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‘Quietist’ Salafism in North Africa: Outlining Moroccan and Libyan Developments

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14 DECEMBER 2021

Abstract: **'Quietist' Salafis, considered typically to reject politics, political activism, and violence, and instead focus on religious education and learning, are in many ways the 'heart' of global Salafism. They also have deep roots and a significant following in North Africa, including in Morocco and Libya. How then have 'quietist' Salafis grappled with the 2011/12 popular uprisings that swept through both countries? In both countries, 'quietist' Salafis remained loyal – at least publicly – to the incumbent regime. Yet in Morocco, between 2011-2013, they also established an informal alliance with the country's largest Islamist party. In both countries since 2011, 'quietist' Salafis experienced fragmentation. In Morocco, this unfolded between the newly-politicised and the 'traditionalist,' anti-political Salafi milieus. In Libya, by contrast, 'quietists' split over whether to support the Western-based or Eastern-based central authorities in the country after the disintegration of the central state in Tripoli.**

Morocco and the Dor al-Qur'an before 2011

A Wahhabi-inspired Salafi trend emerged in Morocco in the 1970s, with the founding of the 'Association for the Call to the Qur'an and the Sunna' (*Jama'īa al-Da'wah Ila al-Qur'an wa-l-Sunna*) – popularly referred to as *Dor al-Qur'an* – in Marrakech in 1976 by Mohammed al-Maghraoui. Maghraoui had studied at the Islamic University in Medina, and maintained close relations with his former tutors in Saudi Arabia, Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani and 'Abd el-'Aziz Ibn Baz[1], until their deaths in 1999. Today, Dor al-Qur'an maintains strong relationships with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait-based 'quietest' Salafi transnational networks underpinned by al-Albani and Ibn Baz's ideas. Maghraoui's relationship to Salafi-Madkhalism, a branch of 'quietist' Salafism that coagulated around students and followers of al-Albani, namely Rabi al-Madkhali[2] and his brother, Muhammad al-Madkhali, has been less close, particularly following Rabi al-Madkhali's public reproval of Maghraoui since 1999. Salafi-Madkhalism differs from other forms of 'quietist' Salafism through its particularly steadfast commitment to the "unquestioned and unquestionable authority of a ruling power."[1] Dor al-Qur'an sheikhs criticise what they consider to be Salafi-Madkhalism's avowal of absolute obedience to the political authority even in cases where the ruler engages in 'disbelief.'[2] In any case, pre-2011 Dor al-Qur'an argued that political parties, including Islamist parties, as well as protests, political participation, and disobedience to the political ruler of a state were all *haram* (forbidden). Following al-Albani's approach, Dor al-Qur'an focused on *al-Tarbiyya wa-l-Taṣfiyya* (teaching Islam and cleansing it of 'heterodox' accretions). Accordingly, Dor al-Qur'an is paradigmatic of the type of Salafi groups generally considered 'quietists' by scholarship on Salafism. In the period between 1979 and 2000, the Moroccan *makhzen* (the palace-oriented political establishment) thought of Dor al-Qur'an as a pro-status quo trend potentially useful to oppose new domestic Islamist and leftist challenges.[3] The regime therefore allowed Maghraoui to expand his network through mosques and new centres.

1- Al-Albani was a Syrian national, scholar of the *ḥadīth,* and good friend of Ibn Baz. He worked as a professor at the Islamic University of Medina and censured Wahhabi approaches to *fiqh* (law) for their reliance on Hanbali jurisprudence. Instead, al-Albani argued for the central place of the 'science of hadith' within the religious sciences (see Lacroix, 2008). A Saudi Arabian scholar, Ibn Baz was grand mufti of Saudi Arabia and vice chancellor of the Islamic University of Medina.

2- A student of al-Albani, Rabi al-Madkhali is a *ḥadīth* expert and the former head of the Sunnah Studies Department at the Islamic University of Madinah.

Yet Dor al-Qur'an's co-existence with the regime came to a sudden conclusion, following the suicide bombings in Casablanca in 2003 by Salafi-jihadi networks.[4] A widespread crackdown on jihadi militancy, and Salafi networks more broadly, followed.[5] To challenge Salafi religiosity in the Kingdom, the authorities closed all of Dor al-Qur'an's centres, except its headquarters.[6] After issuing a controversial *fatwa*[7] (or religious ruling) in 2008 stating that marriage was permissible in Islam for girls as young as nine years old,[8] Maghraoui and his family left for Saudi Arabia, where they remained in voluntary exile until 2011.[9]

