

Battling the Jinn

Exorcism and Islamic Healing in Syria

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And behold, it was a Jinni, huge of height and burly of breast and bulk, broad of brow and black of blee, bearing on his head a coffer of crystal.

—*The Fisherman and the Jinni*, in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, trans. Sir Richard F. Burton.

According to the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad did not realise that he had an audience. While reciting the Qur'an near Nakhlah, he was overheard by a group of jinn. Only later was he informed of the encounter: "It has been revealed to me that a company of the jinn listened" (Qur'an 72:1). The unseen beings returned to their own people declaring: "We have heard a wondrous Recitation. It guides to the right path, and we have believed in it" (Qur'an 72:1-2). Muslim exegetes regarded this as one of the earliest meetings between Muhammad's message and the world of spirits. Far from being figures of folklore, the jinn occupy a defined place not only in the Qur'anic but also in the religious imagination of many Muslim societies. Across the Middle Eastern and North African nations surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2012, belief in jinn ranges from 55% in Iraq to 86% in Morocco.¹ Belief in jinn possession specifically, however, seems to be less uniformly accepted: its reality is affirmed by the predominant position within traditional Sunni scholarship, but it has also been disputed by Muslim scholars and modern interpreters, both on theological and scientific grounds.² Jinn possession nevertheless remains a common explanation in many Muslim societies for certain illnesses or unusual behaviours, although such explanations often coexist with medical or psychiatric interpretations of the same symptoms.

Accounts of invisible beings afflicting humans have appeared across religious traditions, including in contemporary Western societies. Among the best-known modern examples is the Robbie Mannheim case. In the spring of 1949, the parents of a thirteen-year-old American boy found themselves confronted with a series of disturbing phenomena: his bed shook violently, objects appeared to move of their own accord, unexplained scratches emerged on his body, and he developed an apparent aversion to sacred objects, accompanied by increasingly guttural vocalisations. Physicians were consulted. Psychiatrists offered diagnoses. The family's Lutheran pastor became involved. None of these efforts settled the matter. Eventually, the family sought the help of the Catholic Church. Several Jesuit priests carried out a series of exorcisms, recording the proceedings in a diary that, together with later eyewitness testimonies, has made the so-called Robbie Mannheim case one of the best documented allegations of demonic possession in modern history.³ The episode later inspired William Peter Blatty's book *The Exorcist* (1971), which was followed by William Friedkin's extraordinarily successful 1973 film adaptation of the same name. That movie marked a turning point in the modern cultural history of exorcism: it rekindled public

¹ Pew Research Center, *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2012), chap. 4, "Other Beliefs and Practices."

² Simon Dein and Abdool Samad Illaiee, "Jinn and Mental Health: Looking at Jinn Possession in Modern Psychiatric Practice," *The Psychiatrist* 37, no. 9 (2013): 290–293; Tahir Obeid, Ahmad Abulaban, Fawazia Al-Ghatani, Abdul Rahman Al-Malki, and Abdulaziz Al-Ghamdi, "Possession by 'Jinn' as a Cause of Epilepsy (Saraa): A Study from Saudi Arabia," *Seizure* 21, no. 4 (2012): 245–249.

³ Thomas B. Allen, *Possessed: The True Story of an Exorcism* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

fascination with demonic possession and helped bring supernatural explanations back into popular discussions of mental illness and debates about religious experiences.⁴

Historians will be quick to point out that the broader dynamic is hardly unprecedented. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the extraordinary diffusion of Spiritualism—a movement based on the belief that departed souls can interact with the living through a medium—similarly took place within a context of religious uncertainty, emerging forms of mass media, and the new scientific culture of the time.⁵ More interestingly for our subject, though, this development was not confined to the Christian West but also extended to Muslim countries. In mid-twentieth-century Egypt, a Spiritualist movement emerged among educated professional circles but attracted wider attention through the press, while its practitioners attempted to reconcile supernatural agency with modern scientific inquiry within an already existing Islamic universe of jinn, possession and exorcism. Egyptian Spiritualists investigated alleged cases of possession and spirit disturbances, while disputing both materialist explanations and what they regarded as the superstitions of traditional healing practices.⁶ The resulting controversies bear more than a passing resemblance to contemporary debates surrounding jinn possession and Islamic healing, in which claims about the reality of supernatural agency continue to compete with psychiatric explanations and scientific scepticism.

As Michael Cuneo has shown for the United States, exorcistic practices widely regarded—even among clergy—as having been relegated to the outer marches of religious life experienced a revival from the late 1960s onward in Catholic, evangelical, and Pentecostal circles.⁷ Given the contentious nature of claims that spirit possession is a real phenomenon (not only in the “secularised” West but also, albeit probably to a lesser degree, in Muslim societies), it is unsurprising that the subject remains an object of both fascination and scorn. Yet whatever one makes of the phenomenon itself, exorcistic practices have proved resilient across time, cultures and religious traditions. Catholic dioceses in several countries report a growing demand for exorcists;⁸ spirit possession remains a feature of shamanic practice in contemporary South Korea;⁹ rituals of spirit removal continue to attract participants in Japan;¹⁰ temples such as Mehandipur Balaji in India receive large numbers of

⁴ Joseph P. Laycock and Eric Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Amy C. Chambers, “‘Somewhere between Science and Superstition’: Religious Outrage, Horrific Science, and *The Exorcist* (1973),” *History of the Human Sciences* 34, no. 5 (2021): 32–52.

⁵ Simone Natale, “Spreading the Spirit Word: Print Media, Storytelling, and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism,” *Communication +1* 4, no. 1 (2015); Peter Lamont, “Spiritualism and a Mid-Victorian Crisis of Evidence,” *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 4 (2004): 897–920; Francesco Baroni, “The Vatican’s Mediums: The Strange Case of Pope Pius IX and the Spiritualistic Experiences of the Archbishop of Rennes,” *Religion* 55, no. 1 (2025): 369–92.

⁶ Arthur Shiwa Zárate, “Cosmopolitan Spirits: Islam and the Experimental Cosmologies of Egypt’s Spiritualist Movement, 1947–1960,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 68, no. 1 (2026): 114–39.

⁷ Marco Innamorati, Ruggero Taradel, and Renato Foschi, “Between Sacred and Profane: Possession, Psychopathology, and the Catholic Church,” *History of Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2019): 1–16; Michael W. Cuneo, “Of Demons and Hollywood: Exorcism in American Culture,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 27, no. 4 (1998): 455–65.

⁸ Giuseppe Giordan and Adam Possamai, “Mastering the Devil: A Sociological Analysis of the Practice of a Catholic Exorcist,” *Current Sociology*, published online February 2, 2017, 1–18; Katie Dangerfield, “Vatican Launching New Exorcism Course as Demand for It Soars,” *Global News*, February 26, 2018.

⁹ Jungsun Kim, Yuanfei Li, and Fenggang Yang, “A Spatial Analysis of Shamans in South Korea’s Religious Market,” *Religions* 16, no. 10 (2025): 1327.

¹⁰ Andrea De Antoni, “Where I End and You Begin: Comparing Spirit Possession in Contemporary Italy and Japan,” *Religiographies* 5, no. 1 (2026): 65–83.

people seeking relief from afflictions attributed to possession or black magic.¹¹ Beyond the framework of religious institutions or codified spiritual traditions, podcasts, documentaries and social media have created large audiences for stories of possession and the occult.¹² The recent initiative *The Exorcist Files* provides a particularly revealing illustration of that trend. Launched in 2023 by the American Catholic exorcist Father Carlos Martins, it combines professional dramatisations of alleged possession cases with theological commentary, a format deliberately designed to reach audiences less likely to engage with conventional religious instruction. The formula proved quite successful: after only eight episodes, the podcast had already accumulated one million downloads.¹³

