

‘Quietist’ and ‘firebrand’ Salafism in Algeria

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»» Twenty-three years after the onset of Algeria’s so-called Black Decade of bloody civil war, which was precipitated by the military’s cancellation of elections won by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and that killed approximately 200,000 Algerians, Salafi ideology and activism are once again emerging as the locus of societal contention and political controversy.¹ This is a painful manifestation of the failure of the state and its traditional religious institutions to control fundamentalist creeds. Today, the weakening of political Islam and violent militant groups in Algeria stands in sharp contrast with the gradual surge of loud Salafi voices hostile to local traditions and Islamic practice that is not based on strict textual literalism.

Several factors explain Salafists’ surge in Algeria. Echoing the panorama across the Middle East and North Africa region, Algerians face economic stagnation, political paralysis and generational changes. The rise of Salafism epitomises a moral rebellion against the crisis of state institutions. With its strict moral codes and promises to confront societal ills, non-violent Salafism provides the disgruntled youth with an alternative to the growing irrelevance of co-opted mainstream Islamist movements and moribund state-sanctioned religious institutions. Paradoxically, the state has played a non-negligible role in the surge of Salafism by using the movement as an ideological counterweight to political Islam and revolutionary (jihadist, in state parlance) groups.

The political and revolutionary variant of Salafism remains minoritarian. Algerian Salafism, situated at the conservative extreme of the theological and political spectrum, is far from homogenous. Salafists

HIGHLIGHTS

- Salafi ideology and activism are once again emerging as the locus of societal contention and political controversy.
- Strengthening the capacity of neighbourhood mosques and religious institutions remains only one tool in the fight against religious extremism.
- As long as economic stagnation and political paralysis persist and new generations lack opportunities, there will always be a reservoir of angry and disgruntled youths tempted by radicalism and violence.

»»»»» generally speak the same religious language, but they differ sharply on many issues, ranging from apostasy to political activism. The most prominent are the so-called 'quietist' Salafists who abstain from formal politics and reject violence, and advocate the spread and application of their strictly conservative theological orientation in society. Preachers like El Ferkous and Abdelmalek Ramadani are notable representatives of this trend.² These Salafists are active in charitable associations and civil society groups, as well as informal market and street trading activities.

QUIETIST SALAFISM, ECLIPSING ISLAMISM

Salafism was introduced in Algeria at the turn of the twentieth century. It was a transnational intellectual and reformist movement that emphasised the compatibility of Islam and modernity. But modernist ideas failed to have a demonstrable impact on a society still choking under colonial rule. Proponents of Islam as an evolving religion gradually ceded way to more uncompromising brands of Islam, including ultraconservative ones that condemned modernity and secularism. The most extreme religious ideologies were ensconced in Wahhabism, supported since the early 1960s by Saudi Arabia. Many Algerians studied in Saudi religious institutions, in particular in the Islamic University of Medina. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Algerians were amongst the first North African volunteers to fight communist atheism.³

During the 1990s and 2000s, Salafism faced major challenges. After struggling with Algerians' growing backlash against violent ideologies following the civil war between the government and various Islamist groups, Salafism began to make use of the proliferation of satellite television and the internet to improve its image, distance itself from violence and reclaim lost territory. It managed to reposition itself within both the religious and political spheres as an authentic and apolitical alternative to the eroding Islamist political parties and state-sanctioned religious institutions. For

Algerians traumatised by the civil war, Salafism seemed to offer a new path.

Given their political quietism and neutrality towards the Algerian regime, Salafists are allowed to operate their own private schools, build business networks and don their peculiar attire of long beards and white robes. The ease of acceding to Salafi networks is particularly appealing to the country's youth disillusioned with what they perceive as the accumulated decrepitude of Algerian society. Shunning the anguish of the rough and tumble of politics and futility of violence attracts those in pursuit of a new empowering identity and a strong sense of purpose. For its part, the Algerian regime also benefits from the surge of an apolitical movement that can help dissuade at-risk youth from both politics and violent extremism.

