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The Politics of Islamism and Salafism Revisited: A Review Essay

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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

The Politics of Islamism and Salafism Revisited: A Review Essay

Books Reviewed:

Salafism Goes Global: from the Gulf to the French Banlieues

Mohamed-Ali Adraoui

Oxford University Press, 2020, 248 pp, £25.99 (Paperback).

ISBN: 978-0-19-006246-0

The Rise of Islamic Political Movements and Parties: Morocco, Turkey and Jordan

Esen Kirdiş

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 240 pp, £75.00 (Paperback).

ISBN: 978-1-47-445067-6

Salafism in the Maghreb: Politics, Piety and Militancy

Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars

Oxford University Press, 2019, 184 pp, £64.00 (Hardback), £19.99 (Paperback).

ISBN: 978-0-19-094240-3

The Politics of Islamism and Salafism Revisited: A Review Essay

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Abstract

This review essay critically assesses Esen Kirdiş' *The Rise of Islamic Political Movements and Parties*, Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars' *Salafism in the Maghreb*, and Mohamed-Ali Adraoui's *Salafism Goes Global: From the Gulf to the French Banlieues* in light of the post-Islamism hypothesis. In Asef Bayat's formulation, post-Islamism refers to a shift in discourse among Islamist movements de-emphasising a complete societal Islamisation and centring issues of civil liberties and democracy. These three works complicate this picture through introducing greater varieties of movements within local religio-political fields. Adopting a comparative approach, Kirdiş explores how Islamic movements respond to opportunities and threats to employ strategies of party formation or non-participation in formal politics. Wehrey and Boukhars demonstrate Salafism's local embeddedness within the Maghreb, which conditions how Salafi actors react to local circumstances to justify different modes of action which transcend strict categorisations of moderation and radicalisation. Finally, Adraoui's sociological approach to Salafism in France confronts whether French quietist Salafis represent a manifestation of post-Islamism through exhibiting a disillusionment with Islamist politics and the consequent formation of a Salafi counter-hegemonic sphere. Altogether, these studies amount to a more nuanced understanding of the political and apolitical beyond participation in formal politics.

Keywords: Islamism; Salafism; Post-Islamism; Political Islam; Islamic Activism

After decades of Islamist activism in multiple countries and cycles of repression, migration, and adaptation, Islamism and Salafism have frequently been posited to be at a crossroads. On one hand, theorists such as Asef Bayat have identified a trend of post-Islamism, a condition "where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy and sources of legitimacy of Islamism are exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters", leading to a discourse emphasising civil liberties and democracy, with a place for Islam in the public sphere rather than an Islamisation of society (Bayat 2013: 8). Olivier Roy, too, considers that the politicisation of Islam leads to a "failure" resulting inevitably in secularisation or divisions (Roy 1994: 23), while Kepel speaks of how ideology becomes an "encumbrance" (Kepel 2002: 370). Yet as Salwa Ismail argues, these analyses often rest on a preconceived and limited notion of the political, which over-centres the

state and fails to account for the politics of morality and micro-mobilisations which can constitute a different kind of challenge (Ismail 2001: 34). Moreover, she argues, was Islamism ever a uniform movement in the first place? (Ismail 2001: 39).

The three books under review engage with this theme in multiple ways. Esen Kirdiş' (2019) *The Rise of Islamic Political Movements and Parties* illustrates the diversity of Islamic movements in terms of goals, organisational structures and strategies, as well as the centrality of local contexts which present both constraints and opportunities. She compares behaviours of Islamic groups within specific countries, as well as to their international counterparts who have adopted similar political strategies, to identify the costs and benefits associated with specific political choices. In so doing, she dispels common misconceptions which imply a strict demarcation between politicism and apoliticism based on engagement in formal politics. On the contrary, her work shows how, in practice, the formation of a political party can legitimate the state, while refusal to participate can denote legitimate opposition. Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars' (2019) work, *Salafism in the Maghreb*, similarly provides insight into diverse patterns of action through examining the historical development of Salafi ideology within the Maghreb. Through characterising the complex transnational processes of migration and education, they explain how Salafism became entrenched in the region's religio-political environment, and how in turn Salafi movements have adapted in response to contemporary shifts in the landscape. Rather than consider these adaptations as an ideological weakening, they locate them within a series of historical and transnational processes. Finally, Mohamed-Ali Adraoui's (2020) book on French quietist Salafis, *Salafism Goes Global: From the Gulf to the French Banlieues*, analyses the processes of Salafi socialisation resulting in the adoption of an apolitical identity and a socially constitutive worldview within the French context. It explores the creation of an alternative morality and the reformulations of temporality, sacrality and geography embedded within this process and that develop as a result of it.

