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## Islamic Revival Led by Women Tests Syria's Secularism

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

DAMASCUS, [Syria](#) — Enas al-Kaldi stops in the hallway of her Islamic school for girls and coaxes her 6-year-old schoolmate through a short recitation from the Koran.

“It’s true that they don’t understand what they are memorizing at this age, but we believe that the understanding comes when the Koran becomes part of you,” Ms. Kaldi, 16, said proudly.

In other corners of Damascus, women who identify one another by the distinctive way they tie their head scarves gather for meetings of an exclusive and secret Islamic women’s society known as the Qubaisiate.

At those meetings, participants say, they are tutored further in the faith and are even taught how to influence some of their well-connected fathers and husbands to accept a greater presence of Islam in public life.

These are the two faces of an Islamic revival for women in Syria, one that could add up to a potent challenge to this determinedly secular state. Though government officials vociferously deny it, Syria is becoming increasingly religious and its national identity is weakening. If Islam replaces that identity, it may undermine the unity of a society that is ruled by a Muslim religious minority, the Alawites, and includes many religious groups.

Syrian officials, who had front-row seats as [Hezbollah](#) dragged Lebanon into war, are painfully aware of the myriad ways that state authority can be undermined by increasingly powerful, and appealing, religious groups. Though Syria’s government supports Hezbollah, it has been taking steps to ensure that the phenomenon it helped to build in Lebanon does not come to haunt it at home.

In the past, said Muhammad al-Habash, a Syrian lawmaker who is also a Muslim cleric, “we were told that we had to leave Islam behind to find our futures.”

“But these days,” he said, “if you ask most people in Syria about their history, they will tell you, ‘My history is Islamic history.’ The younger generation are all reading the Koran.”

Women are in the vanguard. Though men across the Islamic world usually interpret Scripture and lead prayers, Syria, virtually alone in the Arab world, is seeing the resurrection of a centuries-old tradition of sheikhas, or women who are religious scholars. The growth of girls’ madrasas has outpaced those for boys, religious teachers here say.

There are no official statistics about precisely how many of the country’s 700 madrasas are for girls. But according to a survey of Islamic education in Syria published by the pan-Arab daily Al Hayat, there are about 80 such madrasas in Damascus alone, serving more than 75,000 women and girls, and about half are affiliated with the Qubaisiate (pronounced koo-BAY-see-AHT).

For many years any kind of religious piety was viewed here with skepticism. But while men suspected of Islamist activity are frequently interrogated and jailed, subjecting women to such treatment would cause a public outcry that the government cannot risk. Women have taken advantage of their relatively greater freedom to form Islamic groups, becoming a deeply rooted and potentially subversive force to spread stricter and more conservative Islamic practices in their families and communities.

Since intelligence agents still monitor private gatherings that involve discussion of Islam, groups like the Qubaisiate often meet clandestinely, sometimes with women guarding the door to deter interlopers.

The group is named for its founder, a charismatic Syrian sheikha, Munira al-Qubaisi.

A wealthy woman in her 50’s living in Damascus, who has attended Qubaisiate meetings and who asked that her name not be

used because she feared punishment, provided a rough description of the activities.

A girl thought to be serious about her faith may be invited by a relative or a school friend to go to a meeting, the woman said. There, a sheikha sits on a raised platform, addresses the assembled women on religious subjects and takes questions.

Qubaisiate members, the woman said, tie their head scarves so there is a puff of fabric under the chin, like a wattle. As girls and women progress in their study of Islam and gain stature within the group, the color of their scarves changes. New members wear white ones, usually with long khaki colored coats, she said. Later they graduate to wearing navy blue scarves with a navy coat. At the final stage the sheikha may grant them permission to cover themselves completely in black.

Hadeel, a Syrian woman in her early 20's who asked to be identified only by her first name, described how her best childhood friend had become one of the Qubaisi "sisterhood" and encouraged her to follow suit.

"Rasha would call and say, 'Today we're going shopping,' and that would be a secret code meaning that there was a lesson at 7:30," Hadeel said. "I went three times, and it was amazing. They had all this expensive food, just for teenage girls, before the lesson. And they had fancy Mercedes cars to take you back home afterward."

Hadeel said she had at first been astonished by the way the Qubaisiate, ostensibly a women's prayer group, seemed to single out the daughters of wealthy and influential families and girls who were seen as potential leaders.

