles that Arab Shias are an Iranian fifth column. Nevertheless, as this report shows, this is a misperception; despite all its efforts to expand its influence as a self-proclaimed protector of Shia communities in the Persian Gulf, most Arab Shias, except in Lebanon, did not align with Iran. Shia demands in Arab countries focus on domestic social and political matters, and their loyalty hardly transcends national boundaries.

Conflicts are also shaping relations between religion and politics within the Christian minority, impacting on its future and, in the awake of the popular uprisings, challenging the prominence of established religious authorities as political representatives. In Egypt, Syria and Iraq, the descent into violence has allowed the churches to regain their leadership, turning to the military for protection. The fear of Christian communities for their future in a context of regional disorder is likely to consolidate the role of religious leaders.

Since 2011, the centrality of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to the regional dynamics is subject to constant questioning, as attention has shifted to the Syrian crisis and to Saudi–Iranian rivalry (Cammack et al. 2017: 70). However, the loss of ascendancy of this conflict does not mean that the chances to reactivate the peace process will increase. The shift in the balance of religion and politics in favour of radical religious groups and the strengthening of religious parties in Israel is likely to further contribute to blocking a negotiated solution.

Geopolitical rivalries are profoundly shaping local politics in the MENA region. Many regional powers have tried to advance their interests through support for local allies and for ideological trends. Turkey and Qatar supported Islamist movements in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, whereas Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed the military coup in Egypt, for example. In Syria and Iraq, Iran is supporting the Assad regime and Shia militias, while Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and UAE are backing the Sunni armed groups. There is clearly no single cleavage and line of conflict (Soler 2017). If the Sunni–Shia divide is being fuelled mainly by Saudi–Iranian rivalry, the Islamist–secularist divide is less salient over time after the Salafist backing of the *coup d'état* in Egypt and the compromise in Tunisia. The crisis between Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia, UAE,

Bahrain and Egypt on the other reflects the attempt of the Saudis to create a homogenous Sunni bloc as a strategy to confront Iran. More fundamentally, it shows that religion, and more precisely its many uses, is a crucial tool in shaping the fragile and volatile geopolitics of the Middle East today. However, both the crisis within the GCC countries and the eventual rapprochement between the Saudi regime and some Shia political and religious leaders in Iraq who are opposed to the Iranian hegemony, such as President Abbadi and more importantly the Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr, show that, despite their growing importance, regional conflict cannot be conceived as a clear line between religion and sectarianism in a region where alliances and rivalries are increasingly liquid (Soler 2017).

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