

The politics of North African Salafism

I. Introduction

Amid the volatility of the post-Arab revolts of 2011, Salafi ideology and activism have emerged as the locus of societal contention and political controversy. Scholars and pundits of this ultra-conservative brand of Sunni Islam continue to debate its complexity, contextual diversity and internal dynamics. The most reductive explanations associate Salafi activism with violent extremism or the austere expressions of Saudi Wahhabism. The most insightful ones are those that provide access into the diversity of the Salafi experience, uncovering the social forces and national political trajectories that power its surge in contexts where it was long thought of as a parasitic fringe of contention. Reassessing the reconfigurations of national Salafi ideological politics and their interactions with regional and transnational dynamics is crucial to understanding the ambivalence and complexities of the Salafi phenomenon in the post-Arab Uprising era.

This article takes the Maghreb as a case study to investigate how the Salafi movement in its different stripes has been reshaping both society and politics in different national political contexts. In so doing, it traces the intellectual history and popular origins behind what has become an observable sociological and political phenomenon. Tracking the evolution of different strands of Salafi thought and activism in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria provides a nuanced understanding of the many forces that contributed to the forceful re-emergence of politicised and radical brands of Salafism in the wake of the post-Arab uprisings.

II. The Making of North African Salafism

North African Salafism bifurcates between an indigenous nationalist strand and imported strands that lay either inside or outside the realm of Islamic modernism and politics. The two strands have connected at different historical intervals, producing different approaches to political and social reform. Historically, the most dominant strand embraced Salafism as a theology of rational knowledge and national social reform. During the colonial era, North African Salafism took a distinctly intellectual reform shape than that advocated by the puritanical Islamic reform movement originating in Saudi Arabia.

III. The Case of Morocco

In Morocco under the French protectorate (1912-1956), the Salafi movement championed a firmly nationalist perspective inspired by the founders of Middle Eastern Islamic modernism, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and his disciple Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905). This reformist movement formed a bridge between the old traditional ‘*Ulamā*’ (the learned ones, ‘clerus’) and younger political modernists schooled in European universities. In the post-independence period, this alliance fractured under the weight of power struggles and the pull of the potent ideologies of Arab nationalism and socialism.¹ The old theologians quickly found themselves at odds with the secular turn that Moroccan nationalism was taking. Outmanoeuvred and disillusioned, Moroccan Salafis entered a new phase of depoliticisation that focused exclusively on religious education and social activism. In this regard, they found a ready ally

¹ Tozy, *Les enchaînements paradoxaux de l’histoire du salafisme*, 2015, 216.

in King Hassan II (d.1999), who propped up conservative Islam and politically quiescent theologians as a counterweight to the threatening ideologies of Arab nationalism and socialism.²

In the early 1970's, however, the Salafi movement experienced an expansionary transformation from an indigenous strand into a hybrid one. The Moroccan monarchy's acquiescence in the movement's growth and Saudi Arabia's ambitions to spread its Wahhabi ideology and teachings were the main catalytic agents behind this change in the nature of Salafi thought and action. Over time, Morocco started to count dozens of Qur'anic schools dominated by Saudi aligned Salafi preachers, the most prominent of which was Sheikh Mohamed Maghraoui. This Quietist terrain of Salafi schools shaped the thoughts and politics of its graduates and served as an ideological conduit for the loosely organised Salafi associations that sprouted up during this period. The most successful Salafis, mainly those trained in Saudi Arabia or granted the seal of approval by the international stalwarts of the Salafi ideology, became national sheikhs.³

The 1990s introduced other uneasy amalgams into Moroccan Salafism. The Saudi collaboration with the United States during the first Gulf War (1990–91) created tectonic shifts within Saudi Salafism. The movement seriously fractured along generational lines, blurring the boundaries between politics and religion, and rebellion and disobedience to a ruler's commands. Such rifts with the Saudi Salafi establishment were mirrored in the Moroccan context. The Salafi muddle was further complicated by the return of Moroccan veterans from the wars in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Central Asia and Chechnya. These "holy" warriors, abetted by new media technologies and satellite television, which helped spread a romantic and heroic version of de-

fensive armed struggle, gradually inculcated a new culture of Jihadi activism into the public imagination of disaffected youths in search of a fantasy escape from their social and psychological malaise.

