Chapter Two

Prophet Sharing:

A Theory of Regime-Clerical Cooperation

I. Introduction

Remind them [the people] for you are nothing but a reminder;
You are not charged to oversee them.

Quran 88:21-22

It is the role of the Islamic clerics to advise believers how to best fulfill the Quranic obligation to “enjoin the good and forbid the evil”. Clerical opinions are sought on numerous issues, most of which concern personal obligations for living a pious life. Yet, the ulama also play a political role. By advice and example, clerics can either encourage cooperation with ruling elites or foment discontent. In this chapter I demonstrate that patterns of conflict and cooperation are not determined by the ideological disposition of the clerics (as most scholarly accounts posit), but rather, by the mutual interaction between the clerics and the regime as each pursues their independent interests.

In selecting the most profitable strategy, both the clergy (ulama) and the regime face trade-offs. Clerics seek to maximize their personal authority, which conditions instrumental cooperation with the regime to acquire policy influence and resources that in turn augment their authority. This inevitably entails a complex balancing act; as public support shifts toward the opposition, clerical cooperation risks alienating the clergy’s
primary constituency. Similarly, the regime faces a dilemma. Clerical support and legitimisation generates public support, and thus, serves the compelling state interest in securing its survival. Yet, in exchange for clerical support, the regime must relinquish some political space to the ulama, a concession of power that discomforts authoritarian regimes.

Three considerations shape the strategies of the clerics and the regime:

1) the agenda of the opposition;
2) the probability of regime change; and
3) the clerics’ relative responsiveness to public opinion, which results from their hierarchical rank and the degree of their reliance on followers for promotion and resources.

Variation amongst these factors determine the pay-offs for cooperation and conflict. Indeed, it is the variation of clerical responsiveness to public opinion within the clerics’ ranks that account for strategic divisions within the clerical establishment.

My research demonstrates that conflict between clerics and the regime rarely occurs because the factors that promote clerical opposition to the regime are the same factors that increase the regime’s need to draw on clerical support. For the clerics, increases in the probability of regime change (particularly if it is due to a shift in public support) enhance the potential benefits of defection from the regime. Yet, this shift also intensifies the utility of public support to the regime, and thus raises the relative value of the ulama’s endorsement. Upon provision of a side-payment, clerics support the regime and do not defect.

In limited cases, however, conflict does occur. It erupts in cases where agenda agreement between the clerics and the opposition, the probability of regime change, and the clerics’ responsiveness to public opinion are each high. For the regime, the price of
ulama cooperation under such conditions outweighs the benefit of their support, and the regime chooses to risk combating the opposition alone. Without off-setting gains, the clerics defect and join with the opposition to combat the regime. In sum, this paper explains when regime-clerical conflict will occur, when clerics possess the greatest influence over the regime, and when the clerical establishment is likely to splinter.

In the first part of the chapter, I explain the traditional role of the ulama and how it has changed over time for both Sunni and Shi’i clerics. Second, I present the dominant explanations in the literature for variation in ulama-regime relations and I show how they are ultimately unsatisfying because they can account neither for change overtime nor differences between countries. Third, I discuss the interests of both the ulama, of the regime, and I present my theory. Finally, I conclude the chapter by presenting the predicted outcomes derived from my theory that I will test in the case chapters. I demonstrate that patterns of conflict and cooperation are not determined by the ideological disposition of the clerics, but rather, by the mutual interaction between the clerics and the regime as each pursues their independent interests.

II. The Role of the Ulama and the Development of Clerical Authority

Sunni and Shi’i clerics are religious scholars whose role is to define Islam for the ‘umma (the community of Muslims). Through their occupations as teachers, preachers, arbitrators, scholars, and jurists, they delineate the norms of public morality.1 Traditionally their advice is sought mostly on matters concerning private law, particularly on matters involving civil transactions, family law, inheritance, personal injury, and

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1 Until the establishment of national institutions of higher learning, the ulama also monopolized jobs involving writing (e.g., administrators, notaries, and registrars). See Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dar al-Ifta (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 52.
religious endowments (waqf). Unlike Catholic prelates, the ulama are not considered representatives of God on earth – they can neither forgive sin nor otherwise intercede between the laity and the Divine.\textsuperscript{2} In Islam only the texts -- the Quran and the Sunna\textsuperscript{3}-- have supreme authority. The authority of the ulama is therefore not direct, but rather, is derived “from the widespread belief that, as repositories of centuries of Islamic learning, they are still the best source for answers to social and moral questions.”\textsuperscript{4}

Islamic Law scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl explains the important distinction between the brand of authority exercised by the ulama and other types of authority. He claims that those individuals who occupy official positions within institutional structures, or who are otherwise able to gain compliance by threat of punishment, exercise “coercive authority”. The ulama do not exercise coercive authority because even when they occupy official positions within the state apparatus, their rulings are non-binding unless enforced by the state. The authority inherited by the ulama is “persuasive authority”, or “authoritativeness”. Due to their expertise, the ulama are considered more capable of discerning God’s message and therefore can persuade others to follow their advice. According to Abou El Fadl, the difference between the two types is that:

\begin{quote}
...deferring to someone in authority involves deferring to someone’s official position or capacity, but deferring to someone who is an authority involves deferring to someone’s perceived expertise. The distinction is the difference between deferring to a police officer and deferring to one’s plumber.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{3} The Sunna is a collection of written traditions of the Prophet Muhammed.
While the plumber analogy is unconventional, it helps illustrate an important difference between the two types of authority. Coercive power can compel an individual to submit, but it does not necessarily affect a person’s consciousness or judgment. They may submit, but still disagree. Submitting to an authority involves surrendering a part of one’s judgment. The individual no longer attempts to reason the problem out himself -- whether due to a lack of time, or skill-- but rather relies on the expertise of those whose judgment he trusts. Abou el-Fadl points out that this is not blind submission. Experts must provide explanations for their opinions or they will sow distrust. With “persuasive authority,” individuals do not completely relinquish human agency. They exercise agency by choosing the best clerical authority, and thereafter, relying on his opinion.

I make a further distinction by adding “charismatic authority” i.e. authority devolving directly from God. With “charismatic authority,” such as that claimed by the Catholic Church, followers do indeed surrender human agency to those they believe are representatives of the Divine. Muslim clerics do not enjoy charismatic authority. According to the Quran, only God’s word is divine, and all individuals, including clerics, are fallible. As a result, the faithful are forbidden to surrender accountability for their actions to anyone else.6

Therefore, the ulama’s authority is primarily “persuasive”, or “authoritative”; they lack both the ability to punish and to dictate. Because human agency persists, followers behave as religious “consumers”, picking and choosing amongst clerics and their opinions. The result is a religious marketplace rife with competition as each cleric maneuvers to gain greater recognition of his authority. Since there is no agreed upon

6 Abou El Fadl, 33.
method for a single opinion or cleric to establish eminence over the others, the competitive environment hinders the development of both hierarchy and orthodoxy. As I discuss in Chapter Four, even under Iran’s Islamic Republic, where one cleric is officially designated as the Supreme Leader, the regime has failed to fully subordinate the opinions of other clerics.

That said, the ulama’s history is one of clerics trying to secure their position—both individually and collectively—and establish order within an otherwise unregulated religious marketplace. As the next section shows, their attempts have met with varying degrees of success. Both Sunni and Shi’i clerics have tried to appropriate elements of charismatic authority to enhance the authority of their opinions. Norms have developed that rank clerics according to particular strengths and qualifications. Clerics who take positions within the state apparatus, place themselves within a regime-ordered hierarchy. And the practice of ‘ijma (scholarly consensus) lends greater authority to some opinions over others, thus creating a pseudo-orthodoxy. The following section examines the historical development of the Sunni and Shi’i clerical establishments showing how they’ve struggled to enhance their authority within constraints posed by the aforementioned precepts and the political environment.