In Muslim societies and diasporas since the 1990s, many *ruqyah* practitioners, i.e., Islamic *raqis* who perform rituals of Qur'anic healing, have also gained considerable new visibility through satellite television and, more recently, online platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.¹⁴ The contemporary “routinisation” of that ritual is well illustrated by publications such as *Ruqyah: A Remedy for Illnesses, Evil Eye, Magic and Jinn from the Qur'an and Sunnah*,¹⁵ a booklet produced in 2019 by the Ummah Welfare Trust, a British Islamic humanitarian charity. Equally revealing is the International Academy of Ruqyah, a Sheffield-based training organisation founded by the practitioner Suhaib Hamidi, which promotes *ruqyah shar'iyya* through courses, publications, and online instruction.¹⁶ The digitalisation of *ruqyah* has pushed this process one step further with a recent guide published by AMAU Academy, *How to Perform Self-Ruqyah: A Complete Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners*.¹⁷ Rather than merely encouraging believers to recite the prescribed Qur'anic verses, the guide prescribes a standardised forty-five-minute daily routine, a detailed seven-day program combining recitations with olive oil, honey, and black seed, and a carefully sequenced therapeutic regimen. The resemblance to the rhetoric of wellness applications and lifestyle coaching is difficult to miss. A rather different, though equally modern, register is adopted by *How to Perform Self-Ruqyah at Home: Complete Islamic Guide*,¹⁸ published by Ruqyah Treatment, a British online Islamic healing service operated by the practitioner Shaykh Mohammed. Here the language borrows less from the wellness industry and more from contemporary healthcare: readers are taken through preparation procedures, symptom checklists, frequently asked questions, common mistakes to avoid, and, should self-treatment prove insufficient, are invited to arrange a Zoom call with a

¹¹ Tavishi Sanghi, “Exorcism as a Culturally Embedded Healing Practice in India: A Systematic Review and Case Analysis of Mehandipur Balaji Temple,” *African Journal of Biomedical Research* 27, no. 4S (2024): 18310–16.

¹² Adam Possamai and Rhys Gower, “Digital Exorcism and Morality,” *Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 2 (2025): 308–20. See also Rod Dreher, *Living in Wonder: Finding Mystery and Meaning in a Secular Age*, Zondervan, 2024.

¹³ Joseph Pronechen, “Catechesis on the Demonic: ‘The Exorcist Files’ Podcast Tops the Charts,” *National Catholic Register*, 15 February 2023; Ryan Bethea and Fr. Carlos Martins, *The Exorcist Files*, podcast, launched in 2023.

¹⁴ Ida Fitri Nabila, “Reception of the Qur'an in the Digital Age: Social Media Online Ruqyah on Muhammad Faizar's YouTube Videos,” *Tanzil: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an* 7, no. 1 (2024): 1–24; Nabil Echchaibi, “From Audio Tapes to Video Blogs: The Delocalisation of Authority in Islam,” *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 1 (2011): 25–44.

¹⁵ Ummah Welfare Trust, *Ruqyah: A Remedy for Illnesses, Evil Eye, Magic and Jinn from the Qur'an and Sunnah*, 2nd ed. (Bolton, UK: Ummah Welfare Trust, 2019).

¹⁶ [International Academy of Ruqyah](#)

¹⁷ “[How to Perform Self-Ruqyah: A Complete Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners](#),” AMAU Academy, accessed August 1, 2026.

¹⁸ “[How to Perform Self-Ruqyah at Home: Complete Islamic Guide](#),” *Ruqyah Treatment*, August 9, 2025.

qualified *raqi*. The theological content remains more or less traditional, but its presentation clearly adopts the visual language and marketing strategies of wellness and digital medicine.

Whether this resurgence reflects dissatisfaction with psychiatric explanations of suffering, broader processes of religious transformation, the opportunity afforded by social media, or perhaps simply the remarkable receptivity of the human mind to beliefs in invisible supernatural agents,¹⁹ exorcism cannot be dismissed as a bygone superstition or a disappearing phenomenon.

Syria offers a particularly revealing illustration of these wider developments. Following the fall of the Assad regime (December 2024), *ruqyah* has gained more official recognition, with the Ministry of Awqaf introducing procedures intended to regulate the practice and distinguish licensed practitioners from self-appointed healers. At the same time, available evidence suggests that many Syrians continue to seek help for afflictions attributed to jinn, sorcery, and the evil eye, with religious healers serving, one imagines, as one of the first points of contact for individuals experiencing psychological and spiritual distress. Although evidence from Syria remains limited, access to psychiatric care has long been restricted. Before the civil war, mental health services were largely confined to a few psychiatric hospitals, with only around seventy psychiatrists serving a population of more than twenty million.²⁰ Despite efforts to expand services since 2011, specialist care remains scarce.²¹ In light of studies from neighbouring countries, such as Jordan²² or Iraq,²³ it seems likely that many Syrians experiencing mental distress continue to interpret some of their symptoms in supernatural terms and consult religious healers before, or alongside, the country's limited number of mental health professionals.

Drawing on interviews conducted in Idlib in spring 2024 and in Damascus and Deraa in winter 2025 with *raqis* and established religious healers, this essay attempts to sketch a picture of Islamic exorcism in Syria. It examines how the ritual is performed, the ways in which this practice of negotiating with a rich world of spirits unfolds across different classes of practitioners, and what these developments suggest about the place of the supernatural in contemporary Syrian society.

To protect the anonymity of those who shared their experiences, all names of private individuals interviewed for this study have been changed. Certain identifying details have been modified or

¹⁹ Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan, "Religion's Evolutionary Landscape: Counterintuition, Commitment, Compassion, Communion," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 27, no. 6 (2004): 713–30.

²⁰ "Healing Invisible Wounds of the Syrian Conflict," *World Health Organization*, December 11, 2016.

²¹ Pauline Vacher, "The Syrian Therapist Who Heals Souls Broken in Bashar al-Assad's Prisons," *Le Monde*, May 25, 2025.

²² One study from 2000 found that 85% of women consulted traditional healers before and during their psychiatric treatment, and an additional 15% reported that they visited saints' tombs. Thirty percent of men likewise saw traditional healers before and during treatment, and 70% consulted religious leaders and Qur'anic healers (Alean Al-Krenawi, John R. Graham, and Jamil Kandah, "Gendered Utilization Differences of Mental Health Services in Jordan," *Community Mental Health Journal* 36, no. 5 [2000]: 501–11). There is virtually no interaction between mainstream mental health services and traditional practitioners. See World Health Organization and Ministry of Health of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, *WHO-AIMS Report on Mental Health System in Jordan* (Amman: World Health Organization and Ministry of Health, 2011). See also B. Hijawi et al., *WHO proMIND: Profiles on Mental Health in Development: Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2013), 44.

²³ A 2019 study by Maha S. Younis, Riyadh K. Lafta, and Saba Dhiaa found that consulting faith healers was widespread among psychiatric patients in Iraq. The authors concluded that faith healers may be taking over the role of psychiatrists in treating mental illness. See "Faith Healers Are Taking over the Role of Psychiatrists in Iraq," *Qatar Medical Journal* 2019, no. 3 (2019): 13.

omitted where necessary, while the names of public officials and institutional representatives are retained where they are relevant to the analysis.



Quarrelling Demons, attributed to Mehmed Siyah Qalam, Topkapı Palace Album (Hazine 2153, fol. 37b), late fifteenth century. Topkapı Palace Museum Library, Istanbul.

Ruqyah refers to a ritualised Islamic healing practice based on the recitation of Qur’anic verses, prophetic supplications (*du‘ā*), and other prescribed invocations intended to seek divine protection and healing. It is traditionally regarded as legitimate in both Sunni and Shi’a Islam, provided that healing is ultimately attributed to God. The two traditions differ, however, in what they consider permissible.²⁴ Islamic jurisprudence has traditionally distinguished forms of *ruqyah*, based on Qur’anic recitation and accepted supplications, from practices involving magical formulas or appeals to entities other than Allah. From an anthropological perspective, *ruqyah* is not merely a doctrinal category but a ritual practice combining elements of healing, protection and exorcism, and can also serve as a way of making sense of mental suffering within an Islamic cosmology.²⁵ The present study focuses on one particular dimension of this broader therapeutic framework: the influence attributed to jinn, especially cases of oppression and possession. Most Muslim scholars and theologians accept the possibility of spirit possession, not only of human beings but also, according to some traditions, of animals and inanimate objects. Both the Qur’an and the Sunnah contain passages that have traditionally been interpreted as evidence of such occurrences.²⁶