The first signs of a Salafi slide into violence started to emerge in 1998. Small groups originating in shanty towns and outlying suburbs of larger cities terrorised neighbours that did not conform to their puritanical vision of morality and social conduct. Under the leadership of self-proclaimed emirs, Salafi *takfirīs* (those who accuse others of apostasy) set as a goal the purification of society and punishment of offenders.⁴ Up until the terrorist attacks that hit the United States in 2001, Moroccan authorities were unperturbed by the turn of a fringe of the Salafis movement to vigilante-style activities. The regime's assessment was that *takfirī* Salafi were confined to marginal areas and constituted no threat to the state. If played right, the regime thought that they could turn *takfirīs*' hostility to political Islam against the more formidable illegal political association of Al-'Adl wa-I-ḥsān and the Party of Justice and Development (PJD).

The regime's intoxicated acquiescence to and flirtation with these new strands of radical Salafism began to fray after the 2001 terrorist attacks on American soil and the resultant global war on terrorism. The coming out of the shadows of Salafi firebrands had also had an impact on the government's calculations. On September 18, 2001, sixteen Salafi scholars issued a fatwa virulently denouncing as impious and heretical an ecumenical, interfaith ceremony held in Saint-Pierre Cathedral in Rabat at the behest of the palace to commemorate the deaths of September 11.

The May 2003 suicide bombs that rocked Casablanca, killing dozens and wounding a hundred others was the straw that broke the camel's back. The regime launched a mas-

² Boukhars, *The Origins of Militancy and Salafism in Morocco*, 2005.

³ Tozy, *Les enchaînements paradoxaux de l'histoire du salafisme*, 2015, 217.

⁴ Belaala, *A new kind of fundamentalism Morocco: slums breed jihad*, 2014.

sive crackdown against the Salafi movement, targeting its firebrand preachers, recalcitrant followers and makeshift spaces of gatherings and prayers. Save the most docile and quiescent Salafi associations, the regime closed dozens of Salafi NGOs and Qur'anic schools. This assault on Salafis' symbols and infrastructure was accompanied by a radical overhaul of the country's religious institutions and social policy. The results became quickly quite notable in the severe weakening of *takfirī* Salafis, who terrorised citizens deemed impious. The struggle against the diffuse nebula of Jihadi groups, however, proved to be more difficult, as evidenced by the failed suicide attacks in Casablanca in 2007 and the 2011 bombings in Marrakesh, which killed 17 people. The sprouting of Salafi-Jihadist networks of recruiters who funnelled radicalised Moroccans to Iraq after the US invasion of 2003 and again to Syria, Iraq and Libya after the Arab revolts of 2011 also became a major source of concern for the Moroccan authorities. So far, these networks still lack any solid organisational presence in Morocco.

The onset of the 2011 Arab revolts provided an opportunity for Moroccan Salafis to jump on the protest bandwagon and reclaim the public arena from which they were banished after 2003. An appreciable number tried to rehabilitate their reputations and extract concessions from the regime, especially with regards to the highly sensitive question of Salafis detained under the 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law. The Moroccan monarchy's strategic flexibility and the Salafis' striking revisions of their radical religio-political ideologies facilitated the release from prison of major Salafi Jihadi figures such as Mohammed Al Fezazi, Mohammed Rafiki (Abou Hafs), Hassan Kettani and Omar Al-Hadouchi. The regime also allowed the quietist but controversial Salafi scholar, Mohammed Maghraoui, to return home from his exile in Saudi Arabia.

