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Salafism: A factor for democratization or destabilization?

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Having been repressed or used for decades by the local regimes, Salafism is on a definite rise, raising security and political threats primarily in the Middle East, while the West sees the chance for democratization drifting away. The many faces of Salafism make us address questions regarding its origins, its present dynamics and also whether it can be a viable political alternative and a part of a democratic transition.

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While today many salafists are hostile to western notions, in the beginning of the 20th century Islamist scholars and figures were not so negative about western ideological constructions such as the nation-state, national independence and democracy, seeing them as tools for anticolonial struggle and political emancipation. However, the split in Islamic thought during various historical phases in the Middle East has created different schools of thought that prove Islam not to be a stable and static formation but rather a dynamic religion. Salafism, included in these tendencies, has acquired a very strong dynamic in the Middle East since the 19th century with the teachings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897) focusing on morality, spirituality, a constant quest for personal complement and dignity in an “immoral” world. Initially, plenty of scholars saw Salafism as a conservative return to Islamic roots. Nowadays, however, modern scholars seem to agree that this is a modern construction strongly related to Saudi Wahhabism. The Saudis disseminated Wahhabist creed in the Arab world through educational and religious networks in the 1960’s and ‘70’s in their endeavour to intercept the rising Arab nationalism and the Iranian revolutionary Shi’ism during the 1980’s. The Arab countries and the West were unopposed to this development since it also worked as a barrier to communism.¹ What is still being mistaken, though, is the connection between Salafism and its obsessive attachment to traditional culture, as many support. In reality, Salafism is very hostile to popular culture which is believed to corrode the pure religiosity of the pious with non religious and secular elements, while many salafists are also very hostile to any form of political organization that doesn’t include Islam as its pillar. Furthermore, rationalist philosophy is believed to mislead pure practice of Islam, thus any *bida’at* (innovations) in the Islamic schools of thought are prohibited.²

The different readings of Islam have produced three main factions of Salafism, as Q. Wiktorowicz has suggested. The first one is the purist, the second the political and the third the jihadi. Others identify political and jihadi Salafism, differentiating them from the purists that also characterize them as *da’wat* (preaching). The theological and dogmatic differences between those groups are not fundamental. They strongly believe in *tawhid* (the uniqueness of god), they condemn *shirk* (polytheism), and they desire the implementation of *Shari’a*. The purists or the *da’wat* emphasize on the spiritual, the nonviolent and the propagation methods, giving great significance to Islamic education and opposing any form of political mingling as a malign western influence. The political salafists are engaged with the application of the Salafi creed on political life promoting *shari’a* as a constitutional societal foundation, while the jihadists have a more militant stance trying to awaken the Muslims against the “infidels”.³ The accusation that the *da’wat* lay on the political-jihadists is that the latter have allowed human desires and political strategy to shape religious dogmas, while it should happen the other way around.⁴ Nevertheless, the most important division took place during the first Gulf War in 1990-91, when the religious authorities of Saudi Arabia issued a fatwa allowing American armed forces to station in the country in order to attack Iraq. The political-jihadi faction issued a stormy critic, talking about the neocolonization of the Arab world and dispersing their doubts about whether the *ulama* (religious scholars) should have political jurisdictions.⁵ After the 2011 Arab uprisings, in addition to the above mentioned divisions, the political salafists have launched a fervent critique, towards Jihadis, claiming that they are misguided to choose violence when imposing their political will, in addition to rallying against moderate Islamists for their contamination of pure Islamic thought with *bida’at*.

The reasons why Salafism and religious political forces are on a rise are controversial. Some Middle East scholars draw their attention to the urban downtrodden, living in slums and ghettos and consider them to be a potential “inflammable material”, an idea that Mike

Davis has aptly described in his book, *Planet of Slums*. Other scholars have drawn parallels with the Latin American liberation theology, although Salafism, apart from the importance it puts in charity work, has not been particularly interested in the lower social strata.⁶ The Salafists have filled in a vacuum created by decades of state absence in the slums, leaving the ground for salafi thriving. Perhaps the most important aspect though, is the economic one, since they became vital economic factors, especially in the informal economy sector.⁷ Being a peddler usually demands a push back against state repression which Salafists mostly give wholeheartedly, creating in the meantime an informal network of the “outlawed”. These networks are largely invisible and the social subjects are often unaware of their existence, but they are activated exactly when there is an exterior threat, which most of the times comes from state interventionism. This network activation has a common denominator for mass mobilization, which is Islam - and not as a strict religious creed but more as a moral code. Similar support is also needed in matters of residency. Many shantytown residents live there illegally since they have nowhere else to go. Salafists and Islamists in general often create a safety net not only protecting the marginalized from state control but also by trying to relieve and improve their life in many ways. Another reason for the emergence of Salafism as a political player has been the radicalisation of religious discourse, which has caused an underground islamizing tendency that could come to the fore at anytime, as it did after the recent Arab uprisings. The radical discourse used in mosques and universities became an important political regulator, gradually formulating a more rigid and intolerant religious creed that covered all aspects of life, including politics. Moreover, after the 1967 defeat from Israel, the Arab identity became a subject of rapprochement. Already, modernization had timidly initiated debates about the ethnic and cultural identities of the Arabs. After 1967, these debates were given a boost with Islamic discourse gaining great degrees of legitimacy: the maladies of the Arab world, they argued, were moral, proving that western ethical corruption was corroding their societies. The strengthening of personal attachment to Islam was more an assertion of a Muslim identity and a modernizing transformation than a backward and traditional claim to return to the roots. This process was framed by a very decisive phenomenon: the satellite television broadcasts by salafists ulama, a crucial occurrence that helped Muslim reconstruct their identities, in particular by contrast with the western-Christian one.