**Sunni Islam**

The ulama did not emerge as a distinguishable group with specialized functions until the beginning of the Abbasid Empire (750-1258). Prior to this time, the ulama served as independent advisors, teachers and arbitrators—often well respected in their

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communities-- but lacking a definable occupation. Under the Umayyad Empire (661-750) some clerics served as jurists and administrative support to the Court, but with the Umayyad leaders proclaiming themselves the “shadow of God on earth” it was difficult for the ulama to establish an exclusive claim to religious authority thus their communal identity remained undetermined.

The Abbasid Empire organized the ulama into a type of ecclesiastical hierarchy that served the state. During this embryonic period, clerics served as state functionaries, performing judicial, social and administrative duties. It is also during this time that Sunni clerics began claiming that, as the purveyors of Islamic Law, they were the inheritors of prophetic authority. Such a charismatic connection was never convincingly established, and in the beginning the authority of the ulama remained primarily a reflection of the regime’s authority. Yet, overtime, Islamic Law became systematized, mass conversions took place, and an Islamic world-view (produced and inculcated by the ulama) spread throughout the Empire. As a result, the authority of the ulama as a group gained greater recognition and influence independent of the state.

During the same period, the ulama acquired a measure of financial independence from the regime with the expansion of the waqf (religious endowment) system. Administration of these trusts provided the ulama with the opportunity to earn a respectable salary outside of the influence of the Court. Hence, a division emerged within the newly formed clerical establishment. While some clerics held official positions, others chose to remain aloof from the regime, concerned that a close

8 Litvak, 5.
10 Watt, 73. Although waqf property was theoretically independent from the regime, in truth, either ruling elites or members of the dominant class created most religious endowments. Thus, to obtain, and retain, executorships, clerics had a strong incentive to foster amicable relations with the regime. See Bulliet, 149.
association with the ruling establishment would undermine their connection with the population.

Under later Islamic monarchies, and even contemporary regimes, the division between “official” and “popular” ulama has remained. However, Sunni clerics as a whole are still strongly associated with the state. Political leaders in Muslim societies, hoping to gain religious legitimacy and control a potential adversary, frequently attempt to co-opt the clerical establishment, especially during state-building periods. The process of co-optation involves both carrots and sticks, and for a number of reasons Sunni clerics have proved more susceptible to both than their Shi’i counterparts.

First, though Sunni clerics often bemoan their loss of independence to the state, they receive tremendous benefits from the arrangement. Regime backing for religious edicts strengthens clerical authority, cooperation with the ruling elites provides steady salaries, and the regime actively promotes the public profile of the clerics hoping to capitalize on its association with the religious establishment. In contrast, Shi’i clerics usually represented a minority sect (with Iran being the major exception), thus their support, though still desired, was not as actively sought and they were denied an influential position within the regime.

Sunni clerics lack independent financial support, thus compounding their incentive to cooperate with the regime. Government confiscation of waqf property throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries adversely impacted clerics of both sects. However, while Shi’i clerics continue to receive tithes and other funding directly from their following, the confiscations stripped Sunni clerics of their last source of independent funding. For Shi’i clerics, the demise of the waqf system has heightened
their financial dependence on their following, and by extension, has made them more sensitive to the concerns of the laity. With fewer reinforcing interests, Sunni clerics -- though respected -- are more estranged from their following. In sum, Sunni clerics remain strongly associated with the state because, given the benefits they receive from the regime and their weak ties to their following, they lack both the ability and the incentive to explicate themselves from the regime’s influence.

_Shii Islam_

After the founding of Islam, Shii’s long lived as minority sectarian groups under the rule of Sunni dynasties. As with the clerical hierarchy in Sunni Islam, several centuries passed before any semblance of a Shii hierarchy appeared. According to Shiis, legitimate political and religious leadership is “…a matter of divine right, the ruler deriving his authority from the hereditary transmission of divine inspiration along the line of the Prophet’s descendents.” The Prophet’s descendents, who are traced through his son in-law Ali, are considered infallible. However, because the Sunni Umayyad Dynasty was established immediately after the assassination of Ali, none of Ali’s descendents (the Imams) ever gained political authority. The vast majority of Shii (those of the Twelver sect) believe that the Twelfth Imam has entered a period of occultation, and until his return as the Mahdi, no legitimate political successors exist.

Given that their legitimate political leader had departed for the netherworld, and they did not recognize the de facto ruling elites, the position and authority of the Shii

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13 Other Shii sects exist, but since their numbers are relatively small, I only address the Twelver sect.
ulama remained nebulous. They did not accrue charismatic authority by way of the Imams, and at the same time, the various regimes under which they lived were unwilling to back their decisions or extend them resources. Thus, the ulama--effectively the only Shi‘i leadership remaining--were both ill-equipped and ill-placed to maintain the community. That they nonetheless succeeded in doing so is a testament to their highly personalized leadership style and the strong, mutually-dependent relationships they forged with their following.

The establishment of Shi‘i dynasties, most notably the Safavids in Iran (1501-1736), provided the first opportunity for Shi‘i clerics to enjoy official recognition of their status.14 The Safavids claimed to be both the Shadow of God on Earth and descendents of the Hidden Imam. Since charismatic authority is inherited through the Imamate, the Safavids were thus able to bolster their position by co-opting religious legitimacy. The Safavid regime, like other Shi‘i regimes, organized the ulama into a centralized hierarchy and created salaried positions. As employees of the state, the ulama’s role was as much about touting the piety and legitimacy of the regime, as it was about guiding the community in proper religious practice. Though clerical decisions were now backed by the state, and ulama authority was centralized, under the Safavids Shi‘i clerics were denied the opportunity to claim charismatic authority because doing so would be considered a direct challenge to the regime.

With the collapse of the Safavid Empire and the subsequent rise of Nadir Shah (1736-1747), the Shi‘i ulama were able to reformulate the foundation of clerical authority, and in the process, greatly enhance their power and independence. Nadir Shah

14 Smaller Shi‘i kingdoms included the Awdah in Lucknow and the Chak in Kashmir. Litvak, 5.
sought to expand his dominions by conquering neighboring territories. To facilitate acceptance of his rule by the Sunni population in these areas, Nadir Shah tried to claim that Shi’i Islam was not a separate sect, but rather, was one of the juristic schools within Sunni Islam’s. Iran’s clerics rejected this claim and, despite harsh repercussions, refused to cooperate with the regime.

To escape the nadir Shah’s persecution, Iran’s ulama fled to the Shi’i shrine cities in Iraq and set about redefining the role of all Shi’i clerics. Removed from the meddling of the regime, Iranian clerics succeeded in aggrandizing clerical power by creating a doctrinally justified religious hierarchy and establishing a claim to charismatic authority through the promulgation of the Usuli doctrine.15 The doctrine was a reinterpretation of the concept of general deputyship (niyaba ‘amma) and claimed that during the absence of the Twelfth Imam the responsibility for protecting and guiding the community devolved upon the clerics. It established a charismatic connection by associating the clerics with divine authority. However, the connection remained tenuous because the ulama could not claim descent through the Prophetic line, and thus, unlike the Imams, they are considered fallible.

Adoption of the doctrine fostered the emergence of a clerical hierarchy and the strengthening of ties to the laity. Clerics who engage in ijtihad (independent reasoning) were given primacy in interpreting Islamic law. The doctrine divided the community into the few highly qualified clerics who could interpret the law (mujtahids) and those required to follow the mujtahids (muqallids), and it also declared that every believer must choose a living mujtahid and abide by his judgment. By obligating believers to surrender

15 This important shift will be discussed further in Chapter Four.
agency to their mujtahid, the result was a quasi-charismatic brand of clerical authority that significantly departed from the “persuasive authority” previously exercised by Shi’i clerics. Yet, human agency was not eliminated entirely: followers still needed to choose a living mujtahid.