Several emerging trends can be noted in the post-2011 politics of the Salafi movement. The first major shift is a drift by former Salafi Jihadis towards political and social activism. Sheikh Mohamed Al Fezazi, who once denounced democracy and political pluralism as un-Islamic, is now actively seeking the regime's permission to create a political party. Other Salafis, such as Sheikh Abou Hafs, have integrated political parties. Al Fezazi and Abou Hafs mix preaching and political activism. The second Salafi trend prioritises social and religious activism over political engagement. Represented by apolitical figures such as Maghraoui or former detainees such as Hassan Kettani, this group of Salafis focuses on establishing Qur'anic schools and NGOs specialised in charitable activities and social service provisions. Both the first and second trends are driven by a high degree of pragmatism; their proponents, for example, publicly support the monarchy's political authority and religious legitimacy. The last trend is constituted of informal networks of hard-line ideologues that are sympathetic to Al-Qaeda's restrictive worldview. Some are still in prison while the rest have so far shunned a head-on collision with the monarchy and the coercive power of the state, focusing instead on *da'wa* (preaching) locally and recruiting fighters for the armed struggle in Syria and Libya.

IV. Salafi Ferment in Tunisia

Tunisian Salafism has had its own peculiar trajectory and local articulations. Unlike Morocco, which was never occupied by the Ottomans, Tunisia had an early taste of Ottoman reformism and its interactions with Western modernity and constitutionalism. The most emblematic figure of this period was Kheiredine Pacha, who strongly advocated for a reformist and rationalist reading of religion on the basis of reasoning derived from a re-interpretation of the original textual sources of

the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. His methods were also influenced by the political thoughts of Ibn Khaldoun, born in Tunis in 1332.⁵

When the French took over in 1881, the seeds of the pan-Salafi movement that sought to bring about a *nahḍa* (renaissance) of Islam were budding throughout the Arab World. The appropriation of this reformist Salafi tradition in Tunisian nationalism was facilitated by the rationalist tradition that Kheireddine helped propagate. Upon gaining independence in 1956, the Tunisian Salafi movement was, however, confronted by a more hostile environment than that faced by its counterpart in Morocco. Unlike the Moroccan monarchy, which was religiously conservative, the new rulers of Tunisia were determined to banish Islam to the private domain. President Habib Bourguiba's attempts at cultural de-Islamisation and de-traditionalisation of society created a rupture between the Salafi movement and a regime dominated by an east coast, Francophone elite.

To be sure, Bourguiba framed his assault on religious dogma and institutions within the tradition of Islamic reforms. In his view, he was not modifying the sources of Islam but simply proposing new and innovative readings of religious texts, using the Islamic tools of *ijtihād* (interpretation and reasoning based on religious texts) and *maṣlaḥ* (expediency) to connect the original Islamic sources with the changing realities of Tunisian society. This is after all the meaning of the Prophetic tradition that "God sent to this community, every hundred years, someone to renew its religion".

Bourguiba's reign sowed the seeds of the radicalisation of the religious sphere in Tunisia. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's ascent to power in 1987 further aggravated religious grievances. Ben Ali, like Bourguiba, was obsessed with the implications of the politicisation of Islam

on his hold on power. Under his tenure, political Islam was maligned as a repugnant ideology that was unfit for political life and that deserved to be confined to obscurity. Islamists were jailed, tortured and hounded out of the country. The Salafis on the other hand fared slightly better, as the dominant current within Salafism was quietist and non-confrontational toward the regime. This apolitical orientation shielded most Salafis from the wrath of the security services.

Under Ben Ali, a small number of disaffected Tunisians converted to this type of Salafism. This drift coincided with the slow but steady rising influence of an austere and puritanical form of Islam, powered in part by the return of the first contingent of Tunisian graduates from Saudi universities.⁶ The new converts to Salafism congregated with local charismatic preachers influenced by Saudi Wahhabism in discussion groups, designated cafes and mosques. Some gathered in Internet chat rooms or other online spaces to bypass the regime's control over information. Gradually, however, these virtual spaces became mediums through which initiation into violent extremism took place. Radical preachers and Jihadi recruiters urged Tunisians to defend their beliefs and values by joining the battlefields where Islam was under siege.

The scope of this radicalisation phenomena became evident in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Tunisians represented a high proportion of detainees (7% out of 125) at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay.⁷ This should not be surprising as Tunisians were active throughout the 1990s in the battlefields of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya. By 2000, Tunisian militants founded the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), linked to Al Qaeda and other radicals in Europe. Its first commander was Seifallah Ben Hassine, also known as Abu Ayadh, one of Osama Bin Laden's top lieutenants and the

⁵ Chaherli Harrar, *Les Lumières et les réformistes tunisiens*, 2008.

