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Leadership and authority in the institutions of belief

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Within the philosophy of religion, this article contributes to political science by developing a conceptual interpretation of how leadership, authority, and belief coproduce institutional legitimacy within religious and political institutions, collectively referred to as “institutions of belief”—religious and political bodies whose functioning depends on shared doctrines and recognized sources of legitimacy. Building on classical thinkers and theorists, the paper makes explicit three interdependent moments: authority, belief, and leadership; shows how shifts in authority structures transform leadership patterns of belief; and identifies mechanisms through which crises of authority generate political instability or new charismatic developments. The article is primarily conceptual but indicates where illustrative contemporary cases, particularly from the Middle East, can ground the framework and suggests empirical strategies for future assessment. This work explores two main questions: first, how authority, belief, and leadership interact within belief institutions; and second, how changes in sources or structures of authority influence leadership styles and political outcomes. It is primarily conceptual and synthetic, tracing the histories of ideas, providing operational definitions derived from earlier discussions, and developing an analytical framework. This framework can be applied to current cases, such as examples from the Middle East, and translated into empirical markers for testing.

KEYWORDS

authority, belief, institutions of belief, leadership, religious and political institutions

1 Introduction

Leadership is a topic of global significance that is examined through various theoretical frameworks. It is defined as a personal trait, a set of behaviors, or a cognitive or relational ability, and its complexity requires a multidimensional understanding. Leadership has been a research field for over a century, and its definitions have naturally evolved and been influenced by trends, ideologies, and changes in professional environments. Nowadays, leadership is a highly sought-after topic and has generated a lot of discussion. The community is increasingly interested in this theme, aiming to know the characteristics of effective leaders for better management and to organize adequate training. Books on leadership, articles, and even videos on social networks are multiplying, and the business world believes that fostering good leadership is the key to improving financial results (Northouse, 2015; Plane, 2015). However, despite their significant overlap, discussions surrounding leadership often overlook its intrinsic connection to authority.

The concept of authority itself is not new; it has been extensively studied for over two millennia. In contemporary society, the crisis of authority and belief profoundly influences our understanding of leadership within political and religious institutions. Yet, existing advancements in this discourse remain insufficient to fully grasp the implications surrounding the interplay between leadership and authority within these institutions. Moreover, the prevailing authority and belief crisis significantly affects both leadership and society. In what manner does it influence the political and religious institutions and their authority?

Within the philosophy of religion, this article contributes to political science by developing a conceptual interpretation of how leadership, authority, and belief co-produce institutional legitimacy within religious and political institutions, collectively referred to as “institutions of belief”—religious and political bodies whose functioning depends on shared doctrines and recognized sources of legitimacy. Building on classical thinkers and theorists, the paper makes explicit three interdependent moments: authority, belief, and leadership; shows how shifts in authority structures transform leadership patterns of belief; and identifies mechanisms through which crises of authority generate political instability or new charismatic developments. The article is primarily conceptual but indicates where illustrative contemporary cases, particularly from the Middle East, can ground the framework and suggests empirical strategies for future assessment.

This work explores two main questions: first, how authority, belief, and leadership interact within belief institutions; and second, how changes in sources or structures of authority influence leadership styles and political results. It is primarily conceptual and synthetic, tracing histories of ideas, providing operational definitions from earlier discussions, and creating an analytical framework. This framework can be applied to current cases, such as examples from the Middle East discussed below, and translated into empirical markers for testing. To make this approach practical, the third section presents specific empirical indicators for examining causal pathways. This plan directs future empirical exploration.

2 Conceptual foundations

2.1 Leadership

Etymologically, the word “leader” comes from the old English “*leod*,” meaning “people,” and the verb “*laedan*,” meaning “to lead.” The earliest documented use of the term “leader” in English occurred in the 13th century.

While neither Plato nor Aristotle used the word “leadership,” both explored the concept of governance throughout their works, particularly “The Republic” by Plato and “Nicomachean Ethics” by Aristotle. Plato explores the ideal king’s qualities and philosophy’s role in governance. The emphasis is on wisdom and knowledge as essential characteristics of governance. Leaders should be philosopher-kings who deeply understand reality and the good (Plato, 2021). Governance aims to guide society toward justice and the common good. On his side, Aristotle envisioned leaders as not just wise but as personifications of virtue. Courage, temperance, and justice are the qualities demonstrating exemplary behavior. In his view, true governance was not about giving commands but inspiring a society where citizens flourish together. Practical wisdom and effective communication are important tools; this is how the leader’s character guides the community toward a shared good (Aristotle, 1934). These approaches are still relevant today, and we observe that the lack of any of these values leads society or institution toward a demagogic, totalitarian, or theocratic system.

