ARAB UPRISINGS

The New Salafi Politics

October 16, 2012

KHALIL MAZRAAWI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES
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**The Project on Middle East Political Science**

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network which aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Social Science Research Council. It is a co-sponsor of the Middle East Channel (http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com). For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
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Few developments associated with the Arab uprisings have generated as much concern as the rapid emergence of Salafi movements into the public arena. The performance of al-Nour Party in Egypt’s parliamentary elections stunned many observers. Waves of attacks on Sufi shrines in Tunisia and Libya, denunciations of secular citizens, and loud calls for the imposition of sharia have raised fears at home and abroad. The violent protests over the anti-Islam YouTube film, the deadly attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, and the emergence of Salafi-jihadist trends within the Syrian opposition have made these political concerns ever more urgent.

Who are these new Salafi movements? How should we interpret their rise? This new POMEPS Brief collects more than a dozen recent ForeignPolicy.com essays on Salafis across the Arab world, including a detailed look at Salafi politics in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. The picture that emerges is troubling — but also unexpectedly reassuring. These well-funded and well-entrenched subcultures will likely continue to thrive in the open, contentious new Arab political realm. But how they will behave, the response they will generate from other political trends and societal sectors, and how they will approach political institutions remains very much in question.

The “troubling part” of their ascent doesn’t require a great deal of elaboration. While many Salafis are simply religious individuals comfortable when surrounded by the like-minded, the more assertive of them have advanced a hard-edged, intolerant agenda that has driven a sharp polarization around religion in several Arab countries. Their attacks on movie theaters, Sufi shrines, and Western culture have frightened and angered secular trends in these countries, particularly religious minorities and women who fear for their place in the emerging societies. Attacks on U.S. embassies by Salafi-jihadist groups have frightened and angered the United States, and prompted concerns about a resurgence of al Qaeda.

But there are also reasons for some optimism. As several of the essays in this collection point out, Salafism is not a unified trend. Its adherents belong to a wide range of movements with very different orientations toward politics, many of which push toward political quiescence and an inward-looking focus on the cohesion of their own communities. Because Salafi subcultures generally lack the kind of disciplined organization that characterizes the Muslim Brotherhood, they struggle to act in any sort of organized fashion.

Blaming the Arab uprisings for Salafism is misguided. It is not as if these trends did not exist before their eruption into the public realm. Salafi movements were increasingly prominent in Egypt in the years prior to the revolution, with television stations and prominent public faces. Salafi subcultures across the region were fueled by funding streams from the conservative Gulf states. In some countries, such as Egypt, they were also often tacitly (or openly) supported by intelligence services keen to promote competitors to the Muslim Brotherhood and — to the conspiracy minded — to drum up communal tensions with attacks on churches or outrageous statements when this served the interests of the ruling regimes. The financial flows from the Gulf show few signs of abating, but it is intriguing to consider the possible impact of a decrease of this latter sort of support from the “deep state.”

It is easy to understand the alarm over high profile public arguments over outrageously reactionary comments by Salafi figures. Public clashes over issues advanced by the Salafis are also not necessarily a bad sign. It seems better to have these brought out into the public realm than hidden in shadows. It is reassuring
to see their public advances increasingly beaten back by competing movements, an outraged and controversy-minded press, and calculating politicians. The backlash against the outrageous statements by popular Salafi television preachers reveals as much as their initial comments — and indeed tells us far more than the bland reassurances of the designated spokesmen for the movements. These public battles reveal the limits of their influence and the real radicalism of some of their ideas relative even to their own societies. They may also sometimes reveal real pools of popular support for their ideas in conservative societies such as Egypt's, which is important to recognize rather than turn away from.

Open politics challenges the Salafis as much as empowers them. Since its electoral coming out party, Egypt's al-Nour Party has fragmented and faced serious internal tensions. Its decision to approve of an IMF loan on grounds of extreme contingency seems sure to anger the faithful, and suggests that for better or for worse ultimately even these most ideological of Islamists will prove pragmatic in their pursuit of self-interest. They will likely face increasing challenges as their members grow disenchanted with the benefits of the democratic process and perhaps return to demands for greater doctrinal purity. In short, as much as the leaders of these movements may have enjoyed their public profile it also poses severe challenges.

Finally, the Salafi challenge has been forcing Muslim Brotherhood-style groups in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia into open confrontation. Egyptian and Tunisian Salafis have been biting at the heels of the ruling Islamists. In Egypt some Salafis are gearing up to mobilize against a constitutional draft pushed by the Muslim Brotherhood, while Tunisian Salafis are none to happy about Ennahda's decision to drop its heavily promoted “anti-blasphemy” constitutional clause. From their positions of power such Islamists no longer have the luxury of empty posturing or of ignoring real challenges to stability or national interests. While Salafis and Brothers have been tussling over supporters for many years, the stakes have never been higher nor the electoral sorting mechanism more direct. The Muslim Brotherhood can no longer take its Islamic flank for granted, forcing it to shed its carefully calculated ambiguity maintained over decades.