⁶ Tozy, *Les enchaînements paradoxaux de l'histoire du salafisme*, 2015, 225.

⁷ Ibid.

architect of the brazen assassination of the anti-Taliban leader Ahmad Shah Massoud in Afghanistan in 2001.

Recruitment cells popped up throughout the 2000s in Tunisia, especially in the south of the country, to funnel would be fighters to Iraq via Syria. Dozens of Tunisians were also recruited in European mosques and from the most impoverished and disaffected immigrant communities in suburban spaces in France and elsewhere. US President George W. Bush's administration's war on terrorism provided fodder for Jihadist propaganda, which portrayed a close-knit community of brothers in arms avenging the honour of the Muslim world. Up until 2002, however, Tunisians were being drafted to conduct terror attacks outside of Tunisia. That changed with the Ghriba synagogue bombing in April 2002, in which 19 people died. The violent clashes that occurred between security services and an armed militant group at Soliman in the southeast of Tunis in January 2007 showed the vulnerability of Tunisia and its security services to domestic terrorism.

The 2011 revolution saw a dramatic upsurge of Salafi Jihadism, which was powered by the release of hundreds of Salafis from prison and the return of several prominent sheikhs to Tunisia from their sanctuaries in Western Europe. The Salafi Jihadists employed a two-track strategy in the new political context, broadening their support base in poor urban neighbourhoods through social activism and the propagation of Salafi ideology while at the same time aggressively recruiting disaffected Tunisians into international Jihadi squads fighting in Syria and Mali.⁸

The result is the emergence of a new generation of Tunisian Jihadists who were not around for the first wave of Jihadi battles in Afghanistan in the 1980s and were too young for the second round of major clashes, which

began after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This third generation of Jihadists is best exemplified by the perpetrators of the 2015 terrorist attacks that hit the Bardo museum in the capital (22 deaths), a beach resort at Sousse (38 deaths) and a Tunisian presidential guard bus in downtown Tunis (12 deaths). Like most of their violent cohorts, they were born in the 1990s, had a taste of repressive authoritarianism, then stumbled into the politics of revolt that put an end to the rule of Ben Ali. The revolutionary thrill quickly gave way to the embrace of Salafi Jihadism as the primary vehicle of resistance to the disappointments of transitional politics.

Since then Tunisia has been confronted with a generational phenomenon that affects a very specific category of youth between the ages of 18 and 28. The Tunisian experience clearly shows that frustration with the democratic transition and exposure to self-proclaimed virtual or local radical Salafi preachers are important predictors of youth radicalisation. As frustration grows, some individuals become more prone to nihilism, as the high cases of suicides and self-immolations in the most impoverished neighbourhoods and regions demonstrate. Others become most susceptible to the 'heroic' charms of Jihadist warriors in the battlefields of Syria and Libya.

This gravitational pull of Salafi Jihadism is not only limited to youth residing in impoverished communities. Even if most Tunisians fighting in Syria and Libya originate from socially excluded neighbourhoods and regions, like the southern town of Ben Guerdane, several cases were for example detected in the affluent northern suburbs of Greater Tunis.⁹ Strong anti-system feelings and contamination by exposure to extremist ideas are the two main common denominators among those poor and middle class youths who have joined violent extremist movements.

⁸ Boukhars, *In the Crossfire: Islamists' Travails in Tunisia*, 2014.

⁹ Bendemmel, *Pourquoi Daech recrute-t-il autant en Tunisie?*, 2015.

V. Firebrand Salafism in Algeria

Salafism was introduced to Algeria at the turn of the twentieth century. Like in Morocco and Tunisia, this was essentially an intellectual and reformist movement that emphasised the compatibility of religious values, nationalism and progress. The chief standard bearer of mid-twentieth century Salafism was Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis (1889-1940), who founded the influential Association of Algerian Muslim 'Ulama (AAMU) in 1931. This association contributed to the first religious metamorphosis of Algerian Islam in the modern era. The years between 1930 and 1950 saw a drift away from the legacy of *marabūṭī* (traditional North African scholars) influences towards more orthodox forms of Sunni Islam. The growing homogenisation of the interpretations of Islam and the centralisation of religious authority made religion the idiom of choice in resisting French colonialism.