So far, the state's promotion of Sufism (Islamic mysticism) as a rampart against radical Islamist ideologies has not worked. A 2011 public opinion survey conducted by the University of Algiers and Binghamton University found that while a majority saw Sufist organisations as more prone towards peaceful and tolerant teachings, they disapproved of some of their religious practices as beyond the acceptable Islamic jurisprudence. Most respondents also considered the government's efforts to prop up Sufism as politically motivated.⁴

As the stature of Salafists rises, that of their Islamist rivals decreases. Unlike in Tunisia and Morocco where mainstream Islamist parties have matured into important intellectual and political forces, Algerian Islamists have sunk into intellectual lethargy and are largely disconnected from their electoral constituencies. Their inability to adjust to major recent social transformations has eroded their social and political standing in society. Their integration into the state apparatus and its rent-seeking power structures is a major disincentive for the Islamist base to engage politically. With their moralising discourse and egalitarian attitudes, Salafists are thus emerging as a counterweight to the stagnation of political Islam.

But not all Algerian Salafism lacks a political orientation. As in other neighbouring countries, a minoritarian Salafi current is becoming politicised. One example of this is the creation of the Islamic Sahwa Front in 2013 and the Algerian Front for Reconciliation and Salvation in 2014. Both movements are led by controversial incendiary Salafists, whose goal is to create an Islamic state. So far, however, neither movement has gained state recognition nor managed to sell the idea of political engagement to the wider Salafi community.

STATE AMBIVALENCE

In the absence of a credible alternative, the surge of quietest Salafists holds several benefits for the regime. On the one hand, they seem better equipped to challenge jihadists in their own language. On the other hand, their worldview worries secularists and liberals alike, deepening the ideological cleavages within society. The regime thrives on such divisions as they allow it to act as the ultimate arbiter of societal conflict.

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The Algerian government is seeking to radically change the way it manages the religious sphere

That said, despite the benefits it draws from the surge of quietist Salafism, the regime is uncertain as to how to address politically active Salafists. Some observers believe that the Algerian regime will eventually follow the Moroccan model of political integration of hardline Salafists who have publicly disavowed violence and subversion. By co-opting radical Salafists into partisan networks and political parties friendly to the palace, the Moroccan monarchy has intended to show that there is always a path towards rehabilitation. However, it has also sought to divide the conservative vote and stem the streak of electoral successes of the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party.⁵

While the majority of Algerian Salafists disavow violence and steer clear of politics, the few politicised Salafi voices active in Algeria are the loudest. In recent years, self-proclaimed Salafi 'firebrand' preachers have grown in confidence and assertiveness. Their ideological offensive to re-introduce the 'correct' Islamic creed and practice is seen in mosques, social media and local private television channels. These preachers challenge the authority of local imams, denigrate popular religious and cultural practices like mystical rituals, and issue fatwas condemning cultural events, art shows, bank loans and other 'un-Islamic' behaviour.

The Algerian state has an ambivalent and complex relationship with Salafi firebrand preachers. The meeting in June 2014 between then Minister of State and Chief of Staff of the President Ahmed Ouyahia and former Islamist guerilla fighter Madani Mezrag for consultations on the revision of the constitution and his treatment as a 'national figure' illustrate this.⁶ Mezrag has access to several media outlets and is allowed to preach and organise gatherings. In October 2015, after he criticised President Bouteflika on the private TV channel *El Watan* for denying legal status to his newly created party, the Algerian Front for Reconciliation and Salvation, the authorities closed the channel under the pretext that it was operating 'informally and illegally', but Mezrag himself was not harassed.

Another prominent firebrand Salafist is Abdelafatah Hamadache, who has gained notoriety for his militant rhetoric against non-practicing Algerian Muslims. The slow but steady public resurgence of Takfiri ideology, with heavy accusations of apostasy against 'deviant' Algerian Muslims and intellectuals, especially francophone ones, stirs ghosts of the civil war. In 2013, Hamadache launched the Islamic Sahwa Front (non-recognised by the state) to better organise the ranks of his adherents. In October 2014, he embarked on a 'purification' campaign against bars and places of debauchery and prostitution in Algeria's coastal areas.⁷ In December 2014, Hamadache called for the execution of novelist Kamel Daoud for disparaging Islam. His 'Facebook fatwa' and subsequent calls for establishing diplomatic relations with the Islamic State (IS)



»»»»» have sparked uproar even amongst Islamist hardliners (who suspect that he works for the country's security services).

Salafi intolerance is also exhibited in mosques and street markets. Salafists pressure street vendors and shopkeepers to stop selling alcohol and tobacco.⁸ In 2014, a large group of Salafi imams provoked outrage for refusing to lead funeral prayers in memory of the Algerian soldiers who died in the crash of a military transport plane into the Djebel Ta Fertas mountain near Oum El Bouaghi.