A second significant result of the Usuli doctrine is that it made it incumbent upon believers to give one-fifth of their income (khums tax) as well as obligatory alms (zakat) to their mujtahid.16 These funds are then redistributed by clerics to seminary students and those in need. As a result of changes brought by the doctrine’s adoption, Shi’i ulama became more independent from the regime and more responsive to the population, who by their donations to particular clerics, in effect “vote” for the clerical leadership. The Iranian clerics were also influenced by the customs of their Iraqi Shi’i counterparts. In order to maintain their minority Shi’i population under the rule of the Sunni Ottoman Sultans, Iraqi clerics had always practiced a highly personalistic style of leadership. Hence, for Shi’i clerics, the Nadir Shah period marked the fusing together of the hierarchical tendency of the formerly “official clergy” from Iran, with the more personalistic/communal authority of the Iraqis.17

Most of the precedents developed during the Nadir Shah era persisted until the fall of Reza Pahlavi in 1979, and a good portion continue today under the governmental structure imposed by the Islamic Republic. The close relationship between the clerics and the laity is part of that legacy. Another result is the continued competition amongst Shi’i clerics. Lack of a formal advancement mechanism, in combination with financial dependence on their following, means that Shi’i clerics are always vying for an advantage

17 Litvak, 9.
over their peers. A hierarchy emerges, but the differentiation between levels is often fluid. In Iran, this hierarchy is usually led by a handful of Grand Ayatollahs who are the most learned mujtahids. They are followed by a hundred or so ordinary ayatollahs, some of whom are practicing mujtahids, while others are talented scholars who continue to follow the opinions of an Ayatollah al-Ozma (Grand Ayatollah). The final tier includes thousands of junior clerics bearing the titles of hojatoleslam and saqatoleslam (Islam’s trusted one). These clerics collect funds for the senior Ayatollahs and interpret the opinions of the Ayatollahs for the populace.18

III. Dominant Explanations of Regime-Clerical Relations

In the academic literature explanations of regime-clerical relations are couched within two broader debates of how Islam impacts state-society relations. Within these two debates three methodological approaches are employed. The first approach is largely based on interpretations of Islamic scriptures and the writings of medieval Islamic clerics, although the texts emphasized and the conclusions drawn are often completely contradictory. The approach is both deductive and essentialist. Authors construct an innate Islamic or sectarian character from “core principles” found within the texts. They extrapolate from these principles, claiming that these ideas produce an inherent Muslim disposition that either promotes or discourages conflict with the regime. Another style of argument relies on greater empiricism, but is not far removed from the doctrinally based arguments. Although it recognizes that paradigm shifts occur in response to changing environmental factors, it still gives ideational constructs greater causal significance than

18 Nikola B. Schahgaldian, The Clerical Establishment in Iran (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 1989), 22.
other exogenous factors. A final approach is based on inductive generalizations. Explanations using this method posit that the level of conflict or cooperation between the ulama and the regime is a consequence of objective conditions that are exogenous to their bi-lateral relations.

**Strong State – Weak Society**

This argument emerged from the writings of early Orientalist scholars. These scholars were experts on the textual and historical development of Islam and were particularly interested in how the Abbasid Empire’s decline impacted Islam’s development. As foreign powers encroached upon Abbasid authority in the provinces and rebellions sprung up throughout the Empire, the ulama debated the meaning of Islamic government, the legitimacy of rebellion, and the proper role of the clerical establishment. Over the several centuries of decline, the views of a “realist” school of ulama dominated the debate, most prominent among them, Abu’l-Hasan al-Mawardi (d. 1058), Abu Hamid Muhammed Ghazali (d. 1111), Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) and Badr ad-Din Ibn Jama’ah (d. 1332). Orientalist scholars noted that the Empire’s decline had transformed the ulama’s view of political legitimacy -- they no longer emphasized piety and justice as requisites of Islamic leadership, but began to equate power with legitimacy. For example, al-Ghazali claimed that Muslims should obey any leader who could maintain the community because anarchy is a greater evil than despotism. He states:

> An evil-doing and barbarous sultan, so long as he is supported by military force, so that he can only with difficulty be deposed and that the attempt to
depose him would create unendurable civil strife, must of necessity be left in possession and obedience must be rendered to him…\textsuperscript{19}

Ibn Taymiyyah echoed similar concerns when referring to the Mongol invasions:

It is obvious that the [affairs of the] people cannot be in a sound state except with rulers, and even if somebody from among unjust kings becomes ruler, this would be better than there being none.\textsuperscript{20}

Traditional Orientalists concluded that from this juncture onward, Sunni jurists had adopted a stance of political quietism and forbade dissent, thereby discouraging the formation of representative groups to mediate between the ruler and the ruled. “The upshot of the suppression of such groups was a despotic regime in which the state is stronger than the society.”\textsuperscript{21}

The Orientalist approach was not purely doctrinal, for they recounted how historical events produced ideational change. Even H.A.R. Gibb, the scholar most strongly associated with work on the “realist” ulama, discussed the diversity of opinions that existed at this time.\textsuperscript{22} Yet, despite the nod to historical adaptation, these scholars create a cut-off point toward the end of the Abbasid Empire from which they assume that the adaptive development of the clerics and Islamic society is arrested.\textsuperscript{23} Though prior

\textsuperscript{20} Hamid Enayat, Modern Islamic Political Thought. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).
events are explained using detailed empirical evidence, later events are deductively explained by the characterization that in Islam ‘society is weak, and the state is strong’.

The ‘strong state’ characterization was not limited to Sunni Islam alone. Some scholars posited a similar argument to explain relations between Shi’i society and ruling elites. They argued that Shi’ism’s rejection of de facto political authority encouraged indifference to political matters producing weak communal organization. As a result, Shi’ism was thought to encourage despotic rule because, by their indifference, Shi’i willingly submitted themselves to those in political power.24 The Iranian Revolution largely discredited the quietist view of Shi’i Islam.

Although the Orientalist approach is essentialist, its characterizations are based on empirical and textual examples. Later generations of scholars further distilled the Orientalists’ conclusions and they are now oft-repeated maxims of Middle East Studies, usually with little reference to their antecedents. The following quote by Nazih Ayubi is a typical example:

The Sunnites tend to look at the state as the organizer of their religious affairs. In their traditional theory, the ruler is the implementer of the Word of God; and in this capacity obedience is due to him from every believer…. Opposition to the state is therefore almost tantamount to abandoning the faith; it is not only to be condemned by the society but is also to be prevented by the state…25

Afaf Lutfi Marsot, in her work on ulama-regime relations in Egypt, also regularly refers to the ulama’s ‘tradition of submission to authority’.26 And, as Yahya Sadowski points

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out, this view of Islam literally became the “textbook description of Islamic political culture” when it appeared in James Bill and Robert Springborg’s popular survey textbook, *Politics in the Middle East*.27

**Strong Society - Weak State**

In recent years authors have challenged the “strong state-weak society” theory by espousing the exact opposite characterization of Islam. They claim that Islam encourages strong societies, resulting in weak states. Revision of the Orientalist thesis occurred gradually at first, but after Iran’s Islamic revolution in 1979 and the emergence of Islamist groups in the 1980s, it gained greater momentum. Middle Eastern regimes appeared vulnerable and societal groups posed a formidable threat to their authority. These authors cite either the tribal roots of Islam, the unification of religion and state, or in the case of Shi’ism, the withholding of legitimacy, as reasons why societal actors, such as the ulama, have had the autonomy to routinely challenge and constrain Islamic governments.28