The Arab revolts have created a new political environment in the region. The most striking thing, a real historical development in the Arab world, is that these parties after decades of isolation, imprisonment and repression joined the electoral process, thus embracing parliamentary procedures. The opportunities given at a political level to formations that were never before included in the political process under old regimes, took these organizations by surprise. Many Salafists still believe, though, that democracy is a hoax, or the nation-state is a prison, and many questions are raised by the salafists relating between violence and democracy. Furthermore, many ponder whether the salafi movement is going to promote pluralism and democratization in the Arab world or if it is going to disrupt it. K. Bokhari argues that Salafism is already causing problems to the democratization process for two main reasons: firstly, salafists’ fragmentation and variability is so big that is impossible to have a coherent non-violent Salafist movement that can take liberal and democratic features. Secondly, democracy in the Arab world is not yet well-formed or stable enough to absorb any turbulences caused from militant Salafism. The proof, according to Bokhari, is that they have thus far failed to develop a coherent political discourse and ideology that can exist as an alternative to dominant Arab politics.⁸ The elect oral results may have been impressive but this was not out of the blue: the Salafi semi-official networks existed since the 1970’s, focusing on da’wa. Today Salafists in Egypt are descendants of

the Da'wa al-Salafiyya, a group split from the Gama'a al-Islamiyya during the '70's.⁹

After the 25th of January revolution in Egypt, three salafi parties were formed: the al-Nour, al-Asalah and al-Fadhila. The initial coalition of the salafi parties with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) did not flourish and the subsequent coalition, the Building and Development Party, which included al-Nour Party, al-Asalah and Gama'a al-Islamiyya won 25% of the parliamentary seats. In Tunisia, another country with a political transition experiencing a Salafi rise, similarities are shared with Egypt. Tunisia, the salafists assert, is no longer a land of jihad. Peaceful means should replace jihad and the political life should be balanced, as long as shari'a is the main source for legislation.¹⁰ Jabhat al-Islah, a Salafi political party originating from the Tunisian Islamic Front, was legalized in March 2012 with its pledge of dedication to democratic procedures. Nevertheless, a group formed in 2011, Ansar Ash-Sharia, dominates the salafi political scene in Tunisia with a gradual growth of power and popularity. Their campaigns, such as "occupy mosques", aim to eliminate any anti-islamic element in society and to isolate remnants of the old regime.¹¹ In Syria and Libya, Salafism has taken a more militant form. In Syria, the crackdown by the Assad regime before the civil war had quite effectively silenced the salafists movement, although after the brutal Assad response in 2011, Islamic and Salafi forces, with exterior help, have become very powerful in the anti-Assad camp with Jabhat al-Nusra having a frontline position. In Libya, many militant Salafist groups are active. One of them, Ansar al-Sharia (connected with the one in Tunisia), has been accused of carrying out the attack on the American embassy in Benghazi. The civilian population has repeatedly demanded the disarming of these groups and their inclusion in the political life of the country.¹²

As far as the salafists's political program is concerned the ambiguity is obvious. The clearest example comes from Egypt. When asked, salafists are not straightforward on issues such as democracy or minority rights. In addition, Abdel Moniem al-Shahat, the spokesman of Da'wa al-Salafiyya in Egypt, has claimed that democracy is sinister, while Nader Bakkar, spokesman of al-Nour, claimed that the time for shari'a is nigh. Their socioeconomic policy is based on Islamic jurisprudence, focusing on Islamic banking forbidding riba (usury), while social justice for them is not a precondition for social peace. Nevertheless, together with the MB, salafists have supported neoliberal policies that bring economical stagnation closer. Their aspirations for banning alcohol and imposing strict restraints on women's outfits, have triggered stormy criticism towards them.

In conclusion, the country that for decades has advocated Salafism now has to confront its own creation. The Saudi kingdom seems to be trying to cope with a general feeling of disloyalty towards their Wahhabist creed, supplying the possibility of the emergence of an armed struggle against the Saudi kingdom. Recently, Saudi Arabia declared Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant to be terrorist organizations, a move that indicates its endeavour to keep Salafists under its control. The numerous jihadi groups that have emerged alongside the Syrian civil war pose a threat to Saudi Arabia's domination, since the former see Riyadh as a client state and a hypocritical islamic power, serving western interests in the region. It is believed that its dependence on the West is too strong to truly align with the Muslim states.¹³ The question of who will be the one to make gains out of this remains unanswered, but for now, we can see the Saudis' weakness in their inability to handle with the political implications that are taking place in the region.

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