In contemporary discourse, the concept of leadership is frequently utilized and has a complex history; the following will elucidate its origins and historical trajectory. In an innovative study, Joseph C. Rost analyzed publications from 1900 to 1990, uncovering over 200 unique

leadership definitions. His work offers a snapshot of how this elusive concept has been defined throughout the 20th century. Peter Northouse categorizes his study into periods of history: Leadership in the early 1900s was less collaborative and more focused on centralized control and dominance. In short, leaders rule, not guide. The 1930s shifted the focus from forceful domination to personality traits that enabled “influence” and not just sheer power. Leadership became a two-way street, with leaders shaping groups and vice versa. This marked a significant move toward recognizing leaders’ personal qualities and their interaction with group dynamics. Leadership in the 1940s shifted to a group-centric view. It is defined as an individual’s behavior within group activities, emphasizing interaction over pure dominance. Additionally, a line was drawn between persuasive leadership and coercive “drivership.” This era saw a clear move toward understanding leadership as a process influenced by both the leader and the group. In the 1950s, understanding of leadership blossomed, defined by three key themes: (1) building on previous decades, leadership was seen as actions within groups, not just individual traits; (2) emphasizing collaborative behavior, leaders forged relationships fostering shared goals; and (3) effectiveness, not authority, became the gold standard, judging leaders on their ability to impact their groups’ overall performance positively. These themes established leadership as a dynamic, group-oriented process, moving beyond individual power plays and laying the groundwork for future developments. Harmony reigned in leadership circles in the 1960s, defined as “acts influencing others toward shared goals.” The 1970s focus shifted to organizations; Rost defines leadership as “initiating and maintaining groups to fulfill goals.” However, in 1978, it was redefined as “mobilizing individuals with resources to realize shared goals.” In the 1980s, leadership exploded in popularity, leading to various definitions emphasizing: (1) following orders, leaders still tell followers what to do; (2) influence: a keyword, scholars differentiated leadership from management by emphasizing non-coercive effect; (3) the focus on leaders’ traits; and (4) transformation: leadership as a process of elevating both leaders and followers. Finally, in the 21st Century, the debate on leadership vs. management continues, but the focus is on the process of influencing a group toward a common goal. New approaches include:

- Authentic leadership: Emphasizing genuineness in leaders and their leadership.
- Spiritual leadership: Utilizing values and a sense of calling to motivate followers.
- Servant leadership: Leaders prioritizing follower needs and development.
- Adaptive leadership: Encouraging followers to adapt to challenges and changes.

To establish precise definitions, Jean-Michel Plane writes:

Leadership, which is more widely considered in France by psycho-sociologists and even more so by personal development consultants, can be defined as a process of decisive orientation and influence of one person on the action of a human group to implement a policy and achieve several more or less precise objectives (Plane, 2015, p. 2).

While Plane recognizes leadership as a process where one person influences a group to implement policies and achieve specific

objectives, Northouse, on his side, uses Rost's definition and writes that "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2015). Both definitions define leadership as a process that emphasizes and is not a fixed characteristic within the leader. Instead, it is a two-way interaction where leaders influence followers and vice versa. This dynamic exchange, not a one-way street, opens leadership potential to everyone, not just designated leaders. Leadership is not just a title or position but the power to influence and inspire others. At its core, leadership hinges on influencing followers, guiding them toward shared goals, and motivating them to achieve. Leadership thrives within groups, where individuals unite toward a common purpose. It is the art of influencing others to achieve shared goals in a small task force, a community movement, or even an entire organization. True leadership requires multiple players striving together. It is a group adventure. Leadership is not merely about giving commands, but guiding individuals united by a common purpose. This shared vision sets an ethical foundation, urging leaders to collaborate with followers rather than dictate to them. This emphasis on mutuality reduces the likelihood of coercion and fosters a collective pursuit of the greater good (Rost, 1993).