With respect to Shi’ism, scholars claim that the sect’s rejection of political authority accounts for the numerous episodes of ulama-regime conflict in Iran, including the Tobacco Rebellion (1891), the Constitutional Revolution (1906-09), the Qom Uprising (1963), and the Islamic Revolution (1979). One of the earliest exponents of the innate revolutionary quality of the Shi’i ulama was Hamid Algar, who as early as 1963 wrote:

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27 Sadowski, footnote 17, 45.
There are grounds for discerning a stance of opposition to tyranny as one of the fundamental and most pervasive characteristics of Shi‘i Islam, an almost unbroken line of dissent connects the oppositional role of the ulama in Qajar Iran with the present struggle of an important group of the Iranian ulama against the Pahlavi regime. Despite far-reaching changes in the intellectual, cultural, social and political countenance of Iran, the voice of the ulama is still demanding an end to what it identifies as tyrannical and arbitrary rule.29

Like their “strong state” counterparts, most of the “strong society” authors attribute causality to an assumed Islamic, or sectarian, nature. A third group of scholars depart from the essentialist position and adopt an objective conditions approach. They believe that the tenor of regime-clerical relations is determined by the presence and level of certain explanatory factors. For example, they variously claim that declining oil revenues, defeats at the hands of Israel, and/or the demise of Arab nationalism have weakened regimes and opened the door for Islamic actors and interest groups to make greater political demands. Hence, in terms of the ulama, they claim that clerical strength and conflict with the regime results from the retreat of the state.30 A different argument, yet employing the same approach, posits that when connections between the clerical establishment and society are strong, clerics will demand more of the regime.31 Some of the reasons cited for strong ties between clerics and their followers include cultural affinities between clerics and the traditional classes, the financial reliance of clerics on

merchants and/or artisans, and patron-client networks between the clerics and neighborhood leaders and street ruffians

A fourth approach cites a different explanatory variable for each period of regime-clerical relation, or a multitude of causative variables at any one time without elaborating on the relative impact of each. Indeed, the “kitchen sink” method of analysis is so pervasive in the literature on Islamic clerics that, though I separated the main arguments above, in truth the attribution of causation in most works is muddied by a combination of multiple arguments and approaches.32

Critique

Both the essentialist and objective conditions approaches are unsatisfying for two reasons. First, is their disturbing fatalism. They claim that outcomes are inevitable due to either cultural paradigms or environmental conditions. Given the widely accepted view that people all over the globe are “building”, “shaping”, and in general “adapting” to changes in their environment, it is intellectually unsatisfying to assume that Muslims are somehow programmed by their religion to tread the same path day after day. If Muslim behavior, and through extension clerical behavior, is predestined, why does conflict between the ulama and the regime ever occur? Wouldn’t the regime anticipate

32 A telling example of the kitchen sink method is found in Hanna Batatu’s article on Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood and the ulama associated with the movement. Batatu is well-known for citing class structure as an important determinant of societal relations with the regime, and it is an argument used throughout this particular article. Yet at the same time, when describing why anti-regime sentiment was much stronger in Aleppo than Damascus he also claims that Aleppoans are more prone to violence than mild Damacenes due to “climatic and environmental differences”. He states, “There is nothing similar to Damascus’ fertile oasis of Ghutah on any side of Aleppo. Its landscape is more barren, its climate drier and more severe.” Batatu’s departs from a class struggle argument to an essentialist argument for seemingly no reason: given that during the period in question government policies favored the agricultural sector, it is not surprising that Damacenes, whose prosperity relied heavily on agriculture, would have fewer conflicts with the regime. “Syria’s Muslim Brethren,” MERIP Reports, Issue 110, 15.
the clerics’ reaction and then adjust its behavior accordingly? As Adam Przeworski points out, “Conflict occurs because alternative courses exist…” Even objective conditions “…constitute at most constraints to that which is possible under a concrete historical situation but do not determine the outcome of such situations.”

A second problem is that neither approach adequately accounts for the diversity of relations found in the empirical record. As I show in chapters three, four, and five, relations between regimes and clerics of the same sect have differed in many ways: across countries; within the same country over time; and within the clerical hierarchy of the same country at the same time. Variance in outcomes violates the foundation of the essentialist argument. Likewise, the different behavior of clerical elites as compared to mid-level clerics indicates that exogenous factors alone do not explain regime-clerical relations. Behavior that is not explained by exogenous sources must be due to factors internal to the clerical establishment, in particular, to intra-group competition. In the following section I present a theory of regime-clerical relations that accounts for differences in clerical behavior both between, and within the clerical hierarchies of Islam’s main sects.

IV. Strategic Interaction between Islamic Clerics and Middle Eastern Regimes

My theory departs significantly from previous explanations of regime-clerical relations in both its approach and its predictions. Unlike the conventional arguments that ignore clerical agency, I assume that both the ulama and the regime are strategic actors.


34 Of course, none of the empirical evidence actually contradicts the “kitchen sink” explanations, but then again, nothing can, and there in lies its epistemological flaw.
who make choices in an effort to pursue their interests. They do not make decisions in a vacuum: rather, their strategy selection anticipates the other actor’s decisions. Though the costs and benefits of available options are shaped by environmental constraints, my theory highlights how the competition within the clerical establishment also significantly affects the potential pay-off of different strategies. Even with environmental conditions held constant, ulama-regime relations will differ in cases where the incentive structure within the clerical establishment differs.

It is common practice in political science to model regimes and opposition parties as rational actors. However, this approach is rarely applied to the study of religious elites. I believe that rational-actor assumptions hold for Islamic clerics as well. Like other political actors, the ulama have specific, identifiable goals and they live in a world of resource scarcity. They must therefore weigh the costs and benefits of various strategies and choose the option that best optimizes their resources and insures self and group preservation.35

_Ulama Interests_

The overriding interest of Islamic clerics is to maximize their individual authority. Clerical authority is a combination of popular esteem and the ability to influence the behavior of congregants and the regime. It is reasonable to assume that if an individual chooses a career as an Islamic scholar, and the main function of that career is to guide the

community, then he would strive to be perceived as the best guide. A cleric’s occupation is to dispense advice: how much his advice is sought, and how closely it is followed, are measures of clerical success. This influence is a function of a cleric’s individual authority, specifically, the extent to which he is esteemed and trusted.

A cleric will strive to enhance his individual authority whether he is motivated by an altruistic desire to serve God or he is pursuing narrow self-interest. An altruistic ‘alim commits himself to knowing God’s word in order to best advise people of their moral obligations. The ‘alim, believing his motives to be pure and his interpretation correct, would therefore consider it to be in the best interest of the community to follow his counsel. Likewise, a strictly venal cleric, whether out of a desire for power, popularity, and/or material benefits, would also seek greater personal authority.

Islamic legal experts most frequently cite “scholarship” as the cornerstone of clerical authority. Khaled Abou el-Fadl claims that clerical “authoritativeness” combines both trust and scholarship. As mentioned previously, in Islam followers retain human agency and they must decide which cleric’s opinions are the most authoritative. Believers only submit to an ‘alim’s guidance if, according to Abou el-Fadl, certain “contingencies” are met. These contingencies are: 1) Honesty; 2) Diligence; 3) Comprehensiveness; 4) Reasonableness; and 5) Self-Restraint (modesty). These contingencies, he claims,

…are the only way possible that an appropriate balance can be maintained between the notion of individual accountability, the reality of diverse and complex instructions, and the ultimate role of God as the reference point.

