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Syria's Solidarity With Islamists Ends at Home

By KAREEM FAHIM

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This country, which had sought to show solidarity with Islamist groups and allow religious figures a greater role in public life, has recently reversed course, moving forcefully to curb the influence of Muslim conservatives in its mosques, public universities and charities.

The government has asked imams for recordings of their Friday sermons and started to strictly monitor religious schools. Members of an influential Muslim women's group have now been told to scale back activities like preaching or teaching Islamic law. And this summer, more than 1,000 teachers who wear the *niqab*, or the face veil, were transferred to administrative duties.

The crackdown, which began in 2008 but has gathered steam this summer, is an effort by President **Bashar al-Assad** to reassert Syria's traditional secularism in the face of rising threats from radical groups in the region, Syrian officials say.

The policy amounts to a sharp reversal for Syria, which for years tolerated the rise of the conservatives. And it sets the government on the seemingly contradictory path of moving against political Islamists at home, while supporting movements like **Hamas** and **Hezbollah** abroad.

Syrian officials are adamant that the shifts stem from alarming domestic trends, and do not affect support for those groups, allies in their struggle against Israel. At the same

time, they have spoken proudly about their secularizing campaign, though they have been reluctant to reveal its details. Some Syrian analysts view that as an overture to the United States and European nations, which have been courting Syria as part of a strategy to isolate Iran and curb the influence of Hamas and Hezbollah.

Human rights advocates say the policy exacerbates pressing concerns: the arbitrary imprisonment of Islamists, as well as the continued failure to allow them any political space.

Pressure on Islamic conservatives in Syria began in earnest after a powerful car bomb exploded in the Syrian capital in September 2008, [killing 17 people](#). The government blamed the radical group Fatah al-Islam.

“The bombing was the trigger, but the pressure had been building,” said Peter Harling, a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group. “After a period of accommodation with the Islamic groups, the regime entered this far more proactive and repressive mode. It realizes the challenge that the Islamization of Syrian society poses.”

The government’s campaign drew wider notice this summer, when a decision to bar students wearing the niqab from registering for university classes was compared to a similar ban in France. That move seemed to underscore a reduced tolerance for strict observance by Muslims in public life. Syrian officials have put it differently, saying the niqab is “alien” to Syrian society.

The campaign carries risks for a secular government that has fought repeated, violent battles with Islamists in the past, most notably in 1982, when Mr. Assad’s father, [Hafez al-Assad](#), razed the city of Hama while confronting the Muslim Brotherhood, killing tens of thousands of people. For the moment there has been no visible domestic backlash, but one cleric, who said he was dismissed without being given a reason two years ago, suggested that could change.

“The Islamists now have a strong argument that the regime is antagonizing the Muslims,” he said.

The government courted religious conservatives as Western powers moved to isolate Syria amid accusations that it was behind the assassination of a former Lebanese prime minister, [Rafik Hariri](#), in 2005. The government appointed a sheik instead of a member of the ruling [Baathist](#) party to head the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and allowed, for the first time, religious activities in the stadium at Damascus University.

As the country emerged from that isolation, it focused on domestic challenges, including the fear that sectarian tensions in the region could spread — a recurring fear in Syria, a country with a Sunni majority ruled by Alawites, a religious minority.

The government also focused on conservatives. “What they had nourished and empowered, they felt the need to break,” said Hassan Abbas, a Syrian researcher.

The details of the campaign have remained murky, though Syrian officials have not been afraid to publicize its aims, including in foreign media outlets. In an [interview](#) with the American talk show host [Charlie Rose](#) in May, Mr. Assad was asked to name his biggest challenge.

“How we can keep our society as secular as it is today,” he said. “The challenge is the extremism in this region.”

Mr. Assad has in the past singled out northern Lebanon as a source of that extremism.

“We didn’t forget Nahr al-Bared,” said Mohammed al-Habash, a Syrian lawmaker, referring to battles in that region three years ago between Lebanese forces and Fatah al-Islam. “We have to take this seriously.”

Beginning in 2008, the government embarked on its new course when it fired administrators at several Islamic charities, according to the former cleric, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he feared reprisal by the government.

The clampdown has intensified in recent months. Last spring, the [Qubaisiate](#), an underground women’s prayer group that was growing in prominence, was barred from meeting at mosques, according to members. Earlier this summer, top officials in Damascus Governorate were fired for their religious leanings, according to Syrian analysts.

Other moves underscore the delicacy of Mr. Assad’s campaign — or perhaps send mixed signals. A planned conference on secularism earlier this year, initially approved by the government, was abruptly canceled for no reason, according to Mr. Abbas.

“Secularism is their version of being secular,” Mr. Abbas said.

Another episode can be seen as a concession to Islamists, or a sign of just how comfortable the conservatives have become. A proposed rewrite of Syria’s personal status law, which governs civil matters, leaked last year, retained provisions that made it legal for men to marry girls as young as 13 years old. Under pressure, including from women’s groups, lawmakers abandoned the draft law.

“There are limits to what they can do,” Mr. Harling, the analyst, said of the Syrian government. “They will try things out and pedal back if things go too far. It says a lot about how difficult it is — even for a regime that is deeply secular itself and whose survival is tied to the secular nature of Syrian society.”