Kirdiş' (2019) recent volume, an adaptation of her PhD thesis, is ambitious in its purported scope and aims. Arguing that Islamic movements navigate an environment composed of opportunities and threats, she explores why different movements adopt different strategies in response to their conditions, particularly questioning why they embrace or forgo party politics. Based upon research, fieldwork and interviews, her case studies include: for Morocco, the Party for Justice and Development (PJD) and the Justice and Spirituality Movement (JSM); in Turkey, the Gülen Movement (GM) and the National Outlook Movement (NOM); the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (JMB) and quietist Salafis within Jordan. Composed of five chapters, including the introduction and conclusion, she first introduces her terminology and theoretical foundations, as well as the movements and the political contexts in which they operate. She then explores the facets of their various choices and the implications of these choices within specific environments, which in themselves are constantly adapting. She describes how Islamist actors face a "menu of options", including the choice between participation and non-participation, with distinct advantages and disadvantages attending each choice (Kirdiş 2019: 33). For example, party politics can provide access to elites and thus impart a means by which a group may help its

supporters – yet eschewing politics can also preclude perceptions of complicity (Kirdiş 2019: 47-48). Within her analysis of Islamic movements, she differentiates between the priorities of “vanguard” movements based on a hierarchical, closed power structure, who can generally benefit from the vertical approach enabled by formal political participation, and “grassroots” movements which present their oppositional challenge through the creation of a parallel society and largely eschewing formal politics, though choices are subject to negotiation and development in dialogue with state responses (Kirdiş 2019: 57-58, 102). Owing to the clarity and novelty of its central thesis and its accompanying methodology, this volume will be welcomed by a wide readership interested in comparative politics and religious politics.

It can be difficult, in putting forth a typology, to highlight agency and historicity, but Kirdiş’ approach successfully illustrates the constantly adaptive nature of movements as they seek to achieve their goals. While opportunity structures may provide the contours for action, movements possess the capacity to reflect on their own choices and assess – and re-assess – the potential benefits within any particular course. For example, the Turkish National Outlook Movement recognised the limits to party politics within the Turkish laic structure, and a cadre of its younger generation consequently created the Justice and Development Party, re-positioning its objective to be “economic liberalisation” rather than the “Just Order” of its parent movement (Kirdiş 2019: 141). In contrast, in response to tightening state control over the religious sphere, repression and an inability to broaden its supporter base, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood vacillated between boycotting and participating in elections before ultimately transforming into a “hard opposition” movement threatening the authority of the regime itself through its support for greater democratisation (Kirdiş 2019: 148-152). This analysis insightfully demonstrates how political engagement and non-engagement provide fields by which movements gain and interpret experience, reformulate their goals and consequently adapt their rhetoric, strategies and ideology. In other words, the choices made by movements are both transformative for the societies and political systems they engage with or sidestep, and in turn are transforming for the actors themselves.

Kirdiş’ choice to engage with Islamic politics, rather than Islamism specifically, merits further reflection. She explains how looking at Islamic – rather than Islamist – movements allows an examination of a wide cross-section of actors without assuming their nature to be fixed, fundamentalist or geared towards state capture (Kirdiş 2019: 3). Indeed, this allows for the consideration of a variety of movements without imposing a category that may ultimately prove restrictive in understanding their evolving behaviour and highlights the multiplicity of the players participating in the religio-political field. In Turkey, for example, the national laic ideology presents a barrier to political Islamisation projects. However, through accommodating Islamic politics with Kemalist *laïcité*, the AKP was able to achieve widespread success (Kirdiş 2019: 141). The Moroccan king, on the other hand, is positioned as a religious authority, which, coupled with his political power, creates an uneasy climate for fellow religio-political contenders. The PJD, consequently, while confronting governmental nepotism, shied away from extending this to the ruling family itself and avoided putting forth religious claims that would

undermine royal theological authority (ibid., 127-130). In contrast, the JSM adopted a variety of grassroots strategies, including transnational and secular partnerships to seek reform of the regime (Kirdiş 2019: 128-132). Kirdiş' broad terminology allows religio-political actors to be situated in a pre-existing field vis à vis other actors and structures who make conflicting claims, where their choices can be understood as part of a broader engagement rather than a slide towards or away from Islamism. Nevertheless, it also bears mentioning that diverse ideological movements may contain different theorisations of the political. For example, within Salafism, the question of obedience to a ruler is an application of an epistemologically absolute religious truth (Wiktorowicz 2006: 228-234). Disagreement over what is permissible has caused schisms within the movement, where quietist Salafis are overwhelmingly characterised by an aversion to formal political participation which is construed as doctrinal, rather than solely pragmatic. The extent to which such core differences over the meaning of politics matter – for example, in a group's accountability to its core constituency – would be interesting to consider in more detail.