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36 Patrick Gaffney claims that ‘ilm (knowledge) is the foundation of clerical authority, but what he is really discussing is the projection of knowledge, a concept that is quite close in meaning to “scholarship”. For this reason I include him as one of the proponents of the scholarship argument. Gaffney, The Prophet’s Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994) 34-35.
It is logical to think that unless each and every (follower) will dedicate himself or herself to the full-time and lifetime task of deciphering the instructions, there will have to be a division of functions, a delegation of tasks, and the practical necessity of trust.37

While it may indeed be ideal for believers to assess clerics in this diligent fashion, it is unreasonable to expect them to do so. Given time and information constraints, I believe that people use simple heuristics to gauge an ‘alim’s authoritativeness, and in this respect, they exercise much less agency than Abou el-Fadl suggests. The heuristics I believe are more commonly used by the population as yardsticks of clerical authority are: 1) position; 2) size of following; 3) resources, and finally 4) student following.

First, clerics gain an aura of authority by virtue of their position: the higher the position, the more authority they are thought to have. Believers often assume that clerics could not reach an elevated position unless they were judged well qualified by those who should know the difference. Titles and positions are particularly esteemed and deferred to in societies where illiteracy is high and information is scarce. Of course, if those responsible for clerical advancement are deemed untrustworthy, then a cleric’s position will have little cachet. Overall, however, clerical authority follows the same guiding principle that holds in advertising: it’s all about product recognition. Clerics in high positions are known quantities, and by that fact alone, they are considered more authoritative, especially by the less educated and informed segments of society.

Second, the size of an ‘alim’s following is a strong measure of his authority. Returning to Abou El-Fadl’s earlier plumber analogy, how do most people choose their plumber? Do they research his training and certification? Perhaps, but it is much more

37 Abou El-Fadl, 54-57.
likely that they ask others who their plumber is and if they recommend him. The same is true with choosing clerics: if many people recommend the same cleric, it will be inferred that he is authoritative. Hence, a large following produces a reciprocal effect: the larger the following, the greater the attribution of authority; the greater the attribution of authority, the larger the following. Word-of-mouth is only one way to learn of a cleric’s following. Other measures include the number of worshippers attending a cleric’s Friday *khutba* (sermon) and the prevalence of books and cassette tapes bearing a cleric’s teachings. The size of a cleric’s following is a heuristic for authority because it is assumed “if he’s good enough for them, he should be good enough for me.”

Another heuristic used to assess a cleric’s authoritativeness is evidence of resources. However, Islamic Law scholars often overlook the respect that purely material attributes inspire due to these scholars’ focus on the ideational features of authority. A resource-rich ‘alim, who distributes funds throughout the community and amongst students, will likely be respected-- first for having such wealth, and second for his generosity. Individuals not only consider a resource-rich cleric authoritative, but more venally, they have a greater compulsion to become followers in hopes that they might one day benefit from the ‘alim’s largess.

A final heuristic is the size of a scholar’s student following -- which is the indirect result of his scholarship. Since the laity is largely ignorant of a cleric’s specialization, scholarship only directly influences the opinions of seminary students and clerical peers. While the esteem of colleagues is desired, it is scholarship’s indirect effect that clerics value most, especially if they are teaching at a seminary using a tutorial system. When an ‘alim’s work wins the respect of his peers, he gains a wider circle of students. Students become an
‘alim’s personal network, spreading his ideas and his reputation in both their home communities and the communities where they will eventually be employed.\textsuperscript{38} The quality of a cleric’s scholarship shapes seminarians’ opinions, and in turn, the laity rely on the opinions of his student following to gauge a cleric’s authoritativeness.

Although authority is not a zero-sum commodity, the attribution of authority is an inherently comparative process that pits cleric against cleric. Many scholars place arbitrary limits on the lengths clerics will go to in order to distinguish themselves from their peers and gain authority. These supposed limits include an unwillingness to become involved in strictly political matters, especially foreign policy concerns, and a strong “reluctance to rule”.\textsuperscript{39} Empirically, I have found no evidence of ideological constraints to the clerics’ pursuit of authority; rather, I believe that the aforementioned behavior is rare because under most conditions it does not enhance clerical authority. Yet, when conditions change, clerics behave in a myriad of previously “unthinkable” ways. For instance, clerics head a theocracy in Iran, run a political party in Pakistan, led a revolt of seminary students in Afghanistan, and guide both moderate and extremist opposition groups throughout the Muslim world. In addition, they have responded to the information age in ways that were previously considered undignified for men of their standing: sending out press releases, establishing fatwa hotlines and web pages, and becoming T.V. sheikhs. In sum, Islamic clerics seek individual authority and will do what they must to get it.

Since clerical authority is derived from their position, resources and following, clerics seek to increase all three. However, the pay-offs of each path will vary according

\textsuperscript{38} Clerical networks are discussed in detail in Guilain Denoeux, \textit{Urban Unrest in the Middle East: A Comparative Study of Informal Networks in Egypt, Iran and Lebanon} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

\textsuperscript{39} Gaffney, 39.
to a variety of environmental constraints, so clerics face a trade-off in their effort to maximize personal authority. As opposition grows stronger, clerics must decide whether the potential benefits and risks of responding to public opinion outweigh the possible resource, promotion and/or policy benefits that cooperation with the regime can bring. Pursuit of either strategy -- cooperation or conflict with the regime -- can potentially enhance and, at the same time, undermine an ‘alim’s personal authority.

Complicating matters further, clerics also have a political agenda. Though each cleric’s personal preferences differ, their policy preferences coalesce around their collective interest: clerics seek a greater role for Islam in determining the values and rules that govern societal relations, and, they seek to preserve a clerical monopoly over the religious sphere40, ensuring that only those whom the ulama deem qualified, may interpret Islam for the community and the state.

In addition to weighing gains and losses in terms of individual authority and agenda preferences, clerics must also determine whether the regime is willing to make a “side-payment” to off-set the potential costs of siding with it. Given the many factors involved in clerical decision-making, it seems unlikely that predictions concerning regime-clerical relations can be made. Sometimes, that is in fact the case, particularly when the variables’ impact on the clerics’ decision-calculus run contrary to one another (e.g. when clerics like the opposition’s agenda, but are offered a sizable side-payment for cooperating with the regime.) However, after a brief discussion of regime interests, the following section will show that regime-clerical relations have a distinctive pattern.

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40 As defined here, the ‘religious sphere’ refers to all functions whereby the ulama convey or interpret Islamic precepts, such as preaching, teaching, issuing fatwas, and arbitration.
Regime Interests

The primary goal of the regime\textsuperscript{41} is to stay in power. Its reasons for wanting to stay in power could be for personal enrichment, to carry out a specific agenda, or simply for the sake of power itself, but in any case, securing its position takes precedence over all other considerations. The regime’s monopoly on violence and its access to resources allow it to secure its position to a great extent without public consent. Middle Eastern regimes retain tight control over resource distribution and channel a sizable portion of tariff and tax revenues, foreign aid, and profits from state-owned enterprises, toward the security apparatus. However, to rely solely on this strategy is very costly and dangerous. Forcing the submission of the population to the regime requires a complex and sustained security effort that diverts resources from profitable economic sectors and stifles economic growth. Even if the regime is successful in the short term, the costs, both human and economic, can deepen public resentment causing the emergence of even broader opposition in the long term.

