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Quietist Salafism Between (Neo)liberal Apprehensions and Convergence

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Salafism – a scripturalist, literalist, transnational Sunni Islamic movement – is one of the most influential contemporary Islamic ideologies. Salafis tend to reject liberalism and democratic politics and often urge strict obedience to incumbent regimes, including illiberal and authoritarian states, in the name of political security.

- The typical Salafi rejection of liberal democratic politics and liberalism is generally based on the argument that these concepts and practices are "un-Islamic" and rooted in "forbidden," "Western" ideologies. Further, there is usually little convergence between the thinking of Salafi actors and the economic injunctions of liberalism and neoliberalism.
- Through an in-depth study of the largest and most prominent Salafi group in Morocco – the quietist Dor al-Qur'an association, centred around Sheikh Muhammad ibn ʻAbd al-Rahman al-Maghrawi – this paper argues that despite these Salafis' deep apprehensions vis-à-vis liberalism and their general disregard for questions of the economy and the market, there are in fact striking affinities between the political and societal prescriptions of liberalism and neoliberalism and those of Dor al-Qur'an.
- The paper contrasts these Dor al-Qur'an Salafis' thinking vis-à-vis individual responsibility, "crisis," the state, and societal transformation with that of their Islamist competitor, the Moroccan Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD).

CONTEXT

There are some striking similarities between quietist Salafi thinking in Morocco and key political and societal dictates of liberal and neoliberal logics. These traditions all variously vilify the state as a means of effecting individual and, ultimately, societal transformation. They also variously locate matters of responsibility at the level of each individual, rather than at the level of society or the state.

SALAFISM AND ITS SUB-TYPES – CONTEXTUALIZING THE DEBATE

Salafism is one of the most influential contemporary Islamic ideologies (Bano 2021: 3). It can be described as a scripturalist, literalist, transnational Sunni Islamic movement. It is also centred on a theology (or *ʿaqīda*) stressing a return to the beliefs and practices of the first three generations of Muslims – *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* ("pious ancestors") – and a particular conception of *tawḥīd*, or God's oneness, and thus of a complete submission to God. Scholarship on Salafism analyses the basic tenets of Salafi doctrine, Salafism's popular appeal, its relationship with politics and violence, and its nature as both a transnational and local phenomenon.

Scholars identify several Salafi sub-types: quietists (*al-salafiyya al-'ilmiy*), politicos, and jihadis. Quietist Salafis, the focus of this paper, view institutional and oppositional politics as a diversion that threatens to degrade the purity of Islam by introducing human desires and emotions into it. They also disavow criticism of Muslim rulers. Quietist Salafis are in many ways the true heart of the movement and the largest cohort within contemporary Salafism. By contrast, politico Salafis believe that they understand the intricacies of current affairs and are therefore better placed to apply the Salafi creed to contemporary issues. They thus engage in institutional and oppositional politics. Finally, jihadi-Salafis argue that neither quietist nor politico Salafis sufficiently comprehend the amount of un-Islamic influence and corruption amongst (Arab) rulers today. They therefore advocate unseating these leaders through revolutionary violence.

Existing scholarship argues that given their focus on the purification of religious doctrine and ritual worship, quietist Salafis typically have little to say about the economy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there has therefore been fairly limited scholarly work on the relationship between neoliberal logics and Salafi political thinking. One recent exception, however, is Cavatorta and Resta's work (2019; see also Adraoui (2019) and Amghar (2020)), which shows that with the recent emergence of Salafi political parties – particularly in Egypt – Salafis have formulated economic policies that emphasise job creation, welfare, and income redistribution. These Salafis do so via their increasingly pragmatic approach to policymaking, one that seeks to appeal to a broader set of voters beyond the confines of Salafi communities. Cavatorta and Resta observe that whilst these Salafi approaches appear to be "in line with traditional leftist thinking about state intervention" (Ibid: 2), these Salafi parties envision a restricted role for the state in redistributive policies and tend to underscore the role of "private or semi-private religious entities" in leading "welfare programmes" or conducting "productive investments." In short, Cavatorta and Resta conclude that these Salafi parties emphasise "greater reliance on social solidarity than on the state" (Ibid: 3). In doing so, Salafi economic thought appeals not only to these redistributive ideas but also to "neoliberal economic principles." By contrast, other, smaller Salafi parties in Egypt endorse this relationship between individual piety and neoliberal economic policies.

Elsewhere, Stadlbauer (2021) underscores Salafis' adherence to what she calls the "modern" "values of individuality and reliance on the 'self'." Rock-Singer (2022: 2) points to Salafis' particular "approach to the social world" whereby they assume "a broad, anonymous, and homogenous space [that is] bereft of stabilizing social structures, yet filled with individuals tasked with regulating themselves as they communicate ethical positions and political allegiances alike." Building on this analysis, this paper fleshes out this strand of thinking within Morocco's quietist Salafi milieu and, in doing so, outlines key points of convergence and difference vis-à-vis liberalism and neoliberal logics specifically.