The arrival of Salafis in Libya under Gadhafi from 1990 – 2011

The quietist Salafis were invited into the country and partially supported by the Libyan regime in the 1990s. The official regime narrative deemed them an originally foreign movement that Gadhafi had nurtured, but that had no actual interest or agenda in Libya (and therefore was presumably harmless).[10] With regard to the emergence of quietist Salafism in Libya, one aspect is most important: al-Albani's strong stance against engaging in politics. This was exemplified in his discussions of Islamists movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, as he emphasises their impure understanding of the Qurʾan and hadith.[11] In the late 1980s, some of al-Albani's followers, led by Rabi al-Madkhali from the University in Medina, formed an informal religious network. In addition to focusing on *hadith*, they started propagating al-Albani's calls not to engage in politics and more explicitly denounce those who did so.[12] Many members of this emerging network were of peripheral origin in Saudi Arabia as they came from smaller cities, like Rabi al-Madkhali.[13] In ideological terms, the notion of absolute obedience to the ruler lies at the heart of Salafi-Madkhalism and serves as an eccentricity that sets the Salafi-Madkhalis apart from other Salafis and is captured in the concept of Islamic legitimacy grounded in the principal belief of the *wali al-amr*, or loyalty to the communal leader or head of state.[14]

Embedded in the process of developing his ideological stance, al-Madkhali also embraced the Saudi monarchy. On the part of the Saudi regime, the Salafi-Madkhalis started to obtain financial support as the rulers hoped to foster an apolitical ideological counterweight to the Islamist reformists led by the *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Awakening).[15] In this spirit, the movement was treated comparatively amicably by Gadhafi in order to bolster his regime's claims of religious legitimacy, while at the same time not exhibiting a challenge to the regime itself. The ideology came to Libya mainly via Libyan disciples who had studied in Saudi Arabia, such as Shaykh Abu Musab Majdi Hafala, one of the key Salafi-Madkhali preachers still active to this day in Libya.[16]

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The '20 February' Protests in 2011 and Maghraoui's Negotiated Return to Morocco

Following the eruption of the '20 February' protest movement in 2011 in Morocco that pushed for substantive political and economic reform, the *makhzen* allowed Maghraoui to return to Morocco on the condition that he would support the regime's reform agenda, which it hoped would appease the demonstrators. Responding to the new political opening and political opportunity structures, Maghraoui suddenly shifted his position on political participation, protests, the '20 February' movement, and Islamist networks. He disavowed his historical rejection of protests as impermissible and prone to facilitate *fitna* (chaos or tribulation).[17] Instead, he now argued that in countries *not* based on Islamic rules, and in which demonstrations were legally permitted – by which he meant Morocco – one could benefit from demonstrations. He also publicly described the protests as "a blessed movement." Maghraoui's highly critical attitudes towards competing Islamist movements – most significantly the Justice and Development Party (*Hizb al-'Adala wa-l- Tanmiyya* – henceforth, PJD) – also became more conciliatory after years of stern public reproach for their participation in electoral politics and what Maghraoui had decried as their doctrinal innovation (*al-Bida'h*).[18] In 2011, as part of Maghraoui's arrangement with the regime to combat low voter-turnout, Maghraoui publicly urged Moroccans to vote in support of the new constitutional amendments proposed by the monarchy. In doing so, Maghraoui, for the first time, argued that voting and electoral participation were legitimate practices.

Moreover, Dor al-Qur'an indicated a new openness to political participation by beseeching Moroccans to vote in the 25 November 2011 parliamentary elections. Whilst Dor al-Qur'an publicly held that it did not support any particular party,[19] in more private settings Maghraoui adjured his followers to vote for the Islamist PJD party.[20] This new arrangement between Maghraoui and the PJD was pragmatic. Maghraoui aimed to ensure the survival of his Salafi association by delivering Salafi votes to PJD candidates running in Marrakech in return for the PJD's support in pushing the regime to reopen Dor al-Qur'an's centres.

The 2011 uprisings and Salafi (non-)involvement in Libya

In the early 1990s when the first Salafi-Madkhalis arrived in Libya, Gadhafi's regime faced a Salafi-Jihadi resistance[21] by the *al-Jama'a al-Islamiya al-Muqatila bi-Libya* (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group – LIFG). Therefore, Gadhafi started supporting quietist Salafis more actively as a counterweight, especially promoting Madkhali adherents in mosques to proliferate their teachings of commitment to the ruling authority, while simultaneously placing Salafi-Madkhalis in the security apparatus

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to follow discussions in the mosques and connected religious spaces for any sign of religiously inspired challenges to the regime.[22] One of Gadhafi's sons, Saadi Gadhafi, was given a leading role, serving as a point of contact between the Salafi-Madkhalis and the regime. In the 2000s, Saadi became increasingly active within Salafi-Madkhali circles, visiting their mosques in Tripoli, and superficially aspiring to the beard of its adherents. At the time, Salafi-Madkhalis established a social base in several neighbourhoods of Tripoli – most notably Buslim, Hadhba and Souq al-Juma[23] – through *daʿwah* and charitable works, dominating existing mosques as well as establishing new ones.[24]