To avoid this domestic security spiral, the regime seeks to gain legitimacy, or at the very least acquiescence, for its rule and policies. One method of gaining popular support is through “buying” the cooperation of critical groups (e.g. the business and military establishments). Yet, on a large scale this strategy is both costly and inefficient, especially with respect to obtaining the support of the majority of citizens who are not strongly affiliated with an organized group. Therefore, ruling elites seek strategies aimed

\textsuperscript{41} Although the formal definition of “regime” is simply “a system of government”, I am using the term, as it is commonly referred to in the political science literature, to mean “authoritarian government.” In general, decision-making in Middle Eastern regimes is highly centralized, and I have found through my research, it is particularly so on security and religion-state concerns. Although these issues may be discussed at the cabinet-level, Middle East leaders rely heavily on the advice of just a few close advisors. For this reason, I treat regimes as unitary actors.
at buying public consent as cheaply as possible. One such strategy is to gain the support of religious elites, because clerics can convince believers that obeying the government is good.42 As Anthony Gill points out, “…any level of positive association with a religious organization should enhance a government’s legitimacy and ensure greater compliance from the population, at least among the religious. Therefore, the endorsement of religious leaders helps reduce the costs of rule.”43

The pursuit of religious sanction, however, also has its costs. To gain religious sanction the regime must surrender political space to the ulama, something that authoritarian regimes hesitate to do. At times the regime may feel that encroachment upon social spheres traditionally dominated by the ulama -- such as the educational and judicial establishments -- is more beneficial than cooperating with Islamic clerics. Yet, when facing threats, in particular from Islamist groups, the regime has a stronger incentive to cooperate with the ulama in order to gain moral sanction for its actions and discredit the opposition. Like ulama strategy selection, the regime’s decision to either confront or cooperate with the ulama involves trade-offs that not only depend on the strength and type of opposition it is facing, but also on the “price” demanded by the ulama for their cooperation. In the next section, I discuss the factors that determine the opportunity costs of the strategies available to both actors.

Strategic options

The options clerics and regimes choose depend on shifting environmental factors and their mutual interaction as each pursues its independent interest. In this section I

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42 Arjomand, 1984, 12.
43 Gill, 52.
briefly explain the regime’s and the clerics’ strategic options, and in the next section I discuss in detail the constraints on their decision-making and how they affect the pay-offs too.

Given the presence of opposition, clerics choose among three strategies in their relationship with the regime: 1) Cooperation -- support the regime and confront the opposition; 2) Conflict -- reject regime policies and mobilize support for the opposition; and 3) Neutrality -- abstain from supporting either side. They select their strategy according to which option offers the greatest potential gain to their individual authority. This assessment depends on the agenda of the opposition, their assessment of the probability of regime change, and the likelihood of a side-payment by the regime. Furthermore, the strategy of individual clerics is also contingent upon their relative responsiveness to public opinion, which results from their hierarchical rank and the degree of their reliance on followers for promotion and resources. These constraints are discussed in detail in the following section.

Paralleling the three choices of the clerics, the regime also decides amongst three options: 1) Side-payment -- provide policy and/or resource concessions to secure clerical cooperation; 2) Prey-- appropriate clerical resources, limit the scope of religious activities and influence, and intimidate the clerical establishment by force; and 3) Neutrality -- neither buy-off nor punish the ulama. The side-payment strategy includes all situations where the regime ‘buys” clerical cooperation. If the regime decides to extend benefits to the clerics when clerical cooperation is already forthcoming, this does not constitute a side-payment. This scenario occurs when the regime believes that the clerics will be a more effective force against the opposition if they are given a higher public profile. I
categorize the granting of such benefits as “neutral” because the support was unilaterally extended, without the threat of the ulama defecting. Regime strategy selection is a function of the regime’s perception of the probability of regime change (in particular, the level of public support for the opposition) and the price of clerical cooperation. Each constraint and its individual impact on the decision calculus of the regime and the clerics is discussed below, and in the section following I show how these factors combine, resulting in either cooperation or confrontation between clerics and the regime.

**Constraints on Strategy Selection**

Three considerations shape the strategies of the clerics and the regime:

1) the opposition’s agenda;

2) the probability of regime change; and

3) the clerics’ relative responsiveness to public opinion.

Variation amongst these factors determine the pay-offs for cooperation and conflict. In this section I discuss the impact of each of these constraints on both the clerics’ and the regime’s strategy selection.

**The Opposition’s Agenda**

The nature of the opposition’s agenda, specifically its alignment with clerical interests, is an important consideration for the clerics. Although the ultimate goals of these actors are distinct—clerics seek personal authority, while opposition groups want to exercise political power— their policy interests often overlap. The stronger the agenda

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44 Some analysts suggest that the goals of al-Qaeda and other international Islamic extremist groups depart from those of previous opposition groups. Their goal is not to rule per se, but to establish an
agreement between clerical concerns and the interests of the opposition, the more likely clerics will defect from the regime.\textsuperscript{46} However, when the opposition’s success threatens the clerics’ authority as the main arbiters of social and moral values (as is often the case with Islamic extremist and nationalist groups), clerics will remain loyal to the regime.

Agenda proximity to the opposition is commonly cited as a reason for clerical defection to the opposition or cooperation with the regime.\textsuperscript{47} Yet, this literature ignores how knowledge of clerical decision-making affects the regime’s position taking. When the opposition is more secular than the regime (ex. the communist Tudeh Party in pre-revolutionary Iran) clerics will automatically align with the regime because they prefer the regime’s policies. The regime does not need to make a side-payment to buy cooperation because clerical support is unwavering. However, when there is greater alignment between the opposition’s agenda and that of the clerics, and the opposition is

\textsuperscript{45} This alignment occurs not only because clerics intrinsically want their desires met, but also because clerical preferences are publicly known (ex. clerical edicts often appear in the press), and therefore, drastic deviation from this position can incur reputation costs with the public. Regardless of the public’s position on the political spectrum, when clerics support a position that is clearly contrary to their traditions and interests, their public esteem and authority decline.

\textsuperscript{46} To emphasize the interaction between the ulama and the regime, I treat the opposition’s agenda as fixed. While it is reasonable to assume that opposition groups would strategically shift their policies to attract followers (and more to the point, to attract the support of the clerics) opposition groups are often strongly wedded to their beliefs. According to Timur Kuran, a possible explanation for the opposition’s relative intransigence is that opposition members value being true to themselves more than most people. Kuran, “Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989.” \textit{World Politics}, Vol. 44, No. 1 (October 1991) 19. It may also be that for opposition groups ideological constancy creates the bonds that are crucial for facilitating collective action in the face of tremendous obstacles.

\textsuperscript{47} Mohammad Gholi Majd details the common economic interests that allied clerics and large landowners against the Shah’s land reform program in \textit{Resistance to the Shah: Landowners and the Ulama in Iran} (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000). In addition, both Tamir Moustafa and Steven Barraclough discuss how Egypt’s ulama were eager to cooperate with the regime from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s because Islamic extremist groups threatened and condemned the clerics as well as the regime. Moustafa, “Conflict and Cooperation Between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt,” \textit{International Journal of Middle East Studies} 32 (February 2000) 3-22; and, Barraclough, “Al-Azhar: Between the Government and the Islamists,” \textit{Middle East Journal} 52:2 (Spring 1998) 236-49.
more Islamist than the clerics (ex. the current position of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt), the regime can move its agenda closer to the ulama (or, as will be discussed later, provide an equivalent form of side-payment) causing the clerics to switch their support to the regime. Clerics and the regime cooperate in both instances, but when the opposition is Islamist, rather then secular, clerics stand to make greater gains from the regime.