In Islamic tradition, jinn are sentient beings, invisible to humans unless they adopt a material form,²⁷ “created [...] from the fire of scorching wind” (Qur’an, 15:27), distinct from humans shaped from clay, and angels crafted from light. One traditional classification distinguishes three broad categories of jinn: those inhabiting the air, some of whom are said to eavesdrop on the angels in the lowest heaven and pass on what they overhear to fortune tellers;²⁸ those assuming animal form, believed to appear as snakes, camels, or dogs and traditionally regarded as the lowest order of jinn in terms of power and ability;²⁹ and earthbound jinn, who either remain in a fixed location or wander; some traditions place among them the *qarin*, the companion spirit believed to accompany each human.³⁰ Jinn can eat and drink, be male or female, engage in sexual relations both among themselves and with humans, and even reproduce. They are explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an and

²⁴ The literature on Islamic exorcism appears to be overwhelmingly concerned with Sunni Islam. This may partly be a question of terminology, since studies from Shi’a-majority Iran tend—at least in the literature we have been able to identify—to discuss related practices under other headings, including religious healing and spirit possession. These practices do not necessarily correspond exactly to what is described as *ruqyah* in the Sunni literature. See, for instance, Fereshteh Ahmadi et al., “Religion, Culture and Illness: A Sociological Study on Religious Coping in Iran,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 21, no. 7 (2018): 721–36; Fatemeh Saki and Abdoljavad Ahmadi, “Spirit Possession, Mental Suffering, and Treatment by Theurgic Flight: Anthropological Study of a Culture-Bound Syndrome among the Turkmens of Iran,” *Culture & Psychology* 28, no. 4 (2022): 567–92; Kaveh Safa, “Reading Saedi’s *Ahl-e Hava*: Pattern and Significance in Spirit Possession Beliefs on the Southern Coasts of Iran,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 12, no. 1 (1988): 85–111.

²⁵ Francesco Sincich, “Bedouin Traditional Healers in the Syrian Bādiya,” *Bulletin d’études orientales* 55 (2003): 287–98; Johan Rasanayagam, “Healing with Spirits and the Formation of Muslim Selfhood in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12, no. 2 (2006): 377–93.

²⁶ Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, *Exorcism in Islam* (PhD diss., University of Wales, Saint David’s University College, Lampeter, September 1993), 78–92, 97–98; Samuel M. Dein and Abdool Samad Illaiee, “Jinn and Mental Health: Looking at Jinn Possession in Modern Psychiatric Practice,” *The Psychiatrist* 37, no. 9 (2013): 291.

²⁷ Philips, *Exorcism in Islam*, 53–62.

²⁸ Ibid., 58. The “lowest heaven” (*al-sama’ al-dunya*) is the nearest of the seven heavens in Qur’anic cosmology.

²⁹ Ibid., 65.

³⁰ Robert Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits: Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), quoted in Anastasia Lim, Hans W. Hoek, and Jan Dirk Blom, “The Attribution of Psychotic Symptoms to Jinn in Islamic Patients,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52, no. 1 (2015): 20.

constitute a separate ontological category, endowed with free will and accountable to Allah for their actions.

This classification of the Unseen (*al-ghayb*) surfaced consistently during interviews with contemporary practitioners. Sheikh Nabil, a graduate in Islamic sciences from the Faculty of Sharia at Damascus University, described the world of spirits as internally ordered around three principal categories of jinn well attested in the Islamic tradition. These comprised *'Ammar al-Buyut*, spirits believed to dwell in human homes; *Marid*, powerful and rebellious entities; and *'Ifrit*, formidable beings requiring the attention of experienced healers. Interestingly, this taxonomy was not presented by the Sheikh as the product of strict theological classification but rather as practical knowledge acquired through years of treating patients. Like a physician distinguishing illnesses by their symptoms and prognosis, the *raqi* classified the different spirits according to the kinds of adversaries he had encountered. The boundaries between the realm of the “Unseen” and the earthly world remain porous, allowing these spirits to intervene in human affairs.³¹ Unlike angels in Islamic theology, these entities are not inherently obedient, yet neither are they intrinsically evil in the manner of demons in Christian theology. Some jinn are portrayed as Muslims, others as unbelievers, and some are associated with a particular region or population, while malevolent beings (*shayatin*)³² are generally distinguished by their rebellious and evil character rather than treated as representative of jinn as a whole.

Of Jinn and Men

During fieldwork in Idlib in May 2024, Religioscope heard similar descriptions of the jinn world from three practitioners interviewed independently: Abu Ahmad al-Iraqi, whose pseudonym leaves little doubt about his Mesopotamian origins; Abu Khalid al-Misri, an Egyptian-born practitioner; and Abu Hamza al-Maghribi, the Moroccan-born founder of a religious healing centre in Idlib. Just as humans are divided among different religious communities, so too, according to them, are the jinn. This conception has deep roots in the Islamic tradition and medieval authors similarly divided these beings into religious communities and sects.³³ Most jinn were described by the three *raqis* as Muslims, Christians, or Jews, although Abu Ahmad added that the majority of “lover jinn,” namely spirits who possess humans out of erotic infatuation, are Christians, and that jinn could adhere to other belief systems, including Freemasonry and even atheism—how exactly a denizen of the Unseen could be an atheist was left unexplained. All three identified Jewish jinn as, perhaps predictably, the most formidable opponents encountered during *ruqyah*.

They spoke of specific jinn such as *Shamrokh*, most likely the interviewee’s pronunciation of *Shamhurash*, a powerful Christian jinni who appears in the medieval tradition of the Seven Jinn Kings as the King of Thursday,³⁴ a prominent figure in Arabic and Jewish magical traditions; *Maymun*,

³¹ Nils Bubandt, Mikkel Rytter, and Christian Suhr, “A Second Look at Invisibility: *Al-Ghayb*, Islam, Ethnography,” *Contemporary Islam* 13, no. 1 (2019): 1–16.

³² Philips, *Exorcism in Islam*, 65–66.

³³ Yousef Aly Wahb, “Between Law and the Unseen: Human-Jinn Marriage and the Limits of Legal Personhood in Islamic Jurisprudence,” *Islamic Law and Society* (2026): 8.

³⁴ Anna Caiozzo, “Anges gardiens et démons familiers dans les manuscrits enluminés de l’Orient médiéval,” in *De Socrate à Tintin: Anges gardiens et démons familiers de l’Antiquité à nos jours*, ed. Jean-Patrice Boudet, Philippe Faure, and Christian Renoux (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011), 105–118.

identified in the *Book of Wonders* (*Kitab al-Bulhan*, late fourteenth century) as “Maymun of the Clouds,” one of the flying jinn and king of Saturday;³⁵ *Hamrush*, whom, unlike the two preceding figures, we have not been able to identify in our (necessarily limited) overview of the medieval magical literature—perhaps a more recent addition, transmitted orally or circulating in contemporary occult milieux; and *Hakham*, described by one of the interlocutors simply as “the Rabbi,” an intriguing inclusion because he does not appear among the canonical Seven Jinn Kings of medieval Arabic magical literature. The name itself derives from the Hebrew *hakham*, the traditional title of a learned Jewish scholar and, especially among Sephardic communities, a rabbi.³⁶ This Sephardic resonance seems unlikely to be entirely accidental, particularly since two of our interlocutors came from North Africa, where beliefs in sorcery and esoteric knowledge have long enjoyed particular prominence. The three *raqis* described these figures as exceptionally powerful beings who serve only the most accomplished sorcerers (*sahirs*).



Shamhurash, the Christian king of the Thursday jinn. Kitab al-Bulhan (Book of Wonders), fol. 32v, late fourteenth century. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Bodl. Or. 133.

Such allegiance is not obtained lightly, they warned. Powerful sorcerers must first demonstrate their commitment to *shayatin* through acts of deliberate sacrilege, thereby renouncing Islam and entering a pact with the malevolent jinni. The forms of desecration the *raqis* described included intentionally

³⁵ Stefano Carboni, “The ‘Book of Surprises’ (*Kitab al-bulhan*) of the Bodleian Library,” *The La Trobe Journal*, no. 91 (2013): 28.

³⁶ “*Hakam*,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*.

defiling the Qur'an or writing its verses with ritually impure substances. Several interlocutors further insisted that individuals executed for sorcery by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib province had committed precisely these acts, presenting them as a defining characteristic of the most dangerous practitioners of *sihr*. We found only very limited independent evidence for this claim, however. Public reporting appears to confirm at least one such execution: according to the (moderately reliable) Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, HTS executed a young man from Jarjanaz in the Idlib countryside on 18 August 2023, after accusing him of "practising witchcraft."³⁷ The report does not specify the practices that allegedly led to the accusation, nor does it identify the court that sentenced the accused or the authority responsible for ordering the execution.