Yet despite this, Kirdiş' thorough exploration of the religio-political field fascinatingly invites a more expansive notion of politics, questioning many dominant assumptions about the meanings of participation and non-participation. As she emphasises, a choice not to engage in formal politics can nevertheless constitute a strong oppositional force, and, in semi-autocratic regimes, can allow a movement to position oneself as counter-hegemonic, thereby deriving appeal precisely because of its perceived distance from the system. As such, she provides an original and useful schema by which to analyse Islamic movements, accounting for the significance of context, agency and fluidity of action.

In *Salafism in the Maghreb*, Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars trace the interpretation and adaptation of Salafism to shifting circumstances. They too emphasise the significance of context, presenting in-depth portraits of the religious and political landscapes of the countries they examine, and the history of Salafism within each. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the book consists of six chapters. The first is a useful chapter defining Salafism, and the following five each correspond to a national case study: Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. This organisational structure reflects Wehrey and Boukhars' emphasis on the influence of regional and national dynamics in how specific manifestations of Salafism arise and develop. This locally grounded focus allows for in-depth analyses providing insightful explanations to circumstances which can, on the surface, seem paradoxical, such as the presence of Madkhali militias in Libya, a Salafi strand that had previously been considered categorically quietist, as well as the conflict within the jihadi movement as to how to approach the new political field in Tunisia following the Jasmine Revolution. Wehrey and Boukhars' work will be valuable for policymakers focusing on North Africa as well as academics interested in understanding contemporary developments in Salafism, and their clear, accessible style explains both complex theology and political contexts approachably and thoroughly.

In defining Salafism, Wehrey and Boukhars emphasise the utopian nature of the movement, which exalts the first three generations of Muslims as an authentic and exclusive model for ideal behaviour (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 6). Considering itself a "victorious sect"

in contrast to the wider world, this provides its supporters with a moral and methodological clarity (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 6). Consequently, it often appeals to individuals in liminal or unstable positions (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 17). Yet Wehrey and Boukhars show how this imagined authenticity is challenged by practical circumstances, wherein engagement with the contemporary world causes both schisms and adaptations to ideology and praxis (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 6-7). Even concepts such as Sufism can become part of this field, despite Salafis' doctrinal aversion to the Sufi tradition (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 17). Given the situation of Salafism within local fields of religion and activism, concepts like politics and violence are not taken as absolutes, and upheavals – such as the Arab Spring – problematise treating such classifications as rigid. With these caveats, Wehrey and Boukhars adopt Wiktorowicz's influential categorisation of Salafis into purists, politicians, and jihadis, though they emphasise the range of reasons for each methodological choice in relation to specific realities faced by the actors in question (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 13-16).

The scope of Wehrey and Boukhars' subject matter is more than just a convenient geographic category: they successfully illustrate the utility of a regional analysis both by illustrating Salafism's distinct heritage within the Maghreb and its internal interconnections therein. Wehrey and Boukhars do not merely question the charge that Salafism is an imported ideology, but emphasise that the region has developed its own ideological centres of gravity. With a conclusion reminiscent of Farquhar's (2017) analysis of the multidirectional flows within transnational Wahhabism, they acknowledge the significance of Saudi Arabia in promoting Salafism but dispute its global prominence as a straightforward and unidirectional Saudi export. In Mauritania, for example, Salafism was initially propelled by Mauritanian scholars studying in Saudi Arabia and by Gulf financial support more broadly (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 19). However, its popularity was domestically enabled by waves of urbanisation, Islamisation and Arabisation in the latter half of the twentieth century, and occurred within the rich context of existing Mauritanian Islam, which included the traditional desert *mahadir* schools blending a variety of Islamic currents including Malikism, Sufism and Salafism, and a political Islamic scene including the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat Tabligh (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 22-25). This is reflected in the hybrid thought of Mauritanian Salafi scholars, such as the prominent Mohamed al-Hasen Ould al-Dedew. Indeed, Dedew defies easy definition, blurring Salafi, Islamist, and even Sufi influences (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 139). Wehrey and Boukhars question a straightforward centre-periphery distinction by highlighting how areas like Mauritania function as centres in their own right, with Mauritania's religious scholars and seminaries achieving global renown, including from within the Gulf (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 139-140).