Despite their differences, scholars agree that they cannot define leadership universally. Globalization and generational shifts will continue to shape its meaning. Ultimately, leadership remains a complex concept in constant change. These definitions show that leadership should achieve something and is not static; then, what do achieving and acting mean? According to Hannah Arendt, in Greek and Latin, there are two different synonyms for the verb "to act." One, "*archein*" in Greek, meaning "to begin," "to lead," "to rule," and "*agere*" in Latin, meaning "to set into motion," "to lead"; the other, "*prattein*" in Greek, meaning "to pass through," "to achieve," "to finish" and "*gerere*" in Latin, meaning "to bear" (Arendt, 1998). This distinction reveals the misconception that a strong person can simultaneously be both influential and self-sufficient. Without the contributions of others, success is unattainable. There can be no true accomplishment. This perspective enhances our understanding of leadership and clarifies its essence. Moreover, Hannah Arendt's third part of "The Origins of Totalitarianism" presents a well-developed totalitarian leadership theory. Notably, she offers a valuable distinction between the attributes of totalitarian, tyrannical, and authoritarian leaders, revealing a nuanced understanding of power dynamics (Baehr, 2017).

The various studies of the leadership concept allow us to move forward in our understanding. Leadership fundamentally involves an action accomplished by a group for a purpose that cannot be dictated by a single individual, and a process in which everyone must engage, where influence flows from the leader to the group and vice versa. Consequently, we ask ourselves if the leader is himself the authority who oversees the work, assesses the direction, and establishes the procedures. This leads us to consider authority and its relationship with leadership. The following discussion will delve into the nuances of authority in this context.

2.2 Authority

The etymology of authority reveals an interesting link between the two definitions of "to act" as previously outlined. In his book, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Émile Benveniste defines

"the authority of the king" (Benveniste, 1969). He traces the word "authority" back to the Greek word "*krainen*," which means "the divinity who sanctions with a nod *Kara*." Benveniste argues that, by imitating divine authority, "the authority of the king" gives legal force to a project. He also notes that, by his authority, God gives existence to that which would otherwise be only words. Authority is, therefore, the divine force in its principle of making things exist. The Latin word "*auctoritas*" comes from "*auctor*," which in turn comes from the verb "*augeo*," meaning "to increase, to grow." Benveniste argues that authority, as a force, allows for existence, execution, and growth.

Accordingly, authority is fundamentally the capacity to permit or facilitate the existence and execution of ideas, actions, or beliefs. In religious and political institutions, this concept is closely linked to leadership, in which the ability to influence and achieve specific goals is essential. Effective leadership within these institutions transcends mere order maintenance; it involves guiding followers toward shared objectives and fostering a sense of community and purpose. A leader not only guides this achievement but also requires both authority and power to inspire and mobilize their followers effectively.

To fulfill its mission, an institution must establish a framework of authority that underpins its operations. This authority is often embodied in its leaders, who are essential in navigating the complexities of belief systems and institutional dynamics. Leaders interpret doctrines, shape policies, and inspire commitment among their followers. Their influence extends beyond administrative functions; it encompasses the ability to mold beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors within their communities.

Furthermore, authority operates in a nuanced manner, subtly affecting how individuals engage with their beliefs and the institution itself. It shapes perceptions of legitimacy and trust, which are crucial for fostering loyalty and participation among members. While authority can be less explicit than leadership, it profoundly impacts how individuals understand their roles within the institution and relate to its teachings. Examples of individuals wielding such authority include pastors, who guide spiritual practices; politicians, who influence societal norms; and teachers, who shape educational frameworks. Each figure exemplifies how authority can be leveraged to inspire action and promote adherence to shared beliefs, ultimately reinforcing the institution's foundational principles.

In this way, the interplay between authority and leadership becomes critical for understanding how religious and political institutions operate and thrive in diverse contexts. As we delve into this topic, we must explore how these dynamics manifest within various organizational structures and cultural settings.

2.3 Institutions of belief

To understand the value of authority within leadership and institutions, it is essential to define the term "institution of belief." Indeed, according to Cornelius Castoriadis, an institution is defined by its existence and its characteristics; this framework is referred to as the "economic-functional view." In this context, the institution fulfills a "function (...) in society and given circumstances" while also playing a "role in the overall economy of social life" (Castoriadis, 1999, p. 172). Furthermore, the institution is defined by its manner of being—"the symbolic" (Castoriadis, 1999, p. 174)—like ritual and language. Thus, "whatever the development, technological advancement, or economic

prosperity” (Castoriadis, 1999, p. 169), there can be no “society without institutions” because society depends on them.