A recent video of Tunisian Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi meeting with Salafis has been widely taken as a scandal, revealing secret collaboration between the two trends, but his comments actually look more like a warning to impatient Salafis — to back off, avoid confrontational moves, and be more patient. With a significant proportion of Brothers harboring Salafi sympathies and Salafis moving into the political realm once identified with the Brothers, we can expect those political battles over the Islamic vote to only intensify. Islam may be ever more the coin of public rhetoric in transitional Arab societies, but there is no unified Islamist movement able to take advantage. Indeed, the fragmentation and battling of competing Islamist groups, along with the alarming rhetoric from some of those quarters, which may frighten mainstream voters, should be a blessing for liberal and secular groups, if only they can take advantage.

The same can be said of the emergence of the Salafi-jihadist groups. While much remains unclear, there appears to be a new al Qaeda strategy focused on building ties with local jihadist movements, including
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The various Ansar al-Sharia factions. This is clearly a climb-down from the post-9/11 period for al Qaeda Central, and a more localized and disaggregated threat varying widely across arenas. Combined with the magnet of a radicalized Syrian insurgency (see below), it could represent the next adaptation of a resilient, if still very small, jihadist movement. That jihadist movement looks more like the localized campaigns of the 1990s than the exaggerated ambitions of a unified Islamist movement under Salafi-jihadist tutelage imagined in the years after 9/11. We should avoid the temptation to inflate the threat of these disparate movements or to conflate radically different events and trends into a single narrative of Islamist or al Qaeda resurgence.

One crucial difference in these new localized jihadist groups is that whereas before they targeted secular, pro-American leaders such as Mubarak, now their violence and extremism poses a direct threat to the political interests of Islamist leaders in Egypt and Tunisia. From a U.S. perspective, having the Muslim Brotherhood take the lead in combatting Salafi-jihadists on their own turf, for their own interests, would be a major success in the broader campaign against such groups. The Brotherhood also finds itself in the very uncomfortable position of taking a lead role in cracking down on “Islamic extremists.” It has not been so long since they were the targets of such repression. This competition is one major reason why it is wrong to conflate all signs of Islamist political success into a narrative of a supposedly resurgent al Qaeda.

And then, there is Syria. As a recent ICG report made clear, initially marginal Salafi-Jihadist groups have made significant inroads into the Syrian opposition. They appear to have benefited disproportionately from financial and arms flows from the Gulf, and to have adapted many of the military and communication innovations of al Qaeda in Iraq. For the jihadist community it does appear that Syria is the new Iraq, both operationally and as a propaganda frame for advancing a narrative, which had fallen into deep disrepute over the last few years (I’ll be writing more on this soon). They will likely continue to bring sectarianism, extremist views, and Iraq-style tactics into Syria regardless of whether or how Western countries intervene, and to enjoy ready access to cash and foreign fighters regardless of whether or how Western countries attempt to control such flows.

In short, the emergence of the Salafi trend into the public life of many Arab countries is an important recent development. But it would be a mistake to exaggerate the unity of the Salafi trend or its place within these transitional societies. They are a vital part of the emerging public landscape. Their participation in electoral politics and public life should be encouraged — even as their stances should be condemned and their opponents supported in the effort to build tolerant, inclusive Arab societies. A contentious political battle over Islamic symbols will likely continue to be a prominent feature of Arab politics in coming years. Hopefully, the essays in this POMEPS Briefing collection will be a useful guide to the current state of play.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
October 16, 2012
A New Salafi Politics

By Will McCants, October 12, 2012

Salafis, or Sunni puritans, have been much in the news since they sparked riots at U.S. embassies throughout the Arab world protesting film clips lampooning the Prophet Muhammad. A television personality on a Saudi Arabian-funded Salafi satellite channel in Egypt first fanned the flames, and Salafis ranging from the militant Mohamed al-Zawahiri (the brother of al Qaeda’s chief, Ayman al-Zawahiri) to the mainstream Salafi political party al-Nour fueled the blaze when they blamed the U.S. government and called for protests against U.S. embassies. Salafis in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and elsewhere took up the torch, resulting in attacks on U.S. and other Western diplomatic installations across the Middle East.

Others were involved, of course, and the protests were small compared to the protests over the Muhammad cartoons several years ago. Nevertheless, the Salafi-driven protests are one more sign the ultra-religious right is asserting itself as the guardian of the moral order in Sunni-majority countries rebelling against the ancien régime. Their noisy performance on the public stage poses a major challenge to emerging democratic systems, fueling polarization inside and fears abroad. But the new political realm also poses challenges to the Salafis who are on unfamiliar ground politically and ideologically.