**Probability of Regime Change**

Policy preferences are not the only concern of the clerics and the regime. Both actors’ strategic choices are also shaped by the probability of regime change (this can also be thought of as the power of the opposition relative to the regime.) Several factors impact the probability of regime change, including: foreign support or threats to the regime; economic conditions; military strength and unity; and the organization and cohesion of the opposition. Yet, for the clerics and the regime, the most important factor affecting regime change is public support for the opposition. For the clerics, gauging support for the opposition is important not only because it is a measure of the opposition’s prospects for success, but it is also a measure of the benefits to be gained in terms of personal authority and esteem by defecting to the opposition. Clerics peddle advice and influence, and though they can often sway opinions, they risk losing their influence and public credibility the farther their position strays from public opinion. For the regime, public support for the opposition is both a measure of the regime’s vulnerability and a determinant of the price it will need to pay the ulama to ensure clerical loyalty.
When the regime stands unopposed, or when the opposition has weak support, clerics cannot hope to better their position through regime change. Under such circumstances, they will cooperate with the regime regardless of their agenda preferences and/or the tyranny of the regime. They will cooperate because their only other options – conflict or neutrality with no hope of regime change – are both worse choices. Pursuing a strategy of conflict risks punishment from the regime and offers the clerics no off-setting gains in terms of greater goodwill with the public. On the other hand, remaining neutral provides no guarantee that the regime will not prey on clerical interests and even less chance to benefit than would cooperating with the regime.

Regime concessions to the clerics are determined by the magnitude of the threat the regime faces. Hence, clerics are at their weakest bargaining position when the regime is virtually unopposed because they cannot credibly threaten defection. It is also at this time that the regime is most likely to prey upon the clerics because it can do so and still retain clerical support. For example, in 1961 Egypt’s ulama “thanked” Nasser’s regime for reforms resulting in the complete co-optation of the religious establishment and the confiscation of its resources by the state. Even in the face of depredation by the regime, Egypt’s ulama had no choice but to cooperate—Nasser had recently completed a successful crack-down on Egypt’s only significant opposition group, the Muslim Brothers. Given the regime’s overwhelming power at that time, to have opposed Nasser would have jeopardized all of the clerics’ interests.

When opposition is present, and therefore the probability of regime change increases, so too does the likelihood of clerical defection to the opposition if they prefer the opposition’s agenda to that of the regime. The opposite is true when the clerics
dislike the opposition’s agenda: as the probability of regime change increases, the cleric’s incentive to defect will decrease (the exception, when clerics are highly responsive to public opinion, is discussed in the next section.) Yet, agenda concerns can take a backseat to concerns about public support when public opinion shifts significantly from one side to the other.

![Fig. 1 Agenda Proximity and the Distribution of Public Support](image)

Clerics select their strategies within a multi-dimensional agenda space, but for the sake of simplicity, Figure 1 illustrates clerical decision-making solely along an Islamist-Secular dimension because for the last century this has been the most salient political division in Middle East politics. As Figure 1 depicts, when public support is similar to distribution A clerics will support the opposition because they prefer its agenda to that of the regime and they can increase their following by taking a popular position. When the spread of public support shifts to distribution B, clerics will switch sides and cooperate with the regime, despite their preference for the opposition’s agenda. For clerics, the shift may involve some reputation costs for not being true to their known preferences, but with strong public support, the regime is unlikely to change. Thus, supporting the opposition because of agenda proximity is futile since the opposition will not be in a position to enact its agenda. In addition, clerics would fear becoming estranged from the masses if they sided with the opposition.
When the distribution of public support is less clear, or under any other scenario where the benefits of supporting one side begin to equal that of supporting the other, clerics may choose to withhold their support from both sides and remain neutral. Neutrality is normally a temporary position because any change in the parameters affecting the probability of regime change, or a side-payment by the regime, will soon cause the clerics to support either the opposition or the regime.

For the regime, greater public support for the opposition increases the utility of public support to the regime, and thus raises the relative value of the ulama’s endorsement. In effect, the level of the opposition’s public support signals how much the regime will need to pay for clerical cooperation. Although clerics are influential religious leaders, they may have only a marginal total effect on public opinion. In Figure 2 the

**Fig. 3 Clerics’ Impact on Regime Change as a Function of Regime Strength and Clerical Influence on Public Support**

ulama’s influence on public support is represented by $\Delta$. No matter the strength of the regime, when public support for the opposition is limited, the regime will be unconcerned
about the extra public support that clerical defection to the opposition would bring. The shift (from A to AΔ) would have a negligible impact on the probability of regime change, thus the regime has no interest in providing a side-payment to the clerics.

Yet, when the regime is weak and public support for the opposition is on the rise, the marginal impact of ulama influence (the shift from B to BΔ) can be pivotal in terms of the regime’s survival. It is at such a point that the regime has a strong incentive to provide concessions to the clerics in an effort to buy clerical support. Furthermore, the amount the regime gives will need to be commensurate with the ulama’s impact on the probability of regime change. It would seem that the ulama’s bargaining position would strengthen as support for the opposition reached critical levels.

When support for the opposition is very high, clerics may become intransigent and no amount of concessions will sway them because they don’t expect the regime to survive. Those clerics who remain open to persuasion will demand a very steep price. In response, the regime may decide that the cost of clerical cooperation has begun to outweigh the benefits. The following section explains why some clerics are more open to regime persuasion while others are more sensitive to public opinion.

The Clerics’ Responsiveness to Public Opinion

Described above is how both clerics and the regime select strategies in response to the opposition’s agenda, the probability of regime change, and the anticipated response of the other actor. Yet, one more factor, specific to clerics, affects the outcome of regime-clerical interaction: the cleric’s responsiveness to public opinion. Some clerics value public support more than others, and by that fact alone, as public opinion shifts
toward the opposition, their threshold for defection will plunge. This variation in relative responsiveness to public opinion is what causes strategic divisions within the clerical establishment.

Two factors determine a cleric’s responsiveness to public opinion: 1) the degree of his reliance on followers for promotion and resources; and, 2) his hierarchical rank. Clerics who depend on their following for both advancement within the clerical establishment and resources are more responsive to changes in public opinion than clerics who rely on the regime for funding and position. For these “popular” clerics, though their peers may officially bestow titles and promotions, advancement is strongly influenced by the size of their personal following. Thus, by following particular clerics, the laity plays an important role in the selection of clerical leadership. When promotion and resources are both based on a cleric’s personal following, rather than the regime, clerics become more responsive to popular sentiment. For these clerics, the ‘rate of return’ for responding to public concerns is higher because by doing so they stand to gain personal authority in three, mutually reinforcing, ways -- from expanding their following, from promotion, and from acquiring greater resources.

On the other hand, ulama whose position and resources are tied to the regime will also seek to expand their following, but they are less responsive to the vagaries of public opinion because popular sentiment and regime policy are often at odds.\(^48\) When they are at odds, regime-dependent clerics, if they respond too enthusiastically to public

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\(^48\) Clerical dependence on the regime results from state predation when the regime rules virtually unopposed. Without the possibility of regime change, the clerics have little choice but to cooperate. Once the clerical establishment has been incorporated into the state and the clerics are salaried employees, it becomes difficult to explicate themselves from the regime’s control. Indeed, they may not want to: dependable pay and an assured budget are strong incentives for cooperating with the regime. Even in countries where the clerical establishment as a whole remains independent from the regime, you will still find individual clerics who have chosen to take state-sponsored posts.
sentiment, risk undermining their ability to gain authority through advancement and resources. At the same time, clerics stand to lose their popular following if they ally too closely with the regime. Since regime-dependent clerics try to serve two masters --the regime as well as their following-- they are overall less responsive to public sentiment than their independent counterparts.

A cleric’s relative responsiveness to public opinion, and therefore his interest in defection, is also affected by hierarchical rank. Mid-level clerics, both popular and regime-dependent, have a stronger incentive to respond to public opinion than clerical elites. By championing popular causes, mid-level clerics gain authority both through expansion of their personal following and through possible promotion. When public sentiment and regime policy clash, mid-level clerics are more likely than elites to support the opposition because major changes in the political status quo cause reverberations within the clerical hierarchy, thus providing mid-level ulama with a significant opportunity for advancement.