The three practitioners' descriptions closely resemble those documented elsewhere in the contemporary *ruqyah* literature. Drawing on interviews with *raqis* in Sweden, Michael Marlow reports that aspiring sorcerers are believed to acquire the assistance of malevolent jinn only after proving their loyalty through acts of apostasy and desecration. As one of his informants explained:

[The sorcerer] must make a (Doctor Faustus-like) pact with one of the tribal lords of the *shayatin* [...] Before he can acquire the powers of *sihr*, he first has to become a *kafir* [...] the *shayatin* try to verify the *sahir's* commitment thoroughly in order to be assured that he is not just testing their capabilities. For example, they might ask him to tear out pages from the Qur'an and place them in, or under, the soles of his shoes to desecrate them. Often, they will demand that he live in isolation for several days, sometimes up to forty, in the wilderness, a graveyard, or an unclean place like a dump, without performing *wudu* (cleansing with water after exposing oneself to ritual impurity, e.g., going to the bathroom).³⁸

Although our approach places particular emphasis on *ruqyah* as a deliverance ritual aimed at countering sorcery and the negative influence of jinn, it bears stressing that the practice, in Syria as in other Islamic societies, is not reducible to what we commonly associate with exorcism in the West. While it may involve the expulsion of malevolent beings, it is also employed in cases of physical illness, psychological distress, and social misfortune.³⁹ Unlike the Roman Catholic understanding of the ritual of exorcism, which places strong emphasis on distinguishing mental disorders from demonic oppression or (very rare) cases of possession,⁴⁰ *ruqyah* is generally understood by practitioners as a broader form of medicine, namely a religious healing practice capable of addressing a wide range of ailments, including those understood as supernatural or magical in origin.⁴¹

³⁷ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Report on the Execution of 'Sorcerers' by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham", section 26.

³⁸ Michael Marlow, "Sihr (Sorcery) in Sweden: The Potential Dark Side of Rites of Passage," *Scandinavian Journal of Islamic Studies* 16, no. 2 (2022): 159.

³⁹ Fatima-Zohra Cherak, "La roqya, une forme d'automédication chez les possédés et les ensorcelés (Algérie, Égypte, France) ?," *Anthropologie & Santé*, no. 18 (2019).

⁴⁰ For an insightful discussion of the differential diagnosis employed by a Catholic psychiatrist when assessing alleged cases of demonic possession, see Richard Gallagher, *Demonic Foes: My Twenty-Five Years as a Psychiatrist Investigating Possessions, Diabolic Attacks, and the Paranormal* (New York: HarperOne, 2020).

⁴¹ Syamsul Hadi Untung and Abdul Muiz, "The Concept of Ruqyah in Islam and Exorcism in Catholicism," *Journal of Comparative Study of Religions*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2020).

Descriptions of *ruqyah* often convey the general structure of the ritual but rarely capture how it unfolds in practice. The following case, documented during fieldwork in northwestern Syria in May 2024, illustrates the sequence of a treatment session and the therapeutic logic articulated by its practitioner.

The session took place at a private clinic in northwestern Syria and was conducted by Abu Ahmad al-Iraqi. The patient, a woman seeking treatment for an affliction attributed to witchcraft, was attending her tenth treatment session. Throughout much of the ritual, her cries echoed across the clinic. For Abu Ahmad, such reactions were not accidental but constituted an important diagnostic sign. An unaffected person, he explained, should be able to listen to Qur'anic recitation indefinitely without displaying distress or hostility. The session lasted approximately two hours and followed a carefully structured sequence. It began with praise of God and blessings upon the Prophet, followed by the recitation of Qur'anic verses traditionally associated with protection against witchcraft, the evil eye, and jinn possession. Rather than progressing rapidly through the text, Abu Ahmad lingered over particular passages, repeating some verses seven times or more. Repetition, he explained, was central to the therapeutic process. Each repetition was believed to weaken the jinn's grip while revealing the severity of the affliction. The patient's physical reactions—screaming, trembling, and, eventually, calming down—were interpreted by the *raqi* as evidence of possession.



Sticks used by the healer during exorcism rituals. They may be used to strike the patient after the jinn is believed to have manifested or spoken through the person, particularly when the spirit refuses to respond to the healer's commands. Northwestern Syria, April 2024.

As the session progressed, the recitation gave way to direct confrontation. Convinced that a possessing spirit was present, Abu Ahmad addressed it directly, calling upon the jinn to repent and embrace Islam, questioning its motives for entering the woman's body, and reminding it of the torments awaiting those who disobeyed God: "*O jinn, is it not time to repent to Allah? ... If you cannot endure suffering in this world, how will you bear the punishment of the Hereafter?*" If the entity refused to respond or resisted, the recitation intensified until it weakened sufficiently to submit or reveal itself.⁴² The confrontation was accompanied by lengthy supplications asking God to dismantle the

⁴² The direct interrogation of the possessing spirit is by no means unique to Islamic exorcism. The Roman Catholic Rite of Exorcism likewise instructs the exorcist to question the demon, asking, among other things, its name, the number of spirits present, when they entered the victim, and the cause of the possession. See Marcus William Hunt, "Exorcism and Justified Belief in Demons," *Forum Philosophicum* 25, no. 2 (2020): 257–60.

spirit's power. Abu Ahmad implored Allah to “destroy the knots and bindings of the jinn,” to “tear down its fortresses,” and to leave “no trace of its influence” within the patient's body. Rather than targeting a single form of witchcraft, he sought to neutralise every possible means by which it might have been inflicted: spells attached to food or drink, clothing, strands of hair, written documents, photographs, voice recordings, buried objects, dolls, or substances considered ritually impure.

A Damascene Sheikh

Sheikh Mohammad al-Ayoubi is a 60-year-old Sunni cleric and *raqi*. He comes from a well-established Kurdish Damascene religious family in which scholarly authority has been transmitted across generations: his late father and several of his cousins were likewise sheikhs and religious scholars. The al-Ayoubi family is affiliated with the Naqshbandi Sufi *tariqa*, one of the major Sunni Sufi orders originating in Central Asia, which has long played an important role in Damascus's Sunni religious landscape.⁴³

Sheikh Mohammad traces his initiation into spiritual healing to a family tradition deeply rooted in the city. His late grandfather was a sheikh and imam and maintained close relations with the former Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro (1915–2004), one of the country's most influential Naqshbandi leaders. Within this environment, Sheikh Mohammad's father and uncles pursued formal studies in Islamic jurisprudence and were themselves affiliated with the Naqshbandi *tariqa*. Born in Damascus in 1964, Sheikh Mohammad spent much of his childhood in mosques and religious gatherings. His grandfather and uncles were active in the city's religious life and enjoyed a solid reputation among conservative Sunni families. From an early age, he was immersed in an environment that combined religious scholarship, communal authority, and ritual practice. When he was about ten years old, his father began performing *ruqyah* for relatives and neighbouring families. His father successfully treated a large number of patients and gradually acquired a reputation that extended to towns and villages around Damascus. At the age of fifteen, he began accompanying him during these rituals. Some cases required prolonged intervention, he recalls, with sessions lasting several days and nights and rituals repeated three or four times in particularly severe cases.

Alongside this practical training, he pursued formal religious education, studying for five years at the Abu al-Nour Religious Institute, the prominent Islamic educational and religious centre founded by Sheikh Kuftaro, graduating with strong academic results. By the age of twenty-five, he was already delivering religious lessons and Friday sermons in villages around Damascus, supported by his father's reputation as a practitioner of *ruqyah*, which facilitated access to these communities. Sheikh Mohammad began conducting healing rituals independently at the age of thirty, after what he describes as having acquired the necessary religious education, practical knowledge, and moral preparation.