In addition, they became active on television as well as social media, a trend that exacerbated after 2011. Due to the regime and this religious current's close relationship and burgeoning co-dependency, the Salafi-Madkhalis were included into some state structures.[25] Therefore, in addition to ideological reasoning, a potential weakening and restructuring of the existing system would certainly come with possible disadvantages for the Salafi-Madkhalis regarding their extant political and economic benefits.[26] During the time of the anti-Qadhafi regime protests between February and August 2011, some of them were co-opted for pro-Gadhafi propaganda, issuing statements on TV and radio to cast religious legitimacy on the regime and de-legitimise the revolutionaries. On multiple occasions, Al-Madkhali called on his Libyan followers to remain home, declaring participation as *fitna*, or creating sedition against a lawful ruler (amongst other connotations that include falling into sin and hypocrisy), and continued to insist on this narrative even in October 2011 – eight months into the uprisings and with little chance left for the survival of Gadhafi's regime.[27]

Growing Dissent within Dor al-Qur'an

In a 2012 publication, one of Maghraoui's protégés at Dor al-Qur'an, sheikh Hammad al-Qabbaj, argued that Salafis can "benefit" from some of democracy's procedures,[28] for example elections, voting, and parliament, as well as gatherings, demonstrations, sit-ins, and strikes. Al-Qabbaj also maintained that protests are legitimate insofar as they don't contradict *Sharʿīa* law and achieve the public interest (*al-Maṣlaḥa*). Whilst some sheikhs at Dor al-Qur'an endorsed these ideas, many disagreed and instead reaffirmed Maghraoui's traditional position that democratic politics was disbelief and polytheism (*shirk*) and that *direct* political participation – as opposed to informal alliance building with the PJD – was "deviation". By mid-2013, the regime closed all five of Dor al-Qur'an's centres.[29] This was likely a response to the growing entente between Dor al-Qur'an and the PJD, and Maghraoui's support for the PJD in the 2011 parliamentary elections rather than for

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a party sponsored by the palace, such as the Authenticity and Modernity Party (the PAM party).[30] The ideological divisions within Dor al-Qur'an were increasingly unassailable and, ultimately, al-Qabbaj and his followers would resign from Dor al-Qur'an in mid-2013.

Libya slides into civil war and everyone has to choose sides

With Gadhafi's death in October 2011, the lingering fall of his regime was sealed and the Salafi-Madkhalis found themselves in the unfortunate position of having supported the revolution's losing side. Gadhafi's fall shook the Salafi-Madkhali groups to their ideological core, with the concept of *wali al-amr* requiring redirection, as the ruling authority had been eradicated. However, ideologies can adapt to surrounding developments and local actors are shaped by opportunity structures.[31] Both of these aspects can be traced in the Salafi-Madkhalis' developments after the successful 2011 revolution and the following pressure for reorientation in ideological and practical terms. The immediate political developments in Libya were determined by the expeditious push for elections, heavily promoted by international powers, mostly the ones that had supported the revolutionaries with military airpower over the previous months.[32] Naturally, the Salafi-Madkhalis did not participate in the elections, instead, Rabi al-Madkhali continued to warn against getting entangled in democracy.[33] On the ground in Libya, Salafi-Madkhalis rallied against the first elections in post-Gadhafi Libya. Hafala advised young Libyans to (still) not engage in politics, saying that the best way to "do politics is to withdraw from politics."[34] Furthermore, and in line with their tradition of focusing on religious life, some Salafi-Madkhalis started "prevention of vice and promotion of virtue" groups in Tripoli, some of whose members were later incorporated into militias in Tripoli,[35] such as the Radaa Force. These developments provide support for the pragmatic behaviour pursued by local Salafis, including the Madkhalis, in response to a changing environment.

Maghraoui's volte-face and Qabbaj's politicisation in Morocco

Seeking to curry goodwill from the regime in the face of renewed repression, by late 2013 Maghraoui dramatically abandoned his discourse from 2011 and 2012 concerning politics. Dor al-Qur'an's "approach is not to go into contemporary politics, which we see as far from legitimate Islamic politics (*al-Siyāsa al-Shara'iyya*)" he reasoned.[36] Maghraoui was also increasingly cognisant that the PJD was unable, if not unwilling, to expend sufficient political capital to secure Dor al-Qur'an's reopening for a second time. Consequently, in 2015 the sheikh re-established his traditional censure of the Islamist party.[37] Under pressure from the *makhzen* to help counter voter abstention, Maghraoui did, however, encourage Moroccans to participate in the 2015 local and regional elections as well as the 2016 parliamentary