To understand the political behavior of Salafis today, keep four things in mind: their religious beliefs do not predict their political behavior; they are a minority in almost every Middle Eastern country; the countries where they are a majority are incredibly wealthy; and their appeal and power arises from their commitment to an ultraconservative creed that is out of step with the mainstream.

Salafis were not always so politically active (publicly criticizing government policies or working to change them). From the movement’s beginning in the 1920s until the late 1970s, Salafis preferred scholasticism, political quietism, and social programs to pressure groups and vocal dissent. They frowned on criticizing Muslim rulers and participating in parliamentary systems of government, which they believed usurped God’s role as law-giver. Things changed in the 1980s for some Salafis. In Saudi Arabia, a new generation of Salafis began to agitate against the royal family, pushing for a more Islamic foreign policy and conservative social reforms. In Kuwait, Salafis formed political groups and stood for elections. More ominously, some Salafis picked up arms against Muslim rulers in a jihad against “apostates” and their Western masters. All of these Salafis shared roughly the same puritanical beliefs and a desire for a state that reflects their ultraconservative values, but they differed on how to achieve it.

Significantly, despite the emergence of political parties such as Egypt’s al-Nour Party, many Salafis still stay out of politics. They find it distasteful due to its entanglements, preferring instead to change society by changing people’s minds. That does not mean their proselytizing has no political impact. Supporters can mobilize to change policies they do not like. Salafi-controlled mosques and charitable institutions can step in to provide public goods when the state fails. This retreat from formal politics may regain appeal among the Salafi mainstream if they fail to reap significant rewards for political engagement.

Also noteworthy is that the strength of Salafi trends varies wildly across countries. Most Sunni-majority countries have some Salafi streams, but the strength of the stream is limited by the regime’s policies and the volume of Salafis. For example, small communities will not view parliamentary politics as a way to advance their agenda because their base of support is so small. In Morocco (estimated at 17,000), Tunisia (estimated at 10,000), and Jordan (estimated 7,000), other forms of activism are more effective. (By way of comparison, there are between 15,000 to 17,000 in France and no more than 5,000 in Germany.)
In contrast, a large community like the one in Egypt (3 to 5 million) can mobilize far more people and resources to compete for elected office, making it an attractive choice when a government makes it available.

As the last point suggests, a regime’s response to Salafi political mobilization matters too. Regimes with an effective security apparatus can curtail violent dissent. But if the regime indiscriminately cracks down on Salafis in response to the violence of a few or if it denies them political access after granting it, the regime risks pushing more of the community to revolt, as happened in Algeria. Conversely, regimes that allow Salafis political access can siphon support away from violent groups. And even when a regime does not allow political access, many Salafis remain politically neutral when the state leaves them alone to run their religious institutions. The more institutions Salafis have, the more likely they will protect them by remaining politically quiet or engaging peacefully. Again, size matters.

Money matters, too. Wealthy Salafis in the Gulf amplify the political influence of Salafis abroad by bankrolling their religious institutions. Kuwaiti Salafis fund a number of the charitable institutions in Egypt; the Egyptian al-Nour party drew political support from these charities in the recent parliamentary elections. Kuwaiti Salafis finance one of the major Salafi militias fighting in Syria, Ahrar al-Sham. And as mentioned earlier, it was a Saudi-funded Salafi satellite channel in Egypt that first drew attention to the Muhammad film clips.

What matters to others in the political realm may not be of the most importance to the Salafis. As Sunni puritans, Salafis see themselves as the guardians of public morality, which not only involves sexual matters and dress but also putting religious minorities and “unorthodox” Muslims in their place. Where the state fails to police others’ morals, Salafis respond with criticism, demonstrations, and even vigilantism. Again, the mix of responses in a given country is influenced by the size of the Salafi community and the regime’s response.

One major complicating factor for predicting Salafi political behavior is the nature of the new regimes. Before the Arab uprisings, Islamists did not run the governments of the Arab world (Sudan being the exception), and moderate Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood spoke for the opposition on the religious right. Now that they are in power, the voice of the dissenting right is Salafi, which gives the Salafis leverage they never had before. But it also changes the nature of their political critique and puts them at odds with others claiming the same mantle of religion. Peaceful political engagement is unlikely to moderate Salafis’ social views. Their appeal derives from their unwillingness to compromise their ultraconservative values. Besides, well-organized groups like the Muslim Brotherhood already occupy the middle ground, so Salafis stand to gain little politically by moderating. On economic matters there is more wiggle room. Thus, Yassir al-Burhami, the deputy head of the Salafi Call organization that founded Egypt’s largest Salafi political party, approved an interest-bearing loan to Egypt from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But it is telling that many in the party have harshly criticized his decision as un-Islamic because usury is forbidden in Islam. Pragmatism comes at high cost when it involves Islamic matters Salafis hold dear.