Learning the Craft

His first encounters with cases of genuine jinn influence and possession took place under the close supervision of his father, who guided him step by step in conducting rituals in accordance with *ruqyah shar'iyya*, the more strictly orthodox form of Islamic religious healing. During this

⁴³ Leif Stenberg, “Naqshbandiyya in Damascus: Strategies to Establish and Strengthen the Order in a Changing Society,” in *Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia: Change and Continuity*, ed. Elisabeth Özdalga (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1999), 101–16.

apprenticeship, he learned to recognise the signs of possession (speaking unintelligibly, shouting blasphemous statements, trembling, entering trance-like states, etc.), how to begin Qur'anic recitation, and how to structure the ritual itself. Mirroring quite closely the *raqis* studied by Fatima-Zohra Cherak in Algeria, Egypt, and France, Sheikh Mohammad's training was grounded less in formal instruction than in observation, repeated practice, and accumulated experience.⁴⁴

His first experience as an independent practitioner dates back roughly thirty years. The case involved Khalid, a twenty-two-year-old man from the Rukin al-Din district of Damascus. Sheikh Mohammad recalls it vividly, noting that he has continued to encounter Khalid over the years at the local mosque. According to his account, Khalid was completely controlled by what he described as a “*kafir jinni*,” a non-Muslim *shaytan*, a category of jinn generally regarded as lacking the moral restraints imposed by religion, more stubborn, and therefore more dangerous to the host. Khalid reportedly cried and shouted that the jinni was commanding him to commit acts he regarded as profoundly sinful and transgressive, including desecrating the Qur'an, urinating in mosques, and engaging in sexual acts with minors. Sheikh Mohammad worked with Khalid for two months, meeting him three times a week. During the first three sessions, Khalid resisted listening to Qur'anic recitations or religious instruction. After about a week, however, he gradually began to respond to the rituals and to describe the demands allegedly made by the jinni. Over time, his condition improved. Sheikh Mohammad reports that Khalid eventually recovered, resumed regular religious practice, and to this day continues to perform the five daily prayers at the mosque.

Cases such as Khalid's also shaped the interpretative framework through which Sheikh Mohammad understands jinn-related afflictions. He distinguishes between different forms of spirit influence that differ both in their manifestations and in the way they are treated. The Sheikh identifies two main categories: possession, in which a jinni takes control of a person's behaviour, and oppression or harassment, in which the spirit disturbs a household or repeatedly afflicts individuals without fully controlling them. When jinn enter a home, he explains, they may affect everyone living there. However, individuals with strong faith who regularly perform Islamic prayers and rituals are far less vulnerable to complete domination. Conversely, those who neglect religious practice are, in his view, more susceptible to spirit influence.

For Sheikh Mohammad, these cases cannot be understood in isolation. He situates their growing prevalence within the country's broader experience of war, displacement, and trauma. Cases involving psychological distress, psychiatric disorders, and spiritual afflictions all increased markedly. He attributes this rise to the cumulative effects of trauma, repeated exposure to violence, displacement, and the constant proximity of death. The growing number of people seeking his help also exposed him to forms of suffering that could not, in his view, all be explained in the same way. Sheikh Mohammad notes that victims generally try to conceal such experiences because of shame and fear of social stigma. When concealment is no longer possible, however, he argues that attributing the condition to a jinni can provide a culturally legitimate explanation, allowing sufferers to avoid the stigma associated with mental illness or the trauma and social consequences of rape or sexual assault.

Rather than attributing every form of distress to spirit influence, Sheikh Mohammad insists on distinguishing between spiritual affliction and psychiatric illness, although he emphasises that he

⁴⁴ Cherak, “La roqya, une forme d'automédication chez les possédés et les ensorcelés (Algérie, Égypte, France) ?.”

has encountered individuals suffering simultaneously from spiritual afflictions and psychiatric disorders. In cases involving psychiatric illness, he reports that *ruqyah* sometimes produces temporary calm but never lasting recovery. Deliverance rituals, in his view, are effective only when the underlying cause is clearly spiritual; psychiatric illnesses require different forms of treatment. By contrast, he maintains that individuals suffering from spiritual afflictions consistently recovered following the application of *ruqyah shar'iyya*, eventually returning to what he describes as normal and healthy lives.



Demon carrying a man. Attributed to Muhammad Siyah Qalam. Topkapı Palace Album (Hazine 2153), fol. 129b, late fifteenth century. Topkapı Palace Museum Library, Istanbul.

The Most Intimate of Strangers

Among the particularly vivid cases Sheikh Mohammad recalls are those of a pregnant woman who believed her unborn child had been conceived by a jinn rather than her husband, and an elderly widow convinced that spirits were engaging in sexual relations with her, reporting physical sensations upon waking. Such accounts were not isolated. Throughout our interviews, the possibility of sexual relations between humans and jinn repeatedly surfaced in discussions of possession, infertility, nightmares, and unexplained bodily experiences.

The possibility that jinn may have sexual relations with humans—or even marry and have children with them—has been debated by Muslim scholars since at least the eighth century. The literature

preserves some colourful accounts of such unions. For instance, Yousef Aly Wahb recounts fourteenth-century judge Jalal al-Din al-Razi's misadventure with a one-eyed *jinniyya* who coerced him into marrying her daughter:

[...] while sheltering in a cave during travel, a one-eyed female jinni woke him and asked him to marry her daughter. Overcome with fear, he consented. A jinn judge and jinn witnesses appeared and solemnised the contract. His travelling companions, sleeping nearby, could not be roused despite his attempts to wake them. The daughter, beautiful but bearing her mother's uncanny features, remained at his side for three days and could not be driven away. Only after persistent supplication did the mother return and offer him the option of divorce. When later asked whether he had consummated the marriage, he claimed he had not.⁴⁵

Whether al-Razi's marriage remained quite as chaste as he maintained need not detain us here. Muslim jurists were, in any event, primarily concerned with the legal implications. As Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips explains, the discussion centred on two questions: whether such relations are physically possible and whether a marriage between a human and a jinn can be considered legally valid under Islamic law. "[Maidens of Paradise], whom no man or jinni before them has deflowered" (Qur'an 55:74), has generally served as the principal scriptural basis for accepting that sexual intercourse between humans and jinn is possible. While a minority accepted both the physical possibility and the legality of such marriages, most rejected one or both propositions, arguing either that humans and jinn belong to different orders of creation or that marriage cannot fulfil its intended purposes between beings of fundamentally different natures, the jinn being created from fire rather than clay.⁴⁶ For those jurists willing to entertain the validity of such marriages, the prospect raised a wide range of legal quandaries indeed:

How is a marriage proposal conveyed to a jinn guardian? How does polygamy affect the division of nights (*qasm*) when one or more wives are jinn? Does consent to marry a *jinniyya* imply consent to her shifting forms? Is intercourse permissible in any form the jinn assumes? Can the husband lawfully restrict her movement? Does skin-to-skin contact with her break ritual purity (*wuḍūʾ*)? Must sexual relations be followed by a ritual bath (*ghusl*)? How are maintenance obligations calculated? Must the husband provide sustenance appropriate to jinn dietary customs or may he forbid her from consuming bones or other jinn foods? Does nursing by a *jinniyya* establish kinship prohibitions? How does divorce function? Can a jinn judge adjudicate marital disputes?⁴⁷

Nor were such puzzles entirely confined to medieval jurisprudence. In December 1984, the Egyptian press reported the rather extraordinary case of a woman who petitioned a Giza court for divorce on the grounds that her husband had taken a *jinniyya* as a second wife, with whom he had allegedly fathered two children. Two of her friends testified to supernatural disturbances in the couple's home. Although they had never seen the children, they claimed to have felt their presence moving through the house. The husband denied the accusation, but the court, while acknowledging the scientific impossibility of marriage with a jinn, invoked the Qur'anic recognition of their existence and

⁴⁵ Wahb, "Between Law and the Unseen," 9.

⁴⁶ Philips, *Exorcism in Islam*, 69–73. See also "May a Human Marry a Jinni?," *Islam Awareness*.

⁴⁷ Wahb, "Between Law and the Unseen," 31.

concluded that he had indeed married another person “in another world.” The wife was granted a divorce.⁴⁸

During our fieldwork in Syria, these beliefs repeatedly surfaced in conversations about sexuality, infertility, recurring dreams, and forms of distress that participants themselves interpreted through the language of spirits’ influence, although the juridical and theological subtleties surrounding relations between jinn and humans were rarely articulated and never explored in such detail.