The government's ambiguity in dealing with these firebrand Salafists is causing discontent among Algerians, who suspect the state of deliberately using radical Salafism as the bogeyman of Algerian politics. On the one hand, the government decidedly combats terrorist groups; on the other hand, it seems to tolerate controversial Salafists and their radical ideas.

The re-emergence of radical brands of Salafism in the Algerian public space has sparked intense public debates about the crisis of authority within traditional state-ordained religious institutions. Many Algerians no longer find in them a source of inspiration and meaning. Neighbourhood imams who once played an important role in moulding the worldview of ordinary Algerians are increasingly being eclipsed by mediatic self-proclaimed Salafi preachers who make up for their mediocre religious credentials with slick sermonising and mastery of social media.

Different currents of Salafists are working to fill the ideological, social and political void left by Algeria's dysfunctional state institutions. One of the main challenges for the Algerian government will be to neutralise the growth of the most radical forms of Salafism.

OVERHAULING RELIGIOUS POLICY

The Algerian government is seeking to radically change the way it manages the religious sphere. The regime has made several attempts to rehabilitate traditional religious institutions, margin-

alise radical Salafi discourse and restore order in the face of the proliferation of online fatwas. Since taking office in May 2014, the minister of religious affairs, Mohamed Aïssa, has insisted on the urgent need to train imams in the inclusive and harmonious teachings of Islam steeped in Algerian tradition and inspired by the 'golden age' of Islamic rule in Andalusia, where Muslim clerics were anchors of tolerance and innovation. Only by reclaiming this heritage can Algerian imams and mosques act as a bulwark against the rigid teachings of self-proclaimed clerics influenced by Wahhabism.

In his efforts to reorient Algerians, Aïssa has embarked on a radical overhaul of the country's religious education. Together with the minister of education, Nouria Benghebrit, Aïssa wants to review the religious curricula taught in elementary, middle and high school to adapt it to tolerant and inclusive teachings of Islam. There are also plans to create a bachelor's degree for imams based on a softer version of Islamic jurisprudence and on the use of modern methods of communication.⁹

In addition, the Algerian regime wants to bolster the institutional framework supervising mosques and religious discourse. In March 2013, the government authorised mosque imams to create their own syndicate to better represent their interests and defend themselves against what they call 'un-Algerian' forms of Islam. According to government estimates, there is a shortage of at least 7,000 imams for the country's 22,000 functioning mosques. Worse still, the authorities lack information regarding the training and financing of Salafi imams whose sermons, in the words of the religious affairs minister, 'are irrational' and draw from the anarchic traffic of online fatwas and twitter rulings.¹⁰ It is in the context of 'fatwa anarchy' that the government announced in 2015 the creation of the Scientific National Council (SNC), in charge of issuing 'official' fatwas. Its members are assisted by the Egyptian Al-Azhar institution, a highly regarded authority in Islamic jurisprudence. The SNC has already issued several religious decrees, from the permissibility of accepting bank loans for the acquisition of sub-

sidised apartments to the limits imposed on organ transplants and a ban on anonymous egg and sperm donation.¹¹

CONCLUSION

The Algerian government's attempt to revive the tolerant spirit of religious traditions and teachings can be an important tool in winning the battle of ideas against exclusivist ideologies. But the government has to proceed with caution in overhauling traditional religious institutions. Propping up one single religious tradition runs the risk of discrediting it as a mouthpiece of the regime. The regime's goal should not be the micromanagement of religious affairs or a wholesale vilification of Salafism, but the promotion of tolerance, pluralism and peaceful co-existence.

Strengthening the capacity of neighbourhood mosques and imam-training institutions are crucial elements in building a credible counter-narrative to the intolerant ideas and practices of self-proclaimed Salafi clerics. Non-violent conservative Salafists who favour flexibility and pragmatism also have a role to play in marginalising violent Salafi groups, as they can dissuade at-risk young Algerians of falling into militancy and Salafi jihadism.

Ultimately, however, the development of competent Algerian 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 they cannot tackle the root causes of militancy, which are mainly political. As long as economic stagnation, political paralysis and a lack of opportunity persist, there will always be a reservoir of angry and disgruntled youths tempted by radicalism and violence.

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Endnotes

1. Salafism posits that Muslims have strayed from the Islam of their forefathers (Salaf in Arabic). To rectify this decadence, Muslims must discard the accumulated historical baggage and innovations that have weakened their faith and embrace the authentic teachings as expressed by the Prophet Mohammad himself and his righteous companions.
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