Although politically active Salafis will be bad for social and perhaps some civil liberties like free speech, Salafis are not necessarily hostile to U.S national security interests in the Middle East. The political platforms of the various Salafi political parties in Egypt, for example, did not include anti-American rhetoric, and the head of Egypt’s largest Salafi political party affirmed his support for the Camp David Accords. It is true that Salafi terrorists are one of the great threats to U.S. security and there is an unsettling respect for al Qaeda among many Salafis, but creed alone cannot explain why some Salafis turn to violence while others repudiate it. Those Salafis who turn to violence do not stand apart from non-violent Salafis. They often attend the same mosques, follow many of the same scholars, go to the same universities. Today’s Salafi vigilantes and terrorists in Libya are not socially distinct from yesterday’s Salafi terrorists who have embraced mainstream politics — they move in the same circles. What has changed is the political
context, which forces Salafis to reevaluate their methods. Holding Salafis to account for their past associations while ignoring their current behavior risks negatively influencing their choice.

The Arab uprisings are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to refashion the Arab world. Like others across the political spectrum, Salafis are seizing the opportunity to press new regimes to craft states in the Salafis’ own image. Whether the outcome is hideous or beautiful depends on how the new regimes respond.

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The Salafi Moment

*By Christian Caryl, September 12, 2012*

As the death of a U.S. ambassador in Libya demonstrates, the ultraconservative Salafi movement is pushing to the forefront in the politics of the Middle East. The West should be careful how it reacts.

By now you’ve probably heard. Just a few hours after an angry mob of ultraconservative Muslims stormed the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, the U.S. ambassador to Libya was killed during a protest in the city of Benghazi. Both riots were provoked by the news that an anti-Muslim group in the United States has released a film that insults the Prophet Mohammed. In Egypt, the protestors hauled down the U.S. flag and replaced it with the same black banner sometimes used by Al Qaeda. Shades of Iran, 1979. Scary stuff.

Both attacks are utterly outrageous. But perhaps the United States shouldn’t have been caught completely off guard. The rioters in both cases come from the region’s burgeoning Salafi movement, and the Salafis have been in the headlines a lot lately. In Libya, over the past few months, they’ve been challenging the recently elected government by demolishing ancient Sufi shrines, which they deem to be insufficiently Islamic. In Tunisia, they’ve been attacking businesses that sell alcohol and instigating nasty social media campaigns about the country’s female competitors in the Olympics. In Syria’s civil war, there are increasing reports that the opposition’s wealthy Gulf financiers have been channeling cash to Salafi groups, whose strict interpretation of Islam is considered close to the puritanical Wahhabism of the Saudis and others. Lately Salafi groups have been gaining fresh prominence in parts of the Islamic world — from Mali to Lebanon, from Kashmir to Russia’s North Caucasus.

Some — like journalist Robin Wright, who recently wrote a *New York Times* op-ed on the subject — say that this means we should be really, really worried. Painting a picture of a new “Salafi crescent” ranging from the Persian Gulf to North Africa, she worries that this bodes ill for newly won freedoms after the revolutions of 2011. Calling the rise of the new Salafi groups “one of the most underappreciated and disturbing byproducts of the Arab revolts,” Wright says that they’re now “moving into the political space once occupied by jihadi militants, who are now less in vogue.” “[S]ome Islamists are more hazardous to Western interests and values than others,” she writes. “The Salafis are most averse to minority and women’s rights.”
Others, like Egyptian journalist Mustafa Salama, dismiss this as hysteria. “The reality of the movement is that it is fragmented, not uniform, within Salafis there are various ideologies and discourses,” Salama writes. “Furthermore being a Salafi does not boil down to a set of specific political preferences.” The only thing that unites them, he argues, is their interest in returning to the beliefs and practices of the original Islamic community founded by the Prophet Mohammed — a desire that, in itself, is shared by quite a few mainstream Muslims. (The Arabic word salaf, meaning “predecessors” or “ancestors,” refers to the original companions of the Prophet.) This doesn’t mean that they’re necessarily opposed to freedom and democracy. During the revolution in Egypt, he says, some Salafis were “protecting Churches in Sinai and elsewhere from vandalism and theft” at considerable risk to themselves, though the fact wasn’t reported in the Western media.

If the first death of a U.S. ambassador in two decades is any indication, it’s probably time that the world starts paying attention to this debate. I think there are several points worth mentioning.