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elections. With the collapse of Maghraoui-PJD relations, the PJD leadership – focused on upcoming electoral cycles – chose al-Qabbaj as their candidate for a central Marrakech constituency for the 2016 parliamentary elections.[38] Al-Qabbaj agreed. Al-Qabbaj's parliamentary ambitions were wrecked, however, when the Ministry of Interior rejected his candidacy. Repeating his dalliance with party politics in 2011, Maghraoui forged a secret alliance with the palace-backed PAM party ahead of the 2016 elections. Maghraoui is alleged to have "strongly" called on his followers to encourage relatives and friends to vote for PAM. When the regime then reopened Dor al-Quran just days before the election, many sensed the monarchy's direct involvement.

Libya's quietist Salafis grow in influence and internal friction

Libya's 'quietist' Salafis were invested in securing any political influence and institutional entrenchment they had been able to secure under Gadhafi.[39] In practical terms, entanglement with the Gadhafi regime apparatus is indicative of the Salafi-Madkhalis' success in infiltrating all sides of the current militia landscape in Libya given their experience with cooperating with other security actors. In addition, they managed to influence important governance institutions such as the religious endowments (*awqāf*), through which they could wield significant influence.[40] For example, as documents from the established Eastern religious authority show, they instituted their concept of *wali al-amr* with assertiveness, denouncing the protests in Benghazi on 15 October 2018 as "an outcome of the so-called Western civilisation," while asserting the need for obedience as "there is no group without an imam and there is no imam without obedience."

However, not all Salafi-Madkhalis fight for the same cause. Eight years after Gadhafi's fall, Salafi-Madkhali groups find themselves on opposing sides, some of them aligned with Western-based authorities and some of them integrated into the Eastern-based powerhouse of the Libyan National Army. Both of these authorities are propagated by different Salafi-Madkhali scholars as being the *wali al-amr*. To make things even more complicated, not even the Salafi-Madkhalis operating in the East can agree on who to consider as the *wali al-amr*. In a video published on 19 October 2018, Ashraf Maiar, a Salafi-Madkhali leader of the Salafi Brigade in Eastern Libya, devoted the House of Representatives with its head Aguila Saleh as *wali al-amr* and did not mention the leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA), Khalifa Haftar.[41]

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Conclusion and outlook

Overall, the Salafi-Madkhalis' actions and adaptations in post-revolutionary Libya focused on morphing into a social, but also security force. To be clear, the Salafi-Madkhalis cannot operate unrestrained – neither of their affiliated militias is powerful enough to enforce itself as the only power player in Libya.[42] Instead, the state in Libya is contested in all areas, but the absence of a functioning central state has undermined trust in the state apparatus. This has opened up space for groups with religious-based ideologies to gain ground. In Morocco, following the nationwide popular protests of 2011, the *makhzen* allowed the Ibn Baz-inspired 'quietist' Salafi milieu, centred on Maghraoui and Dor al-Qur'an in Marrakech, to return to public and political life from which they had been largely excluded since the 2003 Casablanca bombings. Opportunities to take sides multiplied as the demonstrations and sit-ins forced Dor al-Qur'an to formulate a position towards the popular uprising. Within this context, Maghraoui abandoned his traditional eschewal of electoral politics, the ballot box and demonstrations. After years of harshly rebuking Islamist currents, Maghraoui established a largely instrumental alliance with the Islamist PJD party. The sheikh sought the survival of his Salafi movement by swapping Salafi support and votes for the PJD's advocacy in pushing the *makhzen* to reopen Dor al-Qur'an's centres. Yet unlike the revolt in Libya, in Morocco the protests demanded political and economic reform, not regime change. Indeed, by 2013, the *makhzen* had re-established its dominance within the Moroccan political system and began to close political space. This included shutting down Dor al-Qur'an due to its pact with the increasingly powerful PJD. The *mazkhen*'s policy remained clear: only small numbers of Salafis, rather than Salafi associations, could associate with small, uninfluential political parties. In response, Maghraoui rolled back on his new political discourse and returned to his traditional lambasting of the Islamist PJD party. Yet despite the sheikh's volte-face, he was required to support the pro-palace PAM party in the 2016 elections, the PJD's main competitor for seats in the Marrakech area, as part of any deal with the *makhzen* to secure his association's reopening.

The significance of quietist Salafism for the region is therefore tangible as this text has outlined that the principle of political obedience does not neutralise an agenda. With its growing influence quietist Salafis could transform Libya's social scene towards a vision of social conformity that rejects other North African traditions of what Islam should be. How this quietist agenda develops despite or in interplay with local and tribal identities will need to be watched.

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