Sheikh Abu Bilal, a traditional healer in his early sixties, lives in a village southwest of Damascus. His authority as a *raqi* derives not from formal religious education but from healing practices inherited from his father and rooted in a local Sufi tradition. Through Sheikh Abu Bilal, we were introduced to Maryam, a divorced woman from a village in southwestern Syria. Born into a poor farming family with little formal education, she married a local farmer in 2014. The marriage remained childless and, after several years, her husband announced his intention to take a second wife in the hope of having children. Rather than accept a polygamous marriage, Maryam requested a divorce, which was finalised at the end of 2021. Nearly two years later, the first symptoms appeared. She began experiencing intrusive bodily sensations, hearing unexplained noises inside her head, and suffering recurring sexual nightmares. She repeatedly awoke convinced that someone had had sexual intercourse with her. She described orgasmic sensations and claimed to find a mysterious fluid on her clothing in the morning. Embarrassed by these experiences and unable to explain them, she kept them to herself for some time before eventually confiding in her mother and aunts. One of them interpreted the symptoms as evidence of jinn activity and accompanied her to Sheikh Abu Bilal, whom she first consulted in 2023. Maryam believed she had become the victim of witchcraft orchestrated by her former husband’s new wife, who feared that he might eventually return to Maryam because of her beauty. Her mother offered a different account. She explained that Maryam had been repeatedly raped by a security officer in exchange for the release of her brother from prison. In her view, this traumatic experience profoundly affected her daughter and may have contributed to subsequent psychological problems.

Abu Bilal rejected both interpretations. Following her divorce, he argued, Maryam’s unfulfilled sexual desire had created an opening through which a *kafir* jinn entered her body and had sexual intercourse with her two or three times each week. Throughout the interview, he repeatedly returned to what he described as Maryam’s excessive sexual desire as the principal cause of her possession. Despite treating her regularly since 2023, he acknowledged that her condition had not improved and considered both her mental and physical condition to be deteriorating. For Abu Bilal, the evidence of possession rested on recurring patterns in the patient’s account. He pointed to Maryam’s repeated description of an “African man” appearing in her dreams and to the persistence of the same sexual scenario over several years. He also claimed that both Maryam and her mother had observed fluid following episodes that Maryam interpreted as nocturnal sexual assault, and that the substance resembled male semen rather than female secretions. Abu Bilal further maintained that the possessing spirit was not an Arab jinni because the entity spoke an “unclear” language during the ritual. He speculated instead that it was probably an African jinni, perhaps originating from Sudan or

⁴⁸ Ian Edge, “Egyptian Family Law: The Tale of the Jinn,” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1989): 684–85. For a more recent case, in which a Dubai court granted a husband a divorce after his newlywed wife refused sexual relations on the grounds that she was possessed by jinn, see “Court Allows Man to Divorce ‘Haunted’ Wife,” *Emirates* 24/7, October 15, 2014.

Somalia, that had migrated to Syria on the shoulders of a foreign fighter—spirits and jihadis making their *hijra*⁴⁹ together, as it were.



A collection of herbs, oils, powders, and incense at an Islamic healing centre in northwestern Syria, April 2024. Such materials are used alongside spiritual healing and exorcism.

Abu Bilal's therapeutic practice reflects the inherited tradition from which he derives his authority. Treatment begins with Qur'anic recitation and prophetic supplications but does not end there. He also burns a variety of incense—including oud, sandalwood, frankincense, and musk—which he sources through Gulf markets, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, although the products themselves originate from countries such as India, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Sudan. According to him, these fragrances help calm patients and put them at ease during treatment. Alongside these sensory elements, he recites what he describes as "secret statements and words" transmitted by his father and preserved in inherited manuscripts. In his ethnographic study of a *raqi* in Stockholm, Marlow similarly describes the use of olive oil, honey, vinegar, and water over which Qur'anic verses have been recited as part of the therapeutic regimen prescribed to patients. These substances accompany rather than replace the ritual recitation of the Qur'an, and, according to Marlow's observations, are typically used before or after treatment within a broader program of healing.⁵⁰

The duration of treatment varies considerably. Some patients require weekly sessions for several months, while particularly severe cases may continue for years. Maryam herself, he noted, had been receiving treatment for more than two years. According to Maryam's mother, each session typically brings temporary relief lasting two or three days before the nightmares and sensations of nocturnal assault gradually return. She also described Abu Bilal as charging little, and sometimes nothing at

⁴⁹ The term originally denotes the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in AD 622. Jihadist movements have appropriated the term to refer to migration to territories under an Islamic polity.

⁵⁰ Michael Marlow, "The Practices of a Raqi (Islamic Exorcist) in Stockholm," *Contemporary Islam* 16, nos. 2–3 (2022): 277–94.

all, for his services. During treatment, however, he generally insists on seeing Maryam alone, with no third person present, and sessions commonly last between one and two hours.

Several practitioners argued that women account for the majority of possession cases. Sheikh Abu Bilal estimated that they represent around 90 percent of his patients, while men, in his experience, recover more quickly. He attributed this imbalance primarily to the social conditions prevailing in rural Syria. Women, he argued, live under greater psychological pressure, enjoy less personal autonomy, and are subject to stricter social expectations, circumstances that make them easier prey for the assaults of jinn, sometimes culminating in possession. Urban, more educated families, he added, appeared to experience such cases less frequently. Abu Hassan, a traditional *raqi* from Deraa who inherited his practice through family lineage rather than formal religious education, offered a somewhat different explanation. He argued that menstruation, emotional vulnerability, and what he described as women's physical weakness make them especially susceptible to jinn influence and unsuited to perform the ritual themselves. Anas Rahman, a practitioner holding a PhD in Sharia and Islamic Creed from Imam Mohammad bin Saud Islamic University in Saudi Arabia, adopted a more nuanced position. While acknowledging that women are often the primary victims of jinn influence, he argued that properly educated women could legitimately perform *ruqyah* on other women, particularly in conservative communities where families preferred female practitioners⁵¹.

⁵¹ Female practitioners are attested. For instance, Marlow's informant, himself a *raqi* practising in Stockholm, considered female *raqis* particularly necessary and reported having encountered several during his own training abroad. See Marlow, "The Practices of a Raqi," 289–91.

Interviews conducted for this study revealed significant disagreements over what constitutes legitimate *ruqyah*. While all practitioners insist that healing ultimately comes from Allah through the recitation of the Qur'an and Prophetic supplications, they differ considerably over diagnosis, ritual practice, and the limits of what should be regarded as acceptable Islamic healing.

One of the clearest examples is Sheikh Ibrahim Salim, a 30-year-old Damascene from a conservative Sunni family. He holds a master's degree in Islamic sciences from the Faculty of Sharia at Damascus University and, after spending several years in Turkey, recently returned to Syria to pursue doctoral studies. Throughout the interview, Salim repeatedly described his approach as *shar'i* ("in accordance with Islamic law"), distinguishing it from practices based on inherited customs, secret formulas, or techniques that cannot be traced back to the Qur'an and the Sunna. For Salim, the central challenge is not performing the ritual itself but determining whether the patient is actually suffering from spirit possession. Families, he explains, often reject psychiatric explanations because of the stigma attached to mental illness. Interpreting psychological distress as jinn possession is, in his experience, frequently more acceptable than acknowledging a psychiatric disorder, leading some patients to refuse psychological treatment altogether. This tension between psychiatric and supernatural diagnoses has also been documented by Ana Maria Vinea among Qur'anic healers and their patients in Egypt.⁵² This, Salim warns, may allow otherwise manageable conditions to develop into severe mental illness.

His diagnostic method is deliberately straightforward. During the first consultation, he writes down the patient's account before asking the same questions again over the following sessions. According to Salim, patients genuinely affected by jinn tend to recount consistent experiences, repeating the same dreams, sensations, and narratives over time. By contrast, patients suffering primarily from mental illness often provide changing or contradictory accounts from one session to the next. He nevertheless acknowledges that the distinction is not always clear-cut. Whenever he remains uncertain, he consults psychologists before reaching a conclusion. Some patients, however, refuse such referrals and instead seek another sheikh willing to confirm that they are possessed. The practitioner's own preparation is equally important. Effective *ruqyah*, Salim argues, requires both strong faith and sound religious training. A practitioner whose faith is weak risks having the jinni pass from the patient to the healer himself. He mentions several cases in which fellow practitioners themselves required treatment after becoming afflicted during sessions.