By organising their analysis of Salafism by country, Wehrey and Boukhars do much to demonstrate Salafism's diverse manifestations and developments, as well as how the movement interacts with local and national histories, narratives and symbolic repertoires. In their chapter on Salafism in Algeria, Wehrey and Boukhars explore how the anti-colonial struggle acts as a resource which is drawn upon by Salafis within the country, while the legacy of the Algerian Civil War is deployed by quietist Salafis against more activist currents. There are members

within the Algerian Salafi-jihadi movement, for instance, who purport to embody the legacy of reformist and anti-colonialist ‘Abd al-Hamid ibn Badis (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 60). Badis, whose schools popularised the slogan “Islam is our religion; Arabic is our language; Algeria is our fatherland”, claimed Islam as part of national Algerian identity (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 62). Yet the debilitating and devastating historical memory of the Algerian Civil War provides a more recent narrative by which quietist Algerian Salafis posit themselves as an alternative to their militant ideological counterparts by emphasising their consistent opposition to upheaval and strife (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 59-60). This is a message that resonates in a “society still traumatized by the ghosts of the mass atrocities of the 1990s” (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 79). National pasts, and the emotions which they evoke, can act as opportunities as well as constraints depending on how actors perceive and appropriate them, and how collective historical memory is shaped within the wider society.

Through describing and analysing these ideological and practical adaptations, they successfully demonstrate the fluidity of action within the categories identified by indicating the centrality of local religio-political fields. For example, the Salafi-jihadi group Ansar al-Sharia, following the Arab Spring, debated institutionalisation in the context of the post-revolutionary opening of Tunisian civil society, with some members favouring establishing a rapport with the regime, and others – including unaffiliated Salafi-jihadis – continuing to commit violent acts. Abu Iyadh, a veteran Salafi-jihadi and the group’s leader, sought to control the movement’s actions to prevent decentralised acts of violence that would prove “counterproductive” to its goals (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 97). This was further complicated by Salafi competition with Ennahda, Tunisia’s Islamist party over the religio-political field, where Ennahda, after initial toleration, felt pressure to respond to Salafi acts of vigilantism and violence (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 103-104). It was officially designated a terrorist organisation in 2013. Despite this ultimate failure to institutionalise, Wehrey and Boukhars underline how the novelty of the post-revolutionary Tunisian socio-political environment – and the heretofore unknown freedoms apportioned to Salafi-jihadi groups to mobilise and proselytise – thereby led some members to reinterpret ideological tenets such as the legitimacy of violence. Ultimately, this illustrates the imprecision of terms such as “violence” or “politics” as absolute categories by which actors are bound, independently of context.

Mohamed-Ali Adraoui’s *Salafism Goes Global: From the Gulf to the French Banlieues*, also based on fieldwork and interviews, adopts a sociological perspective in analysing the increasingly significant ideological current of quietist Salafism within France. He charts the process of Salafi identity formation in terms of socialisation into a Salafi habitus, which involves both a separation from French society and a re-socialisation as Salafi. Aside from the introduction, Adraoui’s book is composed of six detailed chapters exploring specific aspects and processes of this socialisation and re-socialisation, which entail the adoption and internalisation of new ways of thinking. This involves a re-imagining of temporality, geography and agency: Adraoui describes how French quietist Salafism involves the symbolic reconstruction of French society through the creation and sacralisation of a geography opposing the authenticity of the

Muslim world to an imagined – and spiritually devoid – West (Adraoui 2020: 147-148). Beyond this, he insightfully explores the nuances of Salafi apoliticism through the creation of a starkly moral worldview involving a reformulation of the categories of political action and actors. Adraoui's book is a well-written and focused contribution to the emerging literature on religious socialisation and will be welcomed by academics in a range of disciplines with an interest in transnational religious movements and European Salafism in particular.

One of the chief strengths of the book is the visibility of the voices of Adraoui's participants. Interviews with quietist Salafis are quoted at length, lending the book an animating dynamism that grounds his often-cerebral sociological analysis. In explaining the multifaceted oppositional habitus characterising the peripheral socialisation of the French suburbs, which blends leftism with a Salafi disavowal of politics on principle, Adraoui cites an interview with a French Salafi who states his admiration for Hugo Chavez for resisting American domination, despite Salafi principles of rejecting secular ideologies (Adraoui 2020: 116-117). Adraoui provides enough background about his interviewees – including their attitudes to politics, economics, and migration – by which the reader can locate particular statements within individual biographies to explore how processes of socialisation interact and overlap, providing a reminder that ideology, as an ideal type, does not exist independently of the realities of its practitioners. Yet he takes the process of re-socialisation seriously and explores its implications in detail.