On first blush, connecting quietist Salafism with liberalism and neoliberalism appears oxymoronic. Quietist Salafis in Morocco, for example, focus on individual piety, Islamic

education, and the "purification" of religious doctrine and prayer rituals. They generally appear to have little to say about the economy and the market. Furthermore, scholars observe that where quietist Salafis do engage directly with matters of politics, they berate liberalism – particularly its focus on individual rights and liberal democracy – as "un-Islamic" and as exemplifying "Western" ideas and practices. For example, in the published works and lectures of quietist Salafis associated with the Dor al-Qur'an group in Morocco, and during my conversations with them (2016–2020), they explicitly rebuke "liberalism" and liberals' advocacy of "secularism" and "democracy" as "foreign" and "non-Islamic" concepts and practices that, through their majoritarianism, have allowed for the rule of "unlearned" individuals. In the words of Dor al-Qur'an's founder and leader, al-Maghrawi, political participation "in all Arab countries [has been] mostly a failure because it follows the path of [...] liberal currents" (Maghress 2011). The persistent dominance of other political forces in Morocco – not just "secularists" and "liberals," but also Sufis, Shīʿī, and poorly educated individuals – means that politicians legislate not God's laws and rules, but rather "what most people want." In the eyes of Dor al-Qur'an, therefore, liberalism and democracy preclude any substantive Islamic reform and facilitate the grave sin of positioning humans as elected political rulers in ways that violate the sole dominion of God.

Additionally, quietist Salafis are typically distinguished by a strict avowal of obedience towards the incumbent political ruler (*walī al-āmr*). This means that they publicly support incumbent autocratic regimes – regimes that engage in policies of repression that neglect and violate liberal rights. Additionally, this quietist Salafi injunction to political obedience often encompasses a harsh rebuke of citizens who publicly criticise or protest illiberal and/or authoritarian regimes.

However, by closely analysing the everyday thinking practices of not just elite, but also middle-ranking and rank-and-file, quietist Salafi actors in Morocco, this paper argues that the thinking of these quietist Salafi figures in Morocco encompasses a set of ideas about state power, societal reform, state–society relations, and individual responsibility. These ideas indicate a series of oppositions to, but also convergences with, facets of liberalism and neoliberalism. By contrasting the ideas of these quietist Salafis with those of competing Islamist political parties in Morocco, this paper maintains that liberalism's and neoliberalism's vilification of the state as a means of effecting individual and, ultimately, societal transformation, their radical emphasis on the individual, and their insistence on the state's primary role as providing social order are also at the core of Salafi quietist contemporary political thinking in Morocco.

QUIETIST SALAFISM IN MOROCCO

A Salafi trend slowly metamorphosed into a movement in Morocco centred on Marrakech following the 1974 return to Morocco of the preacher Muhammad Taqi al-Din ʿAbd al-Qader al-Hilali (d. 1987) (Tozy 2009). Al-Hilali studied in Saudi Arabia and taught as a professor of Islamic Studies at the Islamic University of Medina under his patron, ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Baz (d. 1999) (Lauzière 2015: 202). Maintaining private correspondence and close relations with key figures within the Wahhabi *ʿulamāʾ* – Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqqi (d. 1959), Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999) and, in particular, the aforementioned Ibn Baz – al-Hilali received financial support from Saudi Wahhabi institutions (Ibid: 209 & 214). Few Moroccans benefitted more directly from al-Hilali's close connections to the Saudi religious establishment than his protégé, Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Maghrawi (1948–). A native of eastern Morocco, al-Maghrawi attended classes run by al-Hilali, where the former won a letter of recommendation from his mentor that paved the way for his studies at the Islamic University of Medina (Aboullouz 2008: 131). Having completed his Ph.D. there on Salafi doctrine (*ʿaqīda*), al-Maghrawi returned to Marrakech

and established a Salafi association popularly referred to as Dor al-Qur'an in 1976. He remained closely aligned with Ibn Baz, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia and luminary of quietist Salafism.

Between 1979 and 2000, the palace-oriented political establishment in Morocco (or *makhzen*) permitted the spread of Salafism. It considered Dor al-Qur'an a means of undercutting domestic Islamist and leftist challenges. Consequently, Dor al-Qur'an expanded its socio-religious presence through mosques and associations. However, the terrorist bombings in Casablanca on 16 May 2003 shattered Dor al-Qur'an's working relationship with the makhzen. A regime crackdown on Salafi networks ensued, and although the wider quietist Salafi milieu had not been implicated in the attacks, Dor al-Qur'an's centres in Marrakech were closed en masse.