The National Liberation Front (FLN), which led the revolutionary war of independence against France (1954–62), courted the influential AAMU as an ally of convenience to help the movement brandish its religious credentials and mobilise popular support for the nationalist cause. Once those goals were achieved, the FLN sidelined the AAMU and became the torch bearer of Islamic nationalism and reformism. With independence, the '*Ulamā*' and Salafi movement lost control of the direction of the new independent state. Algeria's new rulers made the ideological choice of imbuing nationalism and reformist Islam with socialist realism. This elicited strong opposition from religious groups, the most influential of which was Al-Qiyam al-Islamiyya (Islamic Values), which emerged in 1964. Under the leadership of Hashemi Tidjani, the group proclaimed itself to be the bearer of the reformist legacy of Ben Badis. Qiyam's activism, however, was more political and ideological than its predecessor, the AAMU. Through its social networks and

publications, the group pressured Algeria's first post-independence president, Ahmed Ben Bella, to Arabicise the educational system and mandate religious education in public schools.

Houari Boumediene, who overthrew Ben Bella in June 1965, outlawed the association in 1966 after the group protested against the execution of Sayyid Qutb by the Nasser regime in Egypt. Boumediene adopted a two-prong strategy to deal with the heirs of Ben Badis. The most dissident and politicised groups were harassed and hounded by the state security forces. The more docile and quiescent were allowed to preach, proselytise and integrate into state institutions, especially the Ministry of Education. Unlike their Francophone predecessors, most of the new neo-reformist Salafis were Arabophones.

This new class of religious activists led the second round of religious metamorphosis in Algeria. This transformation departed from the intellectual foundations of the movement as conceived by Ben Badis. Under Chadli Bendjedid, who served as the third president of Algeria until ousted in a military coup in 1992, the new Salafis developed into an anti-intellectual populist bloc intent on Islamising state and society. The marginalised neighbourhoods of big cities provided fertile ground for the propagation of their increasingly austere interpretations of Islam. The most extreme interpretations were ensconced in Wahhabi creed, supported since the early 1960's by the Saudi establishment. Many Algerian Salafis had their formative years of Salafi Wahhabism in Saudi religious institutions, especially in the Islamic University in Medina.

Salafi inroads into Algerian society helped create the ideological infrastructure that legitimised the recourse to violence to challenge perceived unjust orders. The radical strands of militancy first appeared in the mid-1970's and became institutionalised in 1982 with the

creation of the Armed Islamic Movement (MIA) by Moustafa Bouyali, who rejected the gradualist approach to societal and political change. MIA launched a low-level underground insurgency for five years until the elimination of its founder in 1987.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 provided a new outlet for Algerians willing to defend their Muslim Brethren. Indeed, Algerians were amongst the first volunteers from North Africa to fight communist atheism. According to Algerian anthropologist Abderrahmane Moussaoui, the first Arab martyr is believed to be Algerian.¹⁰ The return of these fighters in the late 1980's and early 1990's to an Algeria beset by a deep socio-economic crisis boosted the most radical factions in the Salafi and Islamist movements. After the military aborted the democratic process in 1992, the Algerian Afghans played a major role in organising the armed insurgency against the military regime.

During the 1990's and 2000's, non-violent Salafism benefited from the proliferation of satellite television and the internet to refurbish its image, distance itself from violence and reclaim lost territory.¹¹ In so doing, it repositioned itself within the religious and political sphere as an authentic alternative to the erosion of the authority of political Islam and state-sanctioned religious institutions.¹²

After the 2011 Arab revolts, self-proclaimed Salafi preachers emerged as an assertive and provocative force. In 2014, a large group of Salafi imams provoked outrage when they refused to lead funeral prayers in memory of Algerian soldiers who died when a military transport plane crashed into Djebel Fertas mountain near Oum El Bouaghi. Salafi intolerance also exhibits itself in the mosques and

street markets that Salafis dominate. Salafis pressure street vendors and shopkeepers to adapt their goods to Islamic requirements and desist from selling alcohol and tobacco.¹³ In some mosques uncontrolled by the government, self-proclaimed Salafi imams are accused of propagating a panoply of fiery hate speech and extremist views.