Salim anchors this understanding of *ruqyah* firmly in the Prophetic tradition, encouraging believers to perform the ritual upon themselves. He identifies core recitations, including the Surat al-Fatiha, the seven-verse opening chapter of the Qur'an, which he describes as the foremost weapon when performing the ritual. Its healing value is attested to by a famous hadith in which a Companion of the Prophet cures a tribal chief by reciting the surah.⁵³ Other core recitations include the *Mu'awwidhatayn*, known as the "Two Protective Surahs," consisting of the final two chapters of the Qur'an, Surat al-Falaq and Surat al-Nas, and passages from Surat al-Baqara, the second and longest chapter of the Qur'an, including the famous Ayat al-Kursi (the Throne Verse), often recited during *ruqyah*,⁵⁴ alongside a set of widely circulated prophetic supplications. In his framing, these form a

⁵² "Interview: Ana Maria Vinea and *Between the Psyche and the Soul*," *Wenner-Gren Foundation*, February 25, 2013.

⁵³ Philips, *Exorcism in Islam*, 126.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 128, 346. See also Michael Marlow, "The Practices of a Raqi (Islamic Exorcist) in Stockholm," 281.

verified and sufficient repertoire, while additional texts may exist but are less securely attested. Sheikh Salim's understanding of *ruqyah* was shared by Anas Rahman, a practitioner trained at a Saudi religious university. He likewise rejected the notion that healing depends on inherited gifts, secret knowledge, or privileged relationships with the unseen. Instead, he described *ruqyah* as a prophetic practice accessible to every sincere Muslim through the correct recitation of Qur'anic verses and authenticated supplications, with religious authority deriving from sound scholarship and conformity to the Qur'an and the Sunnah rather than family lineage.



Demons Binding and Being Bound, attributed to Mehmed Siyah Qalam, Topkapı Palace Album (Hazine 2153, fol. 31b), late fifteenth century. Topkapı Palace Museum Library, Istanbul.

Not all practitioners, however, accepted this scriptural understanding. Several interlocutors supplemented Qur'anic recitation with traditional formulas, incense, or ritual techniques transmitted through family lineages. Abu Hassan, a senior healer from a village near Deraa, exemplifies this less constrained tradition. The ability to heal, he contended, is neither acquired in universities nor learned from books. It is inherited within families distinguished by their spiritual purity and transmitted through long apprenticeships under experienced healers. His grandfather passed the practice to his father, who, in turn, initiated Abu Hassan and his brothers through years of observation and participation in rituals. Summarising this understanding of religious knowledge, he quoted a common saying: "Knowledge is in the hearts (*al-sudur*), not in the lines (*al-sutur*)."¹ Central to Abu Hassan's understanding was a collection of "secret books," passed down from his grandfather and now kept by his elder brother. These manuscripts, he claimed, had originally belonged to a Moroccan sheikh travelling between Palestine and Damascus. Moroccan healers, in his view, possess particularly powerful knowledge for combating jinn and witchcraft. Not everyone, however, can become a healer. Apprentices frequently abandon the path after experiencing attacks by jinn or fearing that spirits may transfer from patient to practitioner. His own father, for example, refused to allow him to practise before marriage, arguing that married men are spiritually more resilient and therefore less vulnerable to jinn.

The elevated status Abu Hassan attributed to Moroccan healers echoed a broader impression that emerged repeatedly during our fieldwork. At least in northwestern Syria, practitioners from

elsewhere in the Arab world—particularly North Africa—seemed to command greater prestige than their local Syrian counterparts. Notably, the three practitioners interviewed by Religioscope in Idlib were themselves from Egypt, Morocco, and Iraq, and their standing was repeatedly emphasised by our interlocutors. Whether this reflects genuine differences in religious authority, the legacy of transnational jihadist networks, or simply long-standing local perceptions remains difficult to determine.

These competing approaches illustrate a tension over who has the authority to negotiate between humans and invading spirits, one that probably also overlaps with social-class differences, doctrinal disagreements, and status-seeking strategies. As the Syrian state seems to move to regulate religious healing through officially recognised practitioners, approaches grounded in inherited charisma and esoteric knowledge might increasingly find themselves challenged by growing efforts to bring *ruqyah* under institutional control. The very emergence of such efforts at regulation suggests, at the very least, that jinn affliction and the practices surrounding it are perceived as sufficiently common to warrant institutional attention. Its actual prevalence, however, is another question. Several interlocutors familiar with the field independently offered broadly similar estimates. In Damascus and its surrounding countryside, they put the number of new cases of jinn possession at between 100 and 120 each month, presumably referring only to the areas in which they practised. They further estimated that roughly half of those seeking treatment were successfully liberated from jinn affliction, while the remainder continued to experience recurrent or persistent symptoms. Cases of spiritual affliction were also reported to have increased markedly during the years of war. All of this, in fine, remains rather speculative. No official statistics exist, nor is there anything resembling a Syrian *Raqis* Syndicate from which reliable figures might be obtained.

For something of a point of comparison, consider Italy. Belief in demonic possession is far from marginal, while exorcism is subject to considerable bureaucratic oversight within the highly institutionalised structures of the Catholic Church. Yet reliable figures remain elusive. A frequently cited estimate places the number of people seeking assistance from an exorcist at around 500,000 annually, although only a fraction of such consultations result in an exorcism.⁵⁵ Surprisingly, even the number of practitioners is difficult to establish with precision despite the existence of diocesan appointments, dedicated offices, and increasingly organised training.⁵⁶ Giuseppe Giordan and Adam Possamai estimated that Italy probably had more than 300 exorcists.⁵⁷ In one of the most substantial sociological studies of an Italian exorcist's practice, the same authors examined 1,075 consultations recorded over a ten-year period, of which only 5 percent resulted in a formal ritual of exorcism, with most cases being dealt with through other forms of spiritual assistance.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Giuseppe Giordan and Adam Possamai, "The Over-Policing of the Devil: A Sociology of Exorcism," *Social Compass* 63, no. 4 (2016): 444–60.

⁵⁶ [The International Association of Exorcists](#), based in Rome, was founded in 1994 and officially recognised by the Catholic Church in 2014; see also Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, "[Press Release: Back on Campus and with Significant News the 'Course on the Exorcism Minister and the Liberation Prayer,' XVI Edition, 16–21 May 2022](#)," April 27, 2022; Nicole Maria Bauer, "The Devil and the Doctor: The (De)Medicalization of Exorcism in the Roman Catholic Church," *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 87.

⁵⁷ Giordan and Possamai, "Over-Policing of the Devil," 452.

⁵⁸ Giordan and Possamai, "Mastering the Devil", 14.

Conclusion

In April 2025, the Directorate of Awqaf of Damascus Rural, operating under the Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Trusts), established an office, the “Section of Shari’a Ruqyah” (*Shu’bat al-Ruqyah al-Shar’iyyah*), devoted specifically to the regulation of Islamic healing. The novelty lies not in the official recognition of *ruqyah*, but in its bureaucratic organisation. What had previously depended largely on individual practitioners, whether graduates of religious universities or heirs to family traditions of healing, has gradually acquired the familiar trappings of modern administration. This development took place amid the broader reorganisation of Syria’s religious institutions following the fall of the Assad regime. The Ministry of Awqaf came under the authority of Mohammad Abu al-Kheir Shukri, a Damascene scholar close to members of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the former al-Qaeda affiliate that led the coalition that overthrew the Assad regime in December 2024 before dissolving itself in January 2025. Several interlocutors described Shukri as religiously moderate, indeed “not Salafi-Wahhabi,” as one of them insisted. Admittedly, this process is not entirely unprecedented. According to interviews conducted in Idlib, a Department of Shari’a Ruqyah had already been established under the Salvation Government within the Ministry of Endowments in the spring of 2019. Founded by two Moroccan clerics, it brought together officially affiliated practitioners, coordinated their activities through regular meetings devoted to discussing difficult cases, and operated under designated administrative leadership. What is new is therefore not the bureaucratisation of *ruqyah* itself, but its incorporation into the administrative machinery of the Syrian state after the fall of the Assad regime, complete with offices, directors, and public funding.