The “institution of belief,” first elaborated by Michel de Certeau, is characterized by two constituents: doctrine and authority (de Certeau, 1983, p. 70). It is distinguished by the instituted forms of belief, including dogma, ritual, and sacred texts. It is evident that religion represents an example of an institution of belief. However, as articulated by Marcel Gauchet, democracy, sports, and human rights adhere to articles of faith and dogmas, which suggests that they are new instituted forms of belief. Such beliefs may lead to “blindness, irrationality, and even fanaticism” (Debray and Gauchet, 2003). While the domains of politics, sports, and human rights should not be considered a religion because they cannot be associated with religious beliefs, it nevertheless presents analogies with religion, such as “dogma” and “articles of faith.” These similarities reflect the institutional modalities of belief that characterize not only religious institutions but also the institutions of politics, sports, cinema, and other spheres. Political and religious institutions are then institutions of belief and are concerned by authority and leadership.

3 Crisis of authority and the reconfiguration of leadership in institutions of belief

We now analyze how authority, leadership, and belief are mobilized within institutions of belief, starting with Arendt’s evaluation of the crisis of authority.

Hannah Arendt’s book *The Crisis of Culture* is a major work in political thought. It has had a profound influence on the understanding of modern culture. In her writings, she analyzes the nature of power and authority and explores the conditions for responsible leadership. She argues that power is the ability to act, while authority is the ability to get others to do what you want. Arendt believes that power is essential for politics but that it must be tempered by authority. She also argues that responsible leadership requires the ability to think and act in the public interest. Having emphasized the importance of authority, Arendt writes that religion, authority, and tradition form a “trinity” whose three elements are closely related to each other and whose stability is affected when one of the three is weakened (Arendt, 1968, p. 128). We recognize the institution as having the criterion of authority. Thus, since the latter plays an essential role in the institution, its weakening destabilizes not only tradition and religion but any institution. According to Arendt, authority is a “natural necessity” (Arendt, 1968, p. 103) that requires obedience. A review of history proves that neither violence nor persuasion can replace it. Moreover, the fact that violence is used to compensate for the lack of authority proves that nothing can replace authority and that “no society can exist except within an authoritarian framework” (Arendt, 1968, p. 103). Moreover, as Arendt writes, what establishes the seriousness of the crisis of authority is its “symptom”:

The most significant symptom of the crisis, indicating its depth and seriousness, is that it has spread to such prepolitical areas as child-rearing and education, where authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as a natural necessity, obviously required as much by natural needs, the helplessness of the child, as by political necessity, the continuity of an established

civilization which can be assured only if those who are newcomers by birth are guided through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers (Arendt, 1968, p. 92).

The crisis in question impacts the institution and the public domain and extends to the academic and educational levels, thereby underscoring its evident nature. In Capelle (2008), Capelle-Dumont interprets this crisis and its effect on politics and religion:

For the past two centuries, “authority” has presented itself in the form of radical questioning, which has reached the archi-constitutive spheres of our living space, i.e., politics and religion. On the one hand, political authority is no longer held to be “natural” even though it is maintained as “necessary”; on the other hand, religious authority no longer appears “necessary” even though it appears residually “natural.” While the political field has proved to be thick with “beliefs,” religion can be decrypted as a “political” phenomenon (Capelle, 2008, p. 57).

The crisis of authority gives politics and religion a mixture of the criteria that define them. These criteria are authority itself, doctrine, and belief. It turns out that politics is an essential authority that no longer comes naturally but whose weakening reinforces the belief that takes precedence over citizenship and the relationship to rights and duties. Religion now resembles the political institution and becomes less essential; it is affected in its structure, and it loses its authority and its “belief.” The institutional criterion of authority is belief, which is a “receipt.” Michel de Certeau writes in this regard: “Perhaps even today all belief is a matter of ‘receipt’ (*endoxon*) as Aristotle defines it” (de Certeau, 1983, p. 72). Today’s world differs from Aristotle’s, as it has been transformed and made more complex. The simple model of a community with a single authority or leader no longer exists. There is no longer a single “reference” but several circles with several networks. However, as society becomes more complex, authority becomes fragmented and plural. We can find examples of this complexity within a political party or a religion. The role of the authority of the “receipt” in an institution consists, according to Certeau, in “a principle of overflow represented by beliefs” and “punctuates social life” (de Certeau, 1983, p. 73).