The ambiguities of the government in dealing with radical Salafis call forth bitterness in some Algerians, who suspect the state of deliberately using radical Salafism as the perpetual bogeyman of Algerian politics. On the one hand, the government ruthlessly combats terrorist groups; on the other hand, it seems to tolerate the activism of controversial Salafis and propagation of their radical fringe ideas. Whatever the truth, the re-emergence of puritan Salafism in the Algerian public space has sparked intense public debates about the crisis of state institutions, especially religious ones. An appreciable number of Algerians cannot find inspiration or self-confidence in the traditional institutions of religion. The neighbourhood imams who once played an important role in moulding the worldviews of ordinary Algerians are increasingly being eclipsed by self-proclaimed Salafi preachers who make up for their mediocre religious credentials with slick sermonising and mastery of social media.¹⁴

VI. Mitigating the Rise of Salafism

In the post-Arab revolts of 2011, Algeria and Tunisia have struggled to develop a coherent strategy to contain the steady expansion of firebrand Salafism in their societies. Morocco has gone the farthest in its attempts to rehabilitate traditional religious institutions and restore order to the disruptive anarchy generated by a bazaar of online fatwas. The

¹⁰ Blidi, *Comment la mouvance salafiste s'est enracinée en Algérie?*, 2015.

¹¹ Boukhars, *'Quietist' and 'Firebrand' Salafism in Algeria*, 2015.

¹² Unlike in Tunisia and Morocco, where mainstream political Islamists have matured into important intellectual and electoral forces, Algerian Islamists have sunk into intellectual lethargy and disconnect from their surroundings.

¹³ Chikhi, *Hard-line Islam steps out of shadows in Algeria*, 2010.

¹⁴ Boukhars, *'Quietist' and 'Firebrand' Salafism in Algeria*, 2015.

kingdom has become a major international hub for training foreign imams from Tunisia, Mali, Gabon, Guinea, Ivory Coast, the Maldives and Belgium. Algeria and Tunisia are trying to follow the Moroccan model in drastically overhauling the management of religion in their country. Both countries are attempting to strengthen traditional religious institutions and reform religious education in order to be in conformity with the tolerant and inclusive teachings of North African Islam.

The Algerian regime is working on bolstering the institutional framework for the supervision of the affairs of mosques and religious discourse. In 2015, the government created the Scientific National Council (SNC) in order to issue 'official' fatwas informed by the socio-political context they are meant to apply to.¹⁵ The Algerian regime might even be tempted to follow the Moroccan model of politically integrating hard-line Salafis who have publicly disavowed violence and the subversion of the country's supreme political symbols and religious references.

These attempts to revive the North African tolerant spirit of religious tradition and learning are important tools in winning the battle of ideas against exclusivist ideologies. Ulti-

mately, however, the development of competent clerics and credible religious institutions remains only one tool in the fight against religious extremism. Serious and credible theologians can tear down violent interpretations of Islam, but unfortunately they cannot tackle the root causes of militancy, which are mainly political and socio-economic by origin.

As the Tunisian experience clearly illustrates, political disenchantment, social inequality and regional asymmetries are having a dangerous effect on Tunisia's brittle fragility. Aggrieved youths increasingly express their anger in protests, street violence and violent extremism. In Algeria, economic stagnation, political paralysis and generational changes have deepened Algerians' estrangement from the pitiful realities of the prevailing socioeconomic and political order. In both Algeria and Tunisia, the return of Salafism epitomises a moral rebellion against the crisis of state institutions, including religious ones. In Morocco, where the monarchy enjoys religious legitimacy and popular support, Salafism provides an alternative to religious conservatives disenchanted with the political pragmatism and religious moderation of mainstream Islamist political parties like the PJD.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Alilat, *Algérie: la fatwa, une affaire d'État*, 2015.

¹⁶ Lefèvre, *North Africa's Maliki Crisis*, 2015.

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