First of all, however we define them, these new “populist puritans” (as Wright aptly refers to them) are enjoying an extraordinary boom. Though solid numbers are hard to come by, they’re routinely described as the fastest-growing movement in modern-day Islam. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s Salafis barely figured in the political landscape during the Mubarak years — then stormed onto the scene to capture a quarter of the vote in the country’s first democratic election last year. Their share of the vote could well increase, given that the new Brotherhood-led government is likely to have problems making good on the ambitious promises it’s made to Egyptian voters over the past year. Their rapid rise in Tunisia is especially startling, given that country’s relatively relaxed atmosphere toward religion.

Indeed, if the history of revolutions shows us anything, it’s that transformative social upheavals of the kind we’ve seen in the Arab Spring don’t necessarily favor the moderates. On the day that the Shah left Iran in 1979, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that the radical forces around Ayatollah Khomeini, who followed his innovative theory of clerical rule, would end up running the country. Secular socialists, communists, liberal democrats, democratic nationalists, moderate Islamists, and even other rival Shiite clerics were all vying for power. But Khomeini ultimately triumphed because he offered forceful, uncorrupted leadership with a simple message — “Islamic government” — that cut through the mayhem with the authority of faith. Lenin understood the same political dynamic: Hence his ruthlessly straightforward slogan “Bread, Peace, Land,” which was perfectly calculated to appeal to Russians wearied by anarchy, war, and social injustice.

The Salafi notion of returning to the purity of 7th-century Islam can have the same kind of draw for some Muslims exasperated by everyday corruption and abusive rule. Syria offers a good example. If you’re going up against Bashar al-Assad’s helicopter gunships armed with an antique rifle and a few rusty bullets, you’ll probably prefer to go into battle with a simple slogan on your lips. “Power sharing for all ethnic groups in a liberal parliamentary democracy” might not cut it — especially if you happen to be a Sunni who’s seen your relatives cut down by Assad’s murderous militias. This isn’t to say that the opposition is now dominated by Salafis; far from it. But it’s safe to assume that the longer the war goes on, the more pronounced the extremes will become.

At the same time, the Sunni Salafis are a major factor in the growing global polarization of the Islamic community between Shiites and Sunnis. (The French scholar of Islam Olivier Roy argues that the intra-Muslim rivalry between the two groups has now become even more important than the presumed confrontation between Islam and the West.) The fact that many Salafis in various parts of the world get their financing from similarly conservative elements in Saudi Arabia doesn’t help. Perversely enough, Iranian propaganda is already trying to portray the West as backers of Salafi extremism in order to destabilize Tehran and its allies. We’ll be seeing a lot more of this sort of thing in the future, I’m afraid.
In short, no one should count on the Salafis to go away any time soon. So how should the outside world deal with them — especially if they’re going to go around storming foreign embassies?

I think the answer is two-pronged. First, don’t generalize. Not all Salafis should be treated as beyond the pale. Salafis who are willing to stand by the rules of democracy and acknowledge the rights of religious and cultural minorities should be encouraged to participate in the system. With time, voters in the new democracies of the region will discriminate between the demagogues and the people who can actually deliver a better society.

Second, don’t allow radicals to dictate the rules for everyone else. This is why the outcome of the current political conflicts in Tunisia and Libya are extremely important for the region as a whole. In both countries, voters have now had the opportunity to declare their political preferences in free elections, and they have delivered pretty clear messages. Libyans voted overwhelmingly for secular politicians, while Tunisians chose a mix of moderate Islamists and secularists. But the Salafis in both places don’t seem content to leave it at that, and are trying to foment instability by instigating a culture war.

What’s encouraging is that we’re beginning to see some pushback from ordinary Libyans and Tunisians who don’t want to submit to the logic of radicalization — not to mention scholars at the Arab world’s most prestigious university, also in Cairo. Don’t be fooled by the rabble-rousers. The story in the Middle East is still more interesting than the stereotypes.

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The New Islamists

By Olivier Roy, April 16, 2012

The following is an excerpt from the book The Islamists Are Coming: Who They Really Are, released by the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

The longstanding debate over whether Islam and democracy can coexist has reached a stunning turning point. Since the Arab uprisings began in late 2010, political Islam and democracy have become increasingly interdependent. The debate over whether they are compatible is now virtually obsolete. Neither can now survive without the other.

In Middle Eastern countries undergoing political transitions, the only way for Islamists to maintain their legitimacy is through elections. Their own political culture may still not be democratic, but they are now defined by the new political landscape and forced in turn to redefine themselves — much as the Roman Catholic Church ended up accepting democratic institutions even as its own practices remained oligarchic.

At the same time, democracy will not set down roots in Arab countries in transition without including mainstream Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt,
Ennahda in Tunisia, or Islah in Yemen. The so-called Arab Spring cleared the way for the Islamists. And even if many Islamists do not share the democratic culture of the demonstrators, the Islamists have to take into account the new playing field the demonstrations created.