Through the mediation of language or discourse, the institution asserts its authority and remains faithful to the words of those it represents in its authority. However, the crisis of authority not only has consequences within the institution but also impacts the public domain, as Arendt explains in *Between Past and Future*:

Authority as we once knew it, which grew out of the Roman experience of foundation and was understood in the light of Greek political philosophy, has nowhere been re-established, either through revolutions or through the even less promising means of restoration, and least of all through the conservative moods and trends which occasionally sweep public opinion. For to live in a political realm with neither authority nor the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of

behavior, by the elementary problems of human living-together (Arendt, 1968, p. 141).

Traditional authority, rooted in Roman and Greek political thought, has not been effectively restored through revolutions or conservative efforts. Society faces fundamental challenges in living together without authority, lacking the sacred foundations and traditional norms that once guided behavior. The decline of traditional authority highlights a crucial challenge for leadership. Leaders struggle to establish legitimacy and inspire trust in a society where authority no longer transcends power or provides a sacred foundation. Without the guiding force of traditional norms, leadership must navigate the complexities of influencing and unifying people in a context where established standards and sources of authority have eroded, making the exercise of leadership more precarious and contested.

In the *Gospel of Mark*, the authority of Jesus establishes that belief calls for an instituter, an authority: “They were astonished at His teaching because, unlike the scribes, He was teaching them as one having authority” (Mk 1:22), “Then they were all amazed, so they began to argue with one another, saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him’” (Mk 1:27). Authority in the person of Christ finds its source in the transcendent (El Asmar Bou Aoun, 2023, p. 212). The weakening of authority in its traditional form invalidates the new representative power because it is seen as non-transcendent. The main problem that arises from this is the difficulty of people living together. This difficulty is proportional to the lack of trust in a credible source.

Moreover, Max Weber’s *The Scientist and the Politician* better interprets the functioning of authority within an institution. For Weber, the state, for example, can use violence in a legitimate way to dominate people (Weber, 1963, p. 101). They agree to submit to authority for three reasons: the “three foundations of legitimacy” and three types of authority. The first is “the authority of the ‘eternal yesterday,’ it is validated by memory or ‘habit’: ‘This is the ‘traditional power’ that the patriarch or the landed lord once exercised.” The second is based on “the personal and extraordinary grace of an individual (charisma)” and is characterized by the subjects’ “dedication” and “trust” in the “one person” considered a “hero” by his “prodigious” and “exemplary” leadership qualities: “this is the ‘charismatic’ power that the prophet exerted, or—in the political realm—the elected warlord, the elected sovereign, the great demagogue, or the leader of a political party.” The third authority, on the other hand, is based on “legality,” the “belief in the validity of legal status,” in other words on a question of obedience to rules: “this is power as exercised by the modern ‘servant of the state,’ as well as all those who come close to it in this respect” (Weber, 1963, p. 102). This typology shows once again that today’s authority is weakened due to the transformation of belief in the course of history.

Believing in charismatic authority proceeds “from a game of identification of a person with values or principles, such as the prophet identified with God or a certain politician with the nation” (Capelle, 2008, p. 57). This type of authority is irrational since it is the devotion of the leader. Several contemporary events serve as examples that illustrate the intersection of the criteria associated with political institutions and those relating to religious institutions. It is, therefore, a question of a “successful adaptation of cults and figures of holiness to a new and changing world” (Mayeur-Jaouen,

2002, p. 34). In the Middle East, which is constantly in turmoil, people need to believe in leaders and hope that their saint will be able to secure them or that their political leader will be able to restore peace. This reveals how a charismatic leader, whether religious or political, can be revered and adored. Religious behaviors such as prayer, worship, rituality, etc. are typical in the veneration of the saint, martyr, or politician. The image of the authority figure thus becomes a mixture of democratic, sacred, salvific, liberating, etc. projections. Since the sacred and the political are inseparable, the emotional community is devoted to its leader. Added to this is the socio-economic context and political stability that influence the degree of the people’s need for a leader and its impact on the authority figure.

This typology is found, to varying degrees, in the world’s different cultures according to society’s needs. Members of the political institution serve and believe in “national,” “humanitarian,” “social,” “ethical,” “cultural,” “secular,” “religious,” and “progress” ends (Weber, 1963, p. 166). It follows that “a belief or faith is necessary” (Weber, 1963, p. 166), whatever the purpose of devotion. In other words, even if the politician claims to serve only “material ends” or an “idea,” the fact remains that believing in him is essential, precedes authority and leadership, engenders the institution, and is at the center. To believe the authority is a criterion of the institution, but it often goes beyond the limits of the structures to which we want to restrict it, it goes beyond leadership.