Yet, eight years later in 2011, a wave of demonstrations under the banner of the 20 February movement spread across Morocco. Protestors called for economic and political reform. Unlike their counterparts elsewhere in the region, they did not publicly challenge King Mohammed VI's position or impugn the monarchy. On the condition that al-Maghrawi not join the protests, the *makhzen* allowed the sheikh to return to the public sphere from which he, and other elements within Morocco's broader Salafi milieu, had effectively been banned since the 2003 bombings. Whilst al-Maghrawi did not participate in the protests, he did renege on his pre-2011 disavowal of protests as impermissible and instead came out in support of the demonstrations (Medi1 TV 2011). Having long proclaimed that participation in the formal political game was forbidden, for the first time al-Maghrawi reasoned that electoral participation was a permissible practice. This was short-lived, however: as the *makhzen* reasserted its control over the Moroccan political system in 2013, it once again closed Dor al-Qur'an's centres in Marrakech in retaliation for its alliance with the then increasingly powerful Party of Justice and Development (PJD). Al-Maghrawi quickly returned to rejecting all forms of contemporary politics and political protest as "un-Islamic."

LIBERALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM

At the core of the liberal tradition is a commitment to the freedom of the individual as normatively basic, and thus the primacy of individual rights and freedom over and above collective claims. It is therefore characterised by a "profound concern with the overpowering state" (Etzioni 1999). It broadly advocates limited government interference in the conduct of individual life generally, and limited government interference in promoting a particular notion of the "good society." Liberalism is then "a political ideology aligned to the historical emergence of 'free market' capitalism and Western-style representative democracy" (Bell 2014: 704). Classical liberalism and, in effect, libertarianism, theorises liberty as freedom from external constraints. It considers the state as the principal threat to individual liberty and so calls for strict limits to its powers.

Neoliberalism, then, is the upshot of what Cahill et al. (2018: xxvii) call "normative neoliberal doctrines" that seek to return societies to classical liberalism and its notion of the self-regulating market. As Schmidt (2018: 69) writes, neoliberalism in "advanced industrialized countries" – as a "substantive political economic philosophy" – in part encompasses ideas related to political economy: the benefits of unfettered markets, the perils of interventionist state structures, the importance of deregulation and privatisation, and the necessities of austerity and structural reform. As I go on to argue, quietist Salafis in Morocco have little to say about the (political) economic dimensions of neoliberalism.

However, for Schmidt, other core neoliberal principles that focus more on matters of politics and societal transformation conceive of the polity as "made up of the individual first [and] the community second, with regard to community-based demands on the individual" (Ibid: 70). Here, then, neoliberalism envisions the state as "inherently

dangerous" because of its tendency to negatively affect not simply the "freedom of market actors' transactions in capitalism economies" but also the freedom of individuals to choose. In this way, Schmidt argues that whilst all "such neoliberal philosophies" consider the state as the main problem, they simultaneously acknowledge the importance of a strong state as a precondition for forging and maintaining the sorts of institutions required for a free market to proliferate (Ibid). It is these socio-political facets of liberalism and neoliberalism that, I argue, dovetail with aspects of quietist Salafi thinking in Morocco.

SALAFISM, (NEO)LIBERALISM, AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Under neoliberalism, the state per se should play a limited role in social change. Instead, the *market* operates as the "vehicle of individual transformation and, indirectly, of social reformation" (Iqtidar 2017: 794). My Salafi participants spent almost no time theorising the market, nor did they often discuss whether the state should abstain from interfering in citizens' economic activities and instead deploy its capabilities to secure open economic activity. Despite this, however, I argue here that quietist Salafis in Morocco espouse an approach to the location and nature of contemporary "crisis" (*azma*) and *fitna* (tribulation or chaos) that converged on several core features of liberal and neoliberal thinking regarding politics, society, the individual, and the state. Specifically, I contend that the quietist Dor al-Qur'an Salafi movement in Morocco shares with liberal and neoliberal logics a propensity to locate responsibility not at the level of society or the state and its political leaders or leadership, but rather at the level of the individual.

For Dor al-Qur'an Salafis, the "crisis" of contemporary Moroccan society comprises "inauthentic" Islamic practices of worship and a range of personal and public morality issues. Accordingly, the principal element of *fitna*, they argue, is a lack of the individual's confidence associated with access to authentic religious knowledge about God, the Qur'an, and the Sunna. In short, they define the notions of "ignorance" and "ethical crisis" in ways that foreground ritualistic worship-focused and personal and public morality issues. Other issues that competing Islamist groups, such as the PJD, variously bound up within their own understandings of "crisis," such as political crisis and problems associated with infrastructure, are explicitly *excluded* from Dor al-Qur'an's own notion of "crisis."