"They care about getting girls with big names, the powerful families," Hadeel said. "In my case, they wanted me because I was a good student."

Women speaking about the group asked that their names not be used because the group is technically illegal, though it seems the authorities are increasingly turning a blind eye.

"To be asked to join the Qubaisiate is very prestigious," said Maan Abdul Salam, a women's rights campaigner.

Mr. Abdul Salam explained that such secret Islamic prayer groups recruited women differently, depending on their social position. "They teach poor women how to humble themselves in front of their husbands and how to pray, but they're teaching upper-class women how to influence politics," he said.

The Islamic school where Ms. Kaldi, the 16-year-old tutor, studies has no overt political agenda. But it is a place where devotion to Islam, and an exploration of women's place in it, flourishes.

The school, at the Zahra mosque in a western suburb of Damascus, is a cheerful, cozy place, with soft Oriental carpets layered underfoot and scores of little girls running around in their socks. Ms. Kaldi spends summers, vacations and some afternoons there, studying and helping younger children to memorize the Koran. Her work tutoring has made her an important figure in this world; many of the younger girls greet her shyly as they pass.

The school accepts girls as young as 5, who begin memorizing the Koran from the back, where the shortest verses are found. The youngest girls are being taught with the aid of hand gestures, games and treats.

The atmosphere is relaxed. The children share candy and snacks as they study, and the room hums with the sound of high-pitched voices reciting in unison. Several girls, preparing for the tests that will allow them to progress to higher-level classes, swing one-handed around the smooth columns that support the roof of the mosque, dreamily murmuring verses aloud to themselves.

After girls in the Zahra school have committed the Koran to memory, they are taught to recite the holy book with the prescribed rhythm and cadences, a process called tajweed, which usually takes at least several years of devoted study. Along the way they are taught the principles of Koranic reasoning.

It is this art of Koranic reasoning, Ms. Kaldi and her friends say, that most sets them apart from previous generations of Syrian Muslim women.

Fatima Ghayeh, 16, an aspiring graphic designer and Ms. Kaldi's best friend, said she believed that "the older generation," by

which she meant women now in their late 20's and their 30's, too often allowed their fathers and husbands to dictate their faith to them.

They came of age before the Islamic revivalist movement that has swept Syria, she explained, and as a result many of them do not feel an intellectual ownership of Islamic teaching in the way that their younger sisters do.

"The older girls were told, 'This is Islam, and so you should do this,'" Ms. Ghayeh said. "They feel that they can't really ask questions.

"It's because 10 years ago Syria was really closed, and there weren't so many Islamic schools. But society has really changed. Today girls are saying, 'We want to do something with Islam, and for Islam.' We're more active, and we ask questions."

Ms. Ghayeh and Ms. Kaldi each remember with emotion the day, early in President [Bashar al-Assad's](#) tenure, when he changed the law to allow the wearing of Islamic head scarves in public schools, a practice that was forbidden under his father, [Hafez al-Assad](#). The current president, who took office in 2000, also reduced the hours that students must spend each week in classes where the ruling Baath Party's ideology is taught, and began allowing soldiers to pray in mosques.

Those changes have been popular among Sunnis, who make up 70 percent of the country's population, but they carry political risks for a government that has long been allergic to public displays of religious fervor.

The government has been eager to demonstrate in recent years, through changes like these and increasing references to Syria's Islamic heritage in official speeches, that it does not fear Islam as such.

During the weeks of war between Israel and Hezbollah, the government frequently used references to the Islamic cause and to the "Lebanese resistance," as Hezbollah is called in the Syrian state-controlled news media, to play to the feelings of Syrians and consolidate its support. But it is still deeply anxious about Islamic groups acting outside the apparatus of the state, and the threat that they may lose to state control.

The girls at the madrasa say that by plunging more deeply into their faith, they learn to understand their rights within Islam.

In upper-level courses at the Zahra school, the girls debate questions like whether a woman has the right to vote differently from her husband. The question is moot in Syria, one classmate joked, because President Assad inevitably wins elections by a miraculous 99 percent, just as his father did before him.

When the occasion arises, they say, they are able to reason from the Koran on an equal footing with men.

"People mistake tradition for religion," Ms. Kaldi said. "Men are always saying, 'Women can't do that because of religion,' when in fact it is only tradition. It's important for us to study so that we will know the difference."

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