We have demonstrated that amidst the crisis of authority and the crisis of belief, individuals fervently seek a leader in whom they wish to place their trust and hope. All the types of leaders that we would like to establish in our society will have a lot of trouble emerging because the qualities that people seek in their leaders remain closely linked to their own needs and to the images that they project onto the leader, a saint, a protector, a savior, a father, a God etc.

4 From concept to case: practical illustrations

This section translates the conceptual framework into an empirical agenda by showing how the crisis of authority can generate distinct leadership outcomes depending on the configuration of belief, authority, and institutional resilience. Using three analytical markers (1) the dominant authority modality (traditional, charismatic, or legal-rational); (2) the coherence and intensity of collective belief; and (3) technocratic or symbolic leadership, three ideal-type pathways will be sketched through which the authority crisis unfolds. The purpose is not to offer exhaustive case studies but to demonstrate how the theory can be operationalized and where focused empirical research (process tracing, discourse and content analysis, surveys, and local fieldwork) could test the proposed causal mechanisms.

First, where legal-rational authority persists, even amid political fragmentation, institutions tend to render leadership intelligible through routinized procedures, rules, and technocratic practices rather than through personal authority. In such contexts, leadership legitimacy is sustained by stable bureaucratic routines, formal accountability mechanisms, and elite discourse emphasizing competence and legality. Empirically, this configuration is evident in administrative regulations, court rulings, official planning documents, and technocratic public messaging.

For example, in 2016, despite the erosion of central state authority and persistent political fragmentation, local Lebanese institutions such as municipalities continued to operate through routinized, legal-rational practices. Empirical studies document municipal initiatives such as waste management (Mouawad, 2017, p. 6) and strategic responses to the refugee crisis (Mouawad, 2017, p. 8), designed to address governance challenges at the local level. Although these resilient initiatives, often implemented in collaboration with international organizations, could not substitute for the functions of the Lebanese government (Mouawad, 2017, p. 11), they nonetheless demonstrate forms of sectoral bureaucratic resilience operating in accordance with legal norms and administrative procedures. Legal authority persists under technocratic, efficient leadership.

Second, when belief in formal institutions diminishes and authority becomes personalized, leadership tends to become more performative, centered on charisma rather than procedures. This type of leadership focuses on rituals, symbols, and direct emotional connection, employing leader-focused rhetoric, public ceremonies, support networks, and direct communication between leaders and followers. During institutional decline, such leadership often transforms a general lack of trust and faith into personal loyalty by promoting moral stories and promises of protection.

This dynamic is particularly evident in contexts where belief is displaced from institutions onto leaders. Electoral populism thrives when institutional trust is weak, as it relies on symbolic rituals and moral narratives to rebuild belief in the leader rather than in institutions. The modern “crisis of political faith or trust” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 116) describes a situation where loyalty shifts more toward individuals, since “the devotion of followers—and indeed, the hatred of detractors—similarly hangs on the leader in many cases rather than the party” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 54). In such cases, leaders replace institutional belief with personal conviction, turning broad grievances into individual loyalty. The Lebanese context provides clear examples of this process during times of socioeconomic crisis. Both Muslim and Christian political figures use a mix of social services, ritualized public displays, and leader-focused symbolism to maintain personal authority amid institutional weakness, though they employ different ideological and community-based approaches. For instance, Hezbollah, a Shia political party, and the Lebanese Forces, a Christian political party, created welfare initiatives and projects to assist their supporters during crises. These social programs are highly organized and offer significant benefits to their loyal constituencies (Cammatt, 2014, p. 131–133). Hezbollah’s religious and political organization fosters strong personal loyalty through social services, ritual commemorations, and leader-driven messaging, supplementing formal political processes. Welfare projects, religious rituals with political symbols, and speeches emphasizing protection all reinforce individual authority.

Additionally, charismatic leadership often depends on visible territorial control as a symbolic display of power, safety, and organizational strength. Before the 2024 conflict with Israel, Hezbollah limited access to specific areas, except for its own community, as a performative act of authority, demonstrating the leader’s ability to protect followers and strengthening loyalty through territorial control (Cammatt, 2014, p. 88). This pattern highlights how charismatic political figures, often serving as militia leaders in contexts of weak state authority, mobilize ritual, patronage, and spatial control to attract followers and build durable networks of loyalty. In such settings, political institutions do not rely solely on religious ideas to maintain authority; they also distribute material benefits and construct symbolic boundaries vis-à-vis other communities to consolidate internal cohesion and control.