The debate over Islam and democracy used to be a chicken-and-egg issue: Which came first? Democracy has certainly not been at the core of Islamist ideology. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood has historically been strictly centralized and obedient to a supreme guide, who rules for life. And Islam has certainly not been factored into promotion of secular democracy. Indeed, skeptics long argued that the two forces were even anathema to each other.

But the outside world wrongly assumed that Islam would first have to experience a religious reformation before its followers could embark on political democratization -- replicating the Christian experience when the Protestant Reformation gave birth to the Enlightenment and then modern democracy. In fact, however, liberal Muslim intellectuals had little impact in either inspiring or directing the Arab uprisings. The original protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square referred to democracy as a universal concept, not to any sort of Islamic democracy.

The development of both political Islam and democracy now appears to go hand-in-hand, albeit not at the same pace. The new political scene is transforming the Islamists as much as the Islamists are transforming the political scene.

Today, the question of Islam’s compatibility with democracy does not center on theological issues, but rather on the concrete way believers recast their faith in a rapidly changing political environment. Liberal or fundamentalist, the new forms of religiosity are individualistic and more in tune with the democratic ethos.

The Evolution

When Islamism gained ground during the 1970s and 1980s, it was initially dominated by revolutionary movements and radical tactics. Over the next 30 years, however, the religious revival in Arab societies diversified, and social shifts reined in radicalism. The toll of death and destruction that radical Islamism left in its wake also diverted interest in militancy.

Even the proliferation of media free from overbearing state control played a role. In the mid-1990s, Al-Jazeera became the first independent satellite television station in the Arab world. Within a generation, there were more than 500 such stations. Many offered a wide range of religious programming -- from traditional sheikhs to liberal Muslim thinkers -- which in turn introduced the idea of diversity. Suddenly, there was no single truth in a religion that has preached one path to God for 14 centuries.

Islamists also changed both through victory and defeat -- or a combination. Shiite Islamists won a political victory in Iran’s 1979 revolution, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rose to power. But three decades later, the world’s only modern theocracy was increasingly ostracized by the world, leading many Islamists to ask, “What went wrong?”

In Algeria, Sunni Islamists were pushed aside in a military coup on the eve of an election victory in 1992. The party was banned, its leaders imprisoned. A more militant faction then took on the military, and more than 100,000 people were killed in a decade-long civil war. The bloody aftermath of the Arab world’s first democratic election had a ripple effect on the calculations of Islamist groups across the region.

As a result of their experience with the power of government repression, Islamists increasingly compromised to get in, or stay in, the political game. In Egypt, the Muslim Brothers ran for parliament whenever allowed, often making tactical alliances with secular parties. In Kuwait and Morocco, Islamists abided by the political rules whenever they ran for parliament, even when it meant embracing those countries’ monarchies. Morocco’s Justice and Development Party recognized the sacred dimension of the king in order to participate in elections, while Jordan’s Muslim Brotherhood publicly supports the king despite growing discontent among the Arab Bedouin tribes.
A generation of Islamic activists forced into exile also played a major role in redirecting their movements. Most leaders or members ended up spending more time in Western countries rather than Islamic nations, where they came into contact with other secular and liberal dissidents as well as non-government organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House. These new connections facilitated the flow of ideas, and their movements’ evolution.

In the 1990s, exiled activists increasingly framed their agendas in terms of democracy and human rights. They acknowledged that simplistic slogans like “Islam is the solution” were not enough to build programs or coalitions capable of removing dictators. Rached Ghannouchi, co-founder of Tunisia's Ennahda Party, concluded almost 20 years before the Arab uprisings that democracy was a better tool to fight dictatorships than the call for either jihad or sharia.

The Social Revolution

Islamists have changed because society has changed too. The rise of Islamists has reflected the social and cultural revolutions within Muslim societies as much as a political revolution.

A new generation has entered the political space, especially in the major cities. It is the generation of Tahrir Square, the epicenter of Egypt's uprising against Hosni Mubarak. When the uprisings began, two-thirds of the Arab world’s 300 million people were under the age of 30. They are better educated and more connected with the outside world than any previous generation. Many speak or understand a foreign language. The females are often as ambitious as their male counterparts. Both genders eagerly question and debate. Most are able to identify and even shrug off propaganda.

The shift does not necessarily mean the baby-boom generation is more liberal or more secular than their parents. Many Arab baby boomers are attracted by new forms of religiosity that stress individual choice, direct relations with God, self-realization, and self-esteem. But even when they join Islamic movements, they bring along their critical approach and reluctance to blindly follow an aging leadership.

The transformation is visible even among young Egyptian Salafis, followers of a puritanical strain of Islam that emphasizes a return to early Islamic practices. They may wear baggy trousers and long white shirts in imitation of the Prophet Mohammed. But they also often wear shiny sunglasses and sport shoes. They are part of a global culture.