In contrast to mid-level ulama, clerical elites have little authority to gain and a great deal to lose if they join with the opposition against the regime. Clerical elites enjoy tremendous authority from their position and do not want to risk their status. Therefore, protecting their position often takes precedence over responding to public opinion. Furthermore, since change in the political status quo can threaten the position of clerical elites, the fates of clerical elites and the regime are joined and mutual cooperation is likely.
V. Expected Outcomes

As explained above, regime-clerical relations are not determined by ideology or any other individual factor alone, but rather are the result of the two actors’ mutual interaction in pursuit of their individual interests -- personal authority for the clerics, and security for the regime. Three conditions determine the expected pay-offs for the clerics, and in turn, set the price for their cooperation: 1) their agenda alignment with the opposition; 2) the probability of regime change; and 3) the cleric’s responsiveness to public opinion. The regime’s decisions are shaped by the probability of regime change and the price of clerical cooperation. Thus, in this respect, all of the factors affecting clerical decision-making factor into the regime’s decisions too. Tables 1 and 2 depict the predicted strategy selection of the clerics and the regime given the various combinations of constraints. The tables show the expected behavior of the clerics given the possible combinations of agenda alignment, the probability of regime change and the source of their position and resources. Each box contains both the response of clerical elites and that of mid-level clerics.

When clerics prefer one strategy more than any other, regardless of the regime’s choice, they have a dominant strategy. In such cases, only one choice appears in the box. Notice that when the opposition is weak, the clerics have a clearly dominant strategy: they will cooperate because to conflict or abstain when the regime will remain in power provides no opportunity for benefits and opens the clerics to punishment. Likewise, when agenda alignment between clerics and the opposition is weak all regime-dependent clerics, both mid-level and elite, have a dominate strategy and will cooperate with the regime. These regime-dependent clerics are less responsive to public opinion; hence,
Predicted Clerical Behavior and Regime Side-Payments

- Regime Side-Payment to Clerics

**BOLD** Position of clerics after the side-payment

Table 1. STRONG Agenda Alignment Between Clerics and the Opposition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probability Of Regime Change</th>
<th>Regime</th>
<th>Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Elites neutral -- conflict</td>
<td>All clerics conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mid-level conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Elites support -- neutral</td>
<td>Elites neutral -- conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mid-level neutral -- conflict</td>
<td>Mid-level conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>All clerics cooperate</td>
<td>All clerics cooperate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. WEAK Agenda Alignment Between Clerics and the Opposition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probability Of Regime Change</th>
<th>Regime</th>
<th>Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>All clerics cooperate</td>
<td>Elites cooperate -- neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mid-level neutral -- conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>All clerics cooperate</td>
<td>Elites cooperate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mid-level neutral -- cooperate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>All clerics cooperate</td>
<td>All clerics cooperate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
even when the likelihood of regime change is high due to strong support for the opposition, clerical agenda concerns will take precedent over their desire to stay in step with public sentiment.

Some of the boxes display a range of possible behavior for the clerics, particularly when the impact of the variables run counter to one another (e.g. when clerics receive resources from the regime, but they prefer the opposition’s agenda.) When the clerics are sitting on the fence, and there is no dominant strategy, the regime can buy their cooperation with a side-payment. The shading represents when the regime is likely to make a side-payment based on the threat to the regime and the price of clerical cooperation. In the shaded boxes, the strategy in bold represents the expected behavior of the clerics upon receipt of a side-payment.

The only box containing a range of clerical behavior that is not shaded (no side-payment) is the case where “popular” clerics dislike the opposition’s agenda and face a moderate possibility of regime change. Although elites in this category are compelled to cooperate with the regime, more responsive mid-level clerics begin to be swayed by increasing public support for the opposition. The regime will not offer a side-payment because it already has the support of clerical elites who have comparatively greater influence on public opinion. In the end, the mid-level clerics will remain neutral and not conflict with the regime.

In all other scenarios where a range of clerical behavior is possible, the final outcome depends on clerical interaction with the regime. Since clerics always cooperate with the regime when there is a weak probability of regime change, the opportunity to shift the clerics’ position with a side-payment only presents itself when the probability of
regime change is moderate or strong. These are also the times when the threat to the regime is greatest and the cleric’s support can be pivotal. Therefore, when given the opportunity, the regime will provide resource and/or agenda concessions to the clerics in order to gain their cooperation, or at least their neutrality.

All of the scenarios described thus far ultimately result in cooperation between clerics and the regime. Indeed, conflict between clerics and the regime only occurs under very rare conditions. The first set of conditions for conflict is when the agenda alignment between clerics and the opposition is strong, the probability of regime change is moderate to high, and the clerics are very responsive to public opinion (i.e. the “popular” mid-level clerics.) The second scenario for conflict is when there is strong agenda alignment, a high probability of regime change, and the clerics are fairly responsive to public opinion (i.e. regime-dependent mid-level clerics and “popular” clerical elites.) In each case, the clerics’ threshold for defection is so low that it is virtually equal to their having a dominant strategy for conflict. Theoretically, the regime could offer a very large pay-off in order to off-set the possible gains of clerical defection to the opposition, but this is highly unlikely because the steep price would be akin to the complete capitulation of the regime to the ulama. Since under these conditions the cost of buying clerical cooperation is prohibitive, the regime will risk confronting the opposition without the clerics’ support. The clerics will in turn defect to the opposition, thereby resulting in conflict between the clerics and the regime.
VI. Conclusion

Presented here is a generalizable theory about regime-clerical relations that explains how clerics and the regime decide whether their independent interests will be furthered by cooperation or by conflict. I show how the variation of three variables – the opposition’s agenda, the probability of regime change, and the clerics’ responsiveness to public opinion-- determines the pay-offs of the strategies available to the two actors, and how these constraints affect the likelihood of cooperation or conflict. In addition to explaining when regime-clerical conflict will occur, my theory illuminates the reason why it is rare: factors that promote clerical opposition to the regime are the same factors that increase the regime’s need to draw on clerical support. As these factors increase, so too does the likelihood that the regime will extend off-setting gains to encourage the clerics’ cooperation. Upon provision of a side-payment, clerics support the regime and do not defect. Indeed, conflict only emerges under a very specific combination of conditions: 1) when clerics prefer the opposition’s agenda to that of the regime; 2) when they believe regime change is likely; and 3) when they are highly responsive to public opinion.

Yet, like all broad strategic theories, the arguments’ explanatory power is challenged by factors that hamper each actor’s ability to assess the comparative utility of his choices. These obstructions are the reasons why, in retrospect, the decisions of the clerics and/or the regime can sometimes appear more harmful than helpful. With respect to regime-clerical relations, the ability of the two actors to make informed decisions is consistently undermined by both the general instability in the Middle East and by the authoritarian nature of the state. In terms of domestic control, Middle East regimes
usually appear to be very strong; however, challenges by neighboring countries or world powers can suddenly place the regime’s existence in peril. Therefore, regional instability makes assessing regime strength-- and by extension, the probability of regime change--problematic. Likewise, the closed nature of authoritarian regimes increases the error in predicting the probability of regime change. Fearing retribution by the regime, citizens do not make their preferences known, making it difficult to estimate public support for the opposition.

Despite the uncertainty introduced by these factors, the predictive power of the strategic-actor argument presented here is borne out when it is applied to multiple cases of regime-clerical interaction, both over time and cross-regionally. Differing from previous explanations in its predictions and its approach, this argument contributes to our understanding or regime-clerical cooperation beyond its explanation of when cooperation and conflict will occur. By showing how clerical influence is predicated in part by the level of threat to the regime, the theory sheds light on when clerics can expect the greatest resource and agenda concessions from the regime. And finally, it shows how the competition amongst clerics for personal authority impacts their responsiveness to public opinion, resulting in strategic divisions within clerical ranks.