Third, when established sources of authority are nearly dismantled, institutions often create new sources of legitimacy. In this process, authority may be re-established through formal routines and new symbolic or procedural authorization, or it may shift toward highly personalized, charismatic leaders who fill a legitimacy gap. The path taken depends on factors such as institutional resilience, socioeconomic pressures, and the discursive and performative capacities of competing actors. Many real-world situations show a mix of outcomes, where formal procedures remain in some areas while charismatic leadership grows in others. These changes are influenced by institutional strength, resource availability, and discursive power, and can be observed in sectoral differences in ways authority is exercised, overlapping rule systems, and the coexistence of official institutions with patronage or religious networks.

The Syrian case after 2011 exemplifies crisis-driven recomposition under conditions of extreme institutional collapse. The erosion of state-based legal-rational authority and the breakdown of social trust created openings for charismatic and militant leadership forms. In localized settings where institutions collapsed, leaders combining ritualized authority, sectarian narratives, and performative displays of protection acquired intense followings. This dynamic is described as “warlordism, in which ‘trained, armed men’ take advantage of state collapse to take over territory and, relying on their charisma, form networks of patronage to attract fighters and supporters” (Voller, 2022, p. 854). Recruitment in such contexts is mediated through local authority figures, “such as religious leaders, tribal sheikhs and village elders” (Voller, 2022, p. 857).

Overall, these pathways illustrate how authority crises can result in routinization, personalization, or hybrid recompositions, influenced by belief systems, institutional resilience, and leadership styles. These processes can be examined using empirical indicators such as the dominant type of authority, levels of belief strength and coherence, and inventories of leadership practices, thereby turning theoretical insights into testable hypotheses. The next stage involves empirical validation through methods like process tracing, discourse analysis, survey data on trust and legitimacy, and qualitative fieldwork at the regional level, especially in countries like Lebanon, where sectoral differences offer a valuable testing ground.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the historical and contemporary efficacy of leadership remains deeply entangled with how the authority of leaders is perceived—as something that confers transcendence and existential purchase on institutional claims. Globalization, digitization, and rapid social transformation have unsettled the old grounds of legitimacy and fractured traditional sources of authority, producing an intricate mélange of representation and weakening the sediment of collective belief. Without such belief, commitment risks becoming performative rather than substantive, and leadership can be reduced to techniques of manipulation rather than modes of shared meaning and common action.

We may therefore conceive authority, belief, and leadership as three interdependent moments within any institution of belief: authority names the socially recognized claim to institute norms; belief denotes the cognitive–affective orientation through which agents render those claims meaningful; and leadership denotes the practiced ensemble of speech, ritual, and organization by which authority is animated and belief cultivated. From this

standpoint, the prevailing modality of authority—whether anchored in tradition, embodied in a charismatic figure, or sustained by routinized norms—conditions which leadership forms will be intelligible and effective within an institution. The coherence and intensity of collective belief mediate how authority translates into sustained allegiance: when belief is attenuated or fragmented, institutional authority loses purchase and non-institutional leadership forms (charismatic, populist, sectarian) become more attractive. Where recognized sources of authority erode altogether, institutions undergo a process of recomposition in which authority is either re-embedded through routinization and re-authorization or replaced by personalized, charismatic leadership that occupies the resulting legitimacy vacuum; which pathway unfolds depends on institutional resilience, socio-economic pressures, and the discursive and performative capacities available to competing actors.

These conceptual claims should not remain merely programmatic. They invite empirical translation into measurable indicators—dominant authority type, intensity and coherence of belief, and catalogs of leadership repertoires—which can be applied in comparative and regional studies. In contexts such as the contemporary Middle East, where institutional fragility and social dislocation are pronounced, the framework helps explain why actors seeking legitimacy sometimes turn toward saintly, salvific, or populist figures as much as toward formal offices. The task for future research is to operationalize these markers and to test, across paired cases, when crises of authority yield processes of institutional renewal and when they precipitate the emergence of personalized rule. Only through such convergent conceptual and empirical work can leadership be rethought and reconstructed upon foundations that resonate with contemporary needs for shared meaning, accountability, and stability.

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