Not only do Dor al-Qur'an Salafis link *fitna* to an absence of "authentic" religious knowledge, they also see it as rooted in matters of individual responsibility. They therefore push back on the rhetoric of the PJD and other competing Islamist groups in Morocco who argue that Morocco's contemporary crisis is located in the structures of social and political life – in political culture, legislation, institutionalised corruption, social groups, and forces opposed to Islamic practice. In fact, by contrast, the PJD disputes Dor al-Qur'an's analysis by arguing that these structural obstacles to everyday Moroccans' practice of Islam are so powerful that individuals alone cannot be expected to overcome them as part of any challenge or "test" of faith.

For Dor al-Qur'an, obstacles related to a Western secular culture infiltrating Morocco, the malicious role of Sufi guilds, and Shi'ite "cells" are important at the level of individual choices. While Dor al-Qur'an's Islamist competitors describe "crisis" as due to the failure of social institutions and, thereby, as *external* to the individual's Islamic practices, faith, and religious commitment (for example, the collapse of the family unit and political corruption), Dor al-Qur'an Salafis tend to locate this tribulation or chaos, and deviation *internally* – that is, at the level of the individual.

These Salafis explain their focus on the individual and its religious knowledge and practices (narrowly understood) in terms of a particular reflection on the relationship between (a) the moral standing of each individual political subject and (b) political governance. Specifically, they see individuals as particularly powerful vis-à-vis the state

because they understand the state and society more generally as a reflection of the internal condition of the individual. Converging on classical liberal and neoliberal conceptions of the polity as constituted of, first and foremost, the individual, for my Salafi respondents it is the individual's internal religious beliefs and the individual's decision to evade religious knowledge that reflect an internal, introspective "tunnel" to the true nature of social and political life. They theorise their evasion of politics and their concomitant focus on reforming the individual's religious knowledge and religious practices (narrowly understood) in terms of the widely repeated hadith: "As you are, so your rulers will be" (Islamweb). One Dor al-Qur'an respondent reasoned as follows: "The situation you are in [...,] what you do in your life, your ethics are not a result of the state, or the ruler, or society! It's the other way around: if you are good, then your governor will be good, because he is one of you, he comes from you."[1] Dor al-Qur'an members thus emphasise individual responsibility for social and religious "crisis." This paper proposes, therefore, that this approach shares with neoliberal thinking what Iqtidar (2017) describes as neoliberalism's "decoupling of political transformation from individual transformation through an economization of social life."

However, rather than invoking the powers of the market as neoliberal thinking does, Dor al-Qur'an Salafis in Morocco propose that correcting the doctrinal errors and ritual and public morality practices of each individual via self-education and through intimate modes of reformist interventions such as one-on-one advice-giving conversations, is instead the only suitable vehicle of individual transformation and, ultimately, social reform. In short, it is the individual's self-education and intimate advice-giving/advice-seeking conversations in matters of authentic Islamic doctrine and prayer practices, rather than the market, that my Salafi participants hold superior in all issues related to social organisation. Yet, this Salafi emphasis on individuals as self-governing entities might also be seen as consistent with neoliberal ideas about not only state–society relations but also the (free) market as honouring or respecting the self-governing nature of individuals to engage in economic transactions freely.[2]

SALAFISM AND (NEO)LIBERAL APPROACHES TO STATE POWER AND POLITICS

Quietist Salafis in Morocco share classical liberalism's and neoliberalism's deep scepticism regarding the state's role in bringing about individual and societal transformation. Yet where neoliberal thinking typically considers the state as dangerous because of its tendency to limit the freedom of individuals to choose freely as market actors in their transactions, Dor al-Qur'an Salafis instead fret about the Moroccan state's capacity to curtail the freedom of Moroccans to choose "authentic" Islam (in a Salafi sense). They argue that because the contemporary Moroccan state and other Arab states are not truly "Muslim" but rather "secular"-leaning systems, state-directed societal reform is unlikely to succeed in Islamising society (in a Salafi sense).[3] Moreover, they maintain that state regulation of moral behaviour is unlikely to succeed because they believe that society can only come to accept "true (Salafi) Islam" by means of individuals undertaking self-focused religious education and learning in order to relinquish their religious deviancy and secure personal piety. Any coercive state attempt to Islamise society will fail to convince society of "true" (Salafi) Islam.

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ENDNOTES

1 Conversation with the author, 11 March 2018, in Marrakech, Morocco.

2 I'm thankful to Theo Blanc for raising this point and for his comments on an earlier draft of this text.

3 Some did, however, identify the Saudi Arabian state as an exception to this rule (for example, see al-Maghrawi's comments here, online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqrEpv1vFhc (25 May 2023)).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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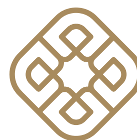

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