According to one of the clerics involved, the office in Damascus seeks to bring religious healing under orthodox supervision by confining it to the Qur’an and the Sunna and stripping away occultism, innovations, and inherited folklore that, he argued, have long characterised much of popular practice in the country. Rather than discouraging *ruqyah*, the new authorities seek to define the boundaries of what they regard as legitimate Islamic healing. The new Section is itself embedded within a larger administrative hierarchy. Conferences, training programs, and coordination with *ruqyah* practitioners and religious scholars fall under the supervision of Sheikh Khaldoun Nour Adeen al-Olaby, while salaries and operational expenses are fully covered by the Ministry of Awqaf. A state-funded bureaucracy devoted to regulating religious healing and battling the jinn.

As Patrick Haenni and Jérôme Drevon have argued, HTS’s evolution has been characterised less by doctrinal revision than by a gradual shift from revolutionary jihadism toward the pragmatic management of religious and public institutions.⁵⁹ Religion has not disappeared from the political sphere but has become an object of governance and administrative regulation rather than serving as the ideological backbone of politics, as HTS’s jihadist origins might have suggested. The creation of a Section of *Shari’a Ruqyah* fits squarely within this trajectory. The state seeks to define what constitutes legitimate Islamic healing and bring practitioners under administrative control. Rather than being confined to the margins of religious life, belief in jinn, witchcraft, and spirit possession is becoming the object of bureaucratic oversight.

⁵⁹ Patrick Haenni and Jérôme Drevon, *Transformed by the People: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s Road to Power in Syria*, Hurst, 2025; Religioscope, “Avec HTS avant la prise de Damas : la déradicalisation discrète d’un mouvement jihadiste. Entretien avec Patrick Haenni,” *Religioscope*, January 5, 2026.



Work permit issued by the Department of Ruqyah of the Syrian Salvation Government's Ministry of Awqaf, Da'wa and Guidance, authorising a practitioner to provide shar'i ruqyah services in the Salqin area. Personal and identifying information has been redacted.

Such bureaucratic regulation of *ruqyah* is hardly unique. Parallels can be found elsewhere in the Muslim world. In Qatar, for instance, the Ministry of Awqaf examines prospective *raqis*, makes recommendations concerning their licensing and supervises their activities, functions that have been part of the ministry's remit since at least 2011.⁶⁰ In Malaysia, *ruqyah* has been incorporated into the state-regulated system of traditional and complementary medicine and, more notably, into national standards for professional training. Practitioners must meet formal qualification requirements, which even include the treatment of illnesses attributed to *sihr* (sorcery) among the skills they are expected to learn.⁶¹ Saudi regulations likewise allow authorised *ruqyah* practitioners to operate within mental-health facilities, but under supervision and without interfering with medical treatment.⁶² The arrangements differ, but they share a common concern: separating legitimate *ruqyah shar'iyya* from illicit or heterodox healing practices and regulating who may practise it.

In Syria—as elsewhere—this process of *ruqyah* standardisation is probably also driven by a more mundane struggle over religious authority: who possesses the legitimacy to diagnose and treat afflictions attributed to spirits? The proponents of *ruqyah shar'iyya* seek to establish a scripturally constrained practice purified of innovations and popular accretions. Yet the older and messier cosmology, bearing pre-Islamic sediments and populated by wandering spirits and magical spells, has proved remarkably resilient. Hereditary healers, inherited incantations, secret manuscripts,

⁶⁰ Qatar, Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, Ministerial Decision No. 24 of 2011, art. 41(10–11), *Al Meezan: Qatar Legal Portal*; Qatar, Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, Ministerial Decision No. 49 of 2017, art. 40(8–9), *Al Meezan: Qatar Legal Portal*.

⁶¹ Muhammad Omar et al., “Model Pengurusan Perawatan Ruqyah dalam Standard Kemahiran Pekerjaan Kebangsaan (SKPK)/National Occupational Skills Standard (NOSS), Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (SKM) Tahap 3,” *Jurnal Evolusi* 6, no. 2 (2025): 108–142 (English abstract available); Malaysia, *Traditional and Complementary Medicine (Amendment) Regulations 2025*, P.U. (A) 324, *Federal Government Gazette*, August 29, 2025, 17.

⁶² Saudi Ministry of Health, *Executive Regulation of the Mental Health Care Law* (2015), art. 9/12R, esp. paras. 1–7.

incense, and elaborate hierarchies of jinn continue to coexist with doctrinal orthodoxy and, to a point, modern psychiatry.

We may very well regard these beliefs as scientifically untenable, irrational, or echoes of a bygone era of dangerous superstition, but they nonetheless continue to shape behaviour, influence therapeutic decisions, and structure the experience of many Syrians—and, for that matter, of many believers across the world. In this respect, Syria may be less the exception than the rule. If there is an outlier, it is probably highly secularised Western Europe. Even more peculiar is the narrative, long influential in Western social thought, that scientific progress would mechanically shrink the space available for supernatural or religious understandings of the world.⁶³ Yet reports of religion's inexorable decline have been greatly exaggerated. Meanwhile, both the secularised West and the Muslim world have witnessed renewed interest in ritual healing, spirit possession, and exorcism, albeit along markedly different trajectories. In Western societies, the revival of exorcism⁶⁴ accompanied the fragmentation of traditional religious authority and the emergence of increasingly individualised, à la carte forms of spirituality. One of the paradoxes of modernity, wrote Danièle Hervieu-Léger, is that the very processes associated with secularisation generate new forms of religious expression.⁶⁵ Across much of the Muslim world, by contrast, the growing visibility of *ruqyah* should probably be understood within the broader Islamic revival that gathered momentum from the 1970s onward.⁶⁶

The Syrian material raises questions that extend well beyond Islam itself. The reader will hardly have failed to notice the striking similarities between many features of *ruqyah* and the procedures prescribed in Roman Catholic exorcistic practice. The commands addressed to the possessing spirit, the insistence on discovering its name, the attempt to establish how and why it entered its victim, and the negotiation surrounding its departure belong to ritual worlds that, at first sight, seem to have much in common. Do these similarities reflect the successive inheritance and transformation of older Jewish exorcistic traditions? Are they the product of the long co-development of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam within the shared religious environment of Late Antiquity? Or do comparable ritual systems emerge independently because the logic of possession itself imposes similar ritual responses?⁶⁷ Despite the extensive literature devoted to exorcism within each religious tradition, this broader comparative question seems to have received little sustained scholarly attention.

Whatever the historical genealogy of these similarities, the Syrian case is but one manifestation of a much wider religious landscape in which neither scientific materialism, confident that the

⁶³ John H. Evans and Michael S. Evans, "Religion and Science: Beyond the Epistemological Conflict Narrative," *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 87–105, esp. 88–92; José Casanova, "The Karel Dobbelare Lecture: Divergent Global Roads to Secularization and Religious Pluralism," *Social Compass* 65, no. 2 (2018): 187–198.

⁶⁴ Giordan and Possamai, "Mastering the Devil"; Joseph P. Laycock and Eric Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁶⁵ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "Religion and Modernity in the French Context: For a New Approach to Secularization," *Sociological Analysis* 51, special issue (1990): S15–S25; Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020).

⁶⁶ Jan A. Ali, "Contemporary Islamic Revivalism: Key Perspectives," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 29, no. 1 (2012): 60–97.

⁶⁷ See Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg, "Co-produced Religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," *Harvard Theological Review* 118, no. 1 (2025): 159–80; Jonathan Klein Henry, *Exorcists: The Origins, Roles, and Lives of Late Antique Exorcism Specialists* (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2020); Emma Cohen and Justin L. Barrett, "Conceptualizing Spirit Possession: Ethnographic and Experimental Evidence," *Ethos* 36, no. 2 (2008): 246–67.

supernatural can be explained away through psychology, neurology, or sociology, nor fundamentalist attempts to restrict religious experience to the narrow confines of scriptural orthodoxy, have succeeded in disciplining the supernatural or emptying the world of its jinn—or, indeed, its demons. Despite their profound differences, both tendencies have worked to tame the supernatural. The first naturalises it, dissolves apparitions, possession, witchcraft, and spirits into pathology, evolutionary mechanisms, or the electrochemical workings of the brain; the second seeks to purify centuries of accumulated cosmology, local idiosyncrasies, and religious experience in favour of a more austere legalism. The realm of spirits, however, has proved a remarkably unruly inhabitant of the modern world, resisting both domestication and reduction. If anything, its resilience suggests that both scientism and fundamentalism may have underestimated how stubbornly mystery and enchantment refuse to wither away.