Mapping Religious Authority in the Middle East: Findings from a Recent Public Opinion Survey
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Who speaks for Islam in the Middle East, and who wields religious authority? Defined by a “free market” of religion, Islamic authority in the Middle East is non-hierarchical and decentralized. Religious authority is the primary mechanism through which various religious actors such as Islamist and fundamentalist (Salafist) movements, parties, and groups operate in the region. Despite the centrality of religious authority to a reliable conception of how religion and politics interact and what motivates religious actors’ political behavior, we lack a thorough analysis of it in the Middle East. Current conceptions of Islamic religious authority rarely go beyond historical descriptions of how religious authority transformed over time and what implications such changes might have. At a time when religious actors play an increasingly prominent role in the Middle East and the religion-politics nexus appears to trump all other considerations, a detailed analysis of the dynamics of Islamic religious authority is imperative.

In a study supported by the Henry R. Luce Foundation’s Initiative on Religion in International Affairs, we examine the nature of religious authority in the contemporary Middle East. Our primary goal in this project has been to map religious authority in the Middle East. This study presents the first systematic comparative investigation of religious authority across the Middle East by employing both quantitative and qualitative data. In particular, we collected and analyzed data to identify major religious actors who wield Islamic authority, the issue areas in which they enjoy greater support, and the characteristics of the individuals who view their religious authority as legitimate. As part of this study, we conducted an online public opinion survey via YouGov with more than 14,000 respondents in 11 countries. The survey covers a wide range of questions about religious leaders across the region, including endorsement experiments.

Some of our findings speak directly to current policy issues in the region. We find that state religious figures command significant credibility across most countries in the region. By contrast, respondents in our survey were more cautious in expressing trust in Islamist and extremist religious figures. This finding is particularly significant in that it reveals that while respondents do want religion to play a role in public policy, they are averse to politicization of religion in the political arena. Lastly, we find that ISIS and its leader Al-Baghdadi enjoy a notable amount of support from survey respondents. This support does not, however, only
surfaces in the endorsement experiments and sharply contrasts with the very low support for domestic extremists in most countries in our study.

As such, it aims to provide a wealth of information to policymakers and scholars who research the dynamics of change within Islamic religious authority and identify the channels with which religious groups can influence domestic and foreign policy within the Middle East. The question of religious authority is not a fleeting concern. It strikes at the heart of the religion-politics relationship in the Muslim world. Whomever can legitimately claim religious authority has an opportunity to shape the extent of the politicization and “objectification” of religion. Moreover, it is not only Islamists and fundamentalists who call for conservative measures to increase religious control over public policy. Other religious actors, such as state religious agencies and traditional religious scholars who are typically more careful in politicization of religion, have in recent years also increased their efforts to institutionalize Islam in state and society in order to outdo Islamists.