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Article

## Who Speaks for Islam?

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### A report on religious authority and political power in the Islamic world

Historically, political actors of many kinds have sought to define Islam for their own purposes: from colonizers seeking control over the resources of the Middle East to homegrown opportunists who aspire to regional dominance. In recent years, religious actors too have wielded notable influence in the Middle East, in many cases more than state officials. Amid these historical and contemporary trends, a resonant question emerges: Who truly speaks for Islam? This is the foundational inquiry of the two-year study “The New Guardians of Religion: Islam and Authority in the Middle East” by Rice University scholar A. Kadir Yildirim.

***At a time when religious actors play an increasingly prominent role in the Middle East and the religion-politics nexus appears to have gained greater traction, a thorough analysis of the dynamics of Islamic religious authority in the region is imperative.***

—*from the Introduction*

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One major component of this study was a public opinion survey in which over 16,000 people in twelve countries were asked about eighty-two different religious leaders. This survey was organized into three sections:

- *Approval of Religious Leaders:* Respondents were asked, “Which of the religious leaders below do you approve of? Please select all that apply.”
- *Trust in Religious Leaders:* Respondents were asked to rate how much they trust individual religious leaders on a scale of 1 to 5 with higher values equating to higher levels of trust.
- *Agreement with Religious Statements:* These “endorsement experiments” assessed whether respondents agreed with particular statements made by the religious leaders in question without knowing the individual who made these statements.

The study assessed leaders and engaged with respondents in Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. It was the largest study of its kind.



Source: boim\_24 via Unsplash.

In addition to the central report, a number of research papers were produced from this project, each one emphasizing a different region. These include the following:

- [“Mapping Religious Authority in Wahhabi States: An Examination of Qatar and Saudi](#)

[Arabia](#)” by Courtney Freer, PhD, London School of Economics and Political Science.

- [“Religious Authority in Tunisia”](#) by Sharan Grewal, PhD, The Brookings Institution
- [“Religious Authority in Turkey: Hegemony and Resistance”](#) by Yusuf Sarfati, PhD, Illinois State University
- [“Royal Religious Authority: Morocco’s “Commander of the Faithful”](#) by Annelle Sheline, PhD, Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy Research
- [“Separating Islam from Politics but not the State: Implications for Religious Authority in Jordan”](#) by Scott Williamson, PhD Candidate, Stanford University

The data and analysis produced by this study provide a more accurate picture of the influence of religious actors in the Middle East. In addition to the main report and research papers, the full [survey results](#) and [supporting documentation](#) are also available online.