One consequence of this re-socialisation, he argues, results in the adoption of an alternative worldview, or counter-world, which is premised upon a separation from French society. This involves a reimagining of categories of the political. The issue of voting, perhaps the emblematic symbol of Western democracy, assumes particular significance for Salafis through the inherent dilemma between the potential benefit of defending Muslims' rights through the ballot box and the prohibitions advanced by many quietist Salafi scholars on voting, particularly in non-Muslim societies (Adraoui 2020: 51-52). Interviewees reflected this tension through expressing political opinions, both on politicians and laws, yet also emphasising that activism would represent a legitimisation of the wider society (Adraoui 2020: 52). Instead, they promote a form of inoculation from a corrupt world, either through symbolic performances of difference – such as through clothing – or emigration (Adraoui 2020: 68, 80). Such “strategies of loyalty and leaving” thus denote the context of political action (Adraoui 2020: 169). Adraoui explains this through the idea that within quietist Salafism, the concept of “the people” as a political actor is absent due to the doctrinal tenet of loyalty to a Muslim ruler, and the injunction against participating in a non-Muslim system (Adraoui 2020: 170). The separatism enjoined by the adoption of a Salafi worldview, therefore, challenges the goals and assumptions underpinning political activism to shape and reform the course of history (Adraoui 2020: 167-168).

Adraoui's conclusion, that Salafism represents a postmodern phenomenon builds upon the work of previous scholarship on European Salafism, but he adds nuance and originality to this assertion through qualitatively exploring how this condition is experienced in different ways. Adraoui considers how one subset of quietist Salafis represents a “post-militant” trend, which is

seen not merely as apolitical, but represents a weariness to the political (Adraoui 2020: 19). He interviews a former Ennahda member, now a quietist Salafi, who justified this shift through reference to the impossibility of achieving meaningful change through politics in a world where manipulation ran rampant (Adraoui 2020: 21). At first glance, this theorisation bears similarities to Bayat's (2013) concept of post-Islamism as a disillusionment with Islamist politics. Yet while Bayat explores the merging of principles of Islam with concepts such as democracy and civil liberties, due to a dawning realisation of the discourse's "anomalies and inadequacies" (Bayat 2013: 8), Adraoui's analysis of Salafi political fatigue results from a belief in the imperfection of society rather than the political structure. As his ex-Ennahda interviewee states, there were two reasons for the failure of Islamism: that "people look after their own interests" and eschew religiosity, and that politics itself came to replace religious foundations, leaving the populace open to manipulation (Adraoui 2020: 21). As such, this form of Salafism results in a separatist worldview rather than the rights-based engagement of post-Islamism, and the creation of a counterworld running both in parallel with, and in moral opposition to, the dominant society (Adraoui 2020: 102-105). Within this counter-world, economic prosperity is encouraged as a symbol of success outside of mainstream society in a characteristic formation of the postmodern (Adraoui 2020: 66-67).

This counterworld is formed as a direct challenge to religious actors seeking to reconcile faith with modernity through rationality and participation. Instead, it re-creates historical narratives of origin and migration, through the embrace of the symbol of *hijra* to denote a departure from France to the Muslim world. Many French Salafis emigrate to the countries of their or their ancestors' heritage, often to North Africa, symbolically rewriting previous migrations through rejecting the imagined attractions of Europe and creating a new temporal and spatial migratory landscape (Adraoui 2020: 91-92). This emigration, which inverts a prior one, in some ways parallels how history is seen as a "succession of cycles" of straying and returning to what is perceived as the true faith – a narrative in which Salafis believe themselves to be agentic actors (Adraoui 2020: 47). Through exploring the processes by which this occurs, Adraoui provides an insightful contribution to understanding what is traditional, modern and post-modern in a theology and worldview which engages with the claims of all three conditions.

All three works analysed above highlight a growing trend to consider ideological movements in terms of application and lived experience, providing micro-level accounts which deconstruct the category of the political and question the linearity of movements' development. Within this analysis, politics and activism can be treated more broadly than party politics – a welcome reminder that in contexts of repression or marginalisation, political mobilisation may not be synonymous with oppositionality, and inaction may not denote passivity. Indeed, apoliticism, in the common usage of the term, does not preclude other forms of mobilisation – and such decisions can in turn cause repercussions within party politics, societal dynamics and even regime actions. There is a fluidity and rich diversity of adaptive interpretation and behaviour which purely ideological studies of Islamism and Salafism often struggle to portray, even when they acknowledge the looseness and adaptability of categories such as "quietist",

“political”, “Islamist” and “post-Islamist”. These three books are welcome additions to emphasising the importance of context in understanding the complex and adaptive behaviours of Islamist and Salafi movements and the fields in which they are engaged.

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