For decades, the Salafis opposed participation in politics. But after the uprisings, they completely reversed course. They jumped into politics, hastily registering as political parties. At universities, clubs of young Salafis -- including females -- have joined public debate forums.

The influence of the current baby-boom generation will be enduring. Their numbers are likely to dominate for much of their lives -- potentially another 30 to 40 years -- because the fertility rate has plummeted almost everywhere in the Arab world since their birth.

The Three Camps

During the centuries-old debate about Islam and democracy, Muslim religious scholars and intellectuals fell into three broad camps.

The first camp rejects both democracy and secularism as Western concepts that are not even worth refuting. In this fundamentalist view, participating even in everyday politics, such as joining a political party or voting, is haram, or religiously forbidden. This has been the position of the Wahhabi clerics in Saudi Arabia, the Taliban in Afghanistan and, for decades, the various Salafi schools across the Arab world.

The second camp claims that returning to the “true tenets” of Islam will create the best kind of democracy. In this conservative view, the faithful may deliberate to understand the true path, but the idea that religion is the
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ultimate truth is not negotiable. These Islamists invoke the concept of tawhid, or the oneness, uniqueness and sovereignty of God, which can never be replaced by the will of the people.

The second camp also invokes Muslim practices to claim modern political ideology meets the basic requirements of democracy. For example, it often points to the shura or advisory council, where ideas were debated before submitting proposals to the leader --as the equivalent of a parliament.

The third camp advocates ijtihad, or reinterpreting Islam to make it compatible with the universal concept of democracy. This position is more common among lay intellectuals than among clerics. But the opening up the doors of ijtihad, which conservative scholars had believed were closed in the Middle Ages, has already produced its own spectrum of ideas, not all in agreement.

The Islamist reformers often have a larger audience in the West than in their own countries -- and not just because of censorship and harassment. Some are deemed to be too intellectual, too abstract, or tied to an artificial theology. Their philosophical approach is disconnected from popular religious practices and the teachings at most madrasas, or religious schools.

The Future

The new Islamist brand will increasingly mix technocratic modernism and conservative values. The movements that have entered the political mainstream cannot now afford to turn their backs on multiparty politics for fear of alienating a significant portion of the electorate that wants stability and peace, not revolution.

But in countries undergoing transitions, the Islamists will face a tough balancing act. In Egypt, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood cannot cede its conviction that Islam is all-encompassing. Yet it risks losing popular support unless it can also reconcile Islam with good governance and human rights.

To do that, the Muslim Brothers may have to translate Islamic norms into more universal conservative values -- such as limiting the sale of alcohol in a manner more similar to Utah’s rules than to Saudi laws, and promoting “family values” instead of imposing sharia norms on women.

Many Islamist movements still do not share the democratic culture of the uprisings. But given their own demographics and the wider constituency they seek, they will increasingly have to take into account the new political playing field created by the demonstrations -- even within their own movements.

The exercise of power can actually have a debilitating effect on ideological parties. And for all their recent political success, Islamists also face a set of constraints: They do not control the armed forces. Their societies are more educated and sophisticated in their worldviews, and more willing to actively express their opinions than in years past. Women are increasingly prominent players, a fact reflected in their growing numbers in universities.

Ironically, elected Islamists may face opposition from the clergy. Among Sunnis, Islamists usually do not control the religious institutions. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood does not control Al Azhar University, the Islamic world’s oldest educational institution dating back more than a millennium. The Brothers may have won a plurality in parliament, but none of them is authorized to say what is or is not Islamic without being challenged by a wide range of other religious actors, from clerics to university scholars.

The biggest constraint on Islamists, however, may be economic realities. Focusing simply on sharia will not spawn economic development, and could easily deter foreign investment and tourism. The labor force is outspoken and does not want to be forgotten, but economic globalization requires sensitivity to international pressures too. The newly elected Islamists face political rejection if they do not deliver the economic goods.

Israel is still unpopular and anti-Western xenophobia has visibly grown, but Islamist movements will need more than
these old issues to sustain their rise to power. The Arab uprisings have shifted the battle lines in the Middle East, and Islamists will find it harder to play on the Arab-Israeli conflict or tensions with the international community.

At the moment, the most dangerous divide is persistent tensions between Sunnis and Shiites. The differences are symbolized by deepening political fault lines between the Sunni religious monarchy in Saudi Arabia and Iran's Shiite theocracy, but they ripple across the region -- from the tiny archipelago of Bahrain to strategically located Syria.

Just as Islamism is redefining the region’s politics, Islamic politics and sectarian differences are redefining its conflicts.

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**Democracy, Salafi Style**

*By Aaron Y. Zelin, July 20, 2012*

One of Saudi Arabia’s most popular hardline clerics just embraced democracy. Should we worry, or applaud?

The Muslim Brotherhood has so far emerged as the clear political winner from the popular uprisings that have seized the Arab world. In Egypt and Tunisia, its affiliated political parties have either won power outright in democratic elections. But the Brotherhood isn’t the only movement mixing faith and politics in the new Middle East: Salafis — hardline conservatives who model their lives on Prophet Mohamed and the first three generation of Muslim leaders following his death — are setting aside years of theological opposition to democracy to participate in the political game.

This sea change was driven home earlier this week when Saudi Salafi heavyweight Sheikh Salman al-Awdah took to his Twitter feed and Facebook page to proclaim: “Democracy might not be an ideal system, but it is the least harmful, and it can be developed and adapted to respond to local needs and circumstances.” Although Awdah notably made his announcement on his English and not Arabic social media platforms, where his audience numbers in the millions rather than the tens of thousands, the sentiment is still positively Churchillian — echoing as it does the late British prime minister’s maxim: “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.”

Awdah’s pronouncement is significant due to his history and popularity within the Salafist milieu. He was one of the key leaders of Saudi Arabia’s sahwa (“awakening”) movement, which butted heads with the House of Saud most prominently during the Gulf war in the early 1990s. During those years, key Saudi religious scholars and sahwa activists signed two petitions admonishing the Saudi royals for their reliance on the United States, and calling for the creation of a shura (“consultative”) council that would grant greater authority to the religious establishment to determine whether legislation was truly in line with Islamic law.
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The House of Saud viewed these letters as a direct threat to its power, and consequently arrested Awdah and other sahwa figures in 1994. Awdah would not be released until 1999. Although he has not been as overt in his criticisms of the regime since his release, he is not part of the official religious establishment and has a level of independence, which has afforded him the ability to maintain a large following without being viewed as a lackey of the government.

Osama bin Laden was one of the young Saudis deeply affected by Awdah’s stand against the Saudi regime in the early 1990s. The al Qaeda chief viewed him as an intellectual mentor, and allegedly told his former bodyguard Abu Jandal that if Awdah had not been imprisoned, he would not have had to raise his voice up against the Saudi ruling family.

The al Qaeda leader’s admiration highlights Awdah’s influence among not only mainstream Salafists, but some of the more radical wings of the movement. Awdah himself was never an al Qaeda sympathizer. He would rebuke bin Laden in 2007 during Ramadan, saying, “My brother Osama, how much blood has been spilt? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed … in the name of al Qaeda? Will you be happy to meet God Almighty carrying the burden of these hundreds of thousands or millions of victims on your back?”

Prior to the Arab uprisings, the large majority of Salafis viewed democracy as contrary to Islam. The crux of the Salafist argument is that electing legislators to create laws infringes upon the sovereignty of God, who is the only valid sovereign in the world. Therefore, by establishing the supremacy of democracy, one is putting humans on the same level as God and thus one is worshipping another. As a consequence, one is no longer truly a Muslim because one’s beliefs have slipped into polytheism. The burgeoning Salafist parties across the Middle East, however, show the monumental shift away from this doctrinaire position.

But Awdah’s remarks are an acknowledgment of the changing political landscape in the Middle East. The list of legal Salafist parties in Arab countries making the transition to democracy continues to grow. Egypt has three Salafist parties, which together hold roughly 25 percent of seats in parliament, while Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen have one each. With these parties quickly becoming accepted players in the political game, this new era could see the proliferation of political movements established by formerly non-politicized Salafis.

Awdah’s comments may resonate further in countries still living under the yoke of authoritarian rulers than those undergoing a political transition. If he is more outspoken in the coming months or years, especially in Arabic, it could reinvigorate past failed attempts to reform, or even unseat, the House of Saud. That possibility, however, still remains beyond the horizon — in the short term, the kingdom appears stable.

Democracy has exposed Salafis to a difficult question: Do they maintain their doctrinal purity or attempt to truly influence their destiny — a path that was closed to them under authoritarian regimes? It appears that some Salafis have had the foresight to see the necessity of joining the process.

Of course, taking part in the democratic process does not make one a liberal in the Enlightenment sense. Important questions remain about Salafi groups’ shift to democracy. Is it pragmatic or a true ideological commitment to democratic principles? Will joining the process liberalize such parties to the extent that they could provide more competition in the election process, or will it create a populist push between Islamist parties to prove who is truly following God’s will? It is still too early to assess the answers to these questions one way or the other, but the result of Salafis’ participation in the political game will likely vary by country, depending on the local context.

Salafis’ participation in the political game also raises important policy considerations the United States should take into account. True, the U.S. government, and the West in general, have few points of ideological agreement with these Salafi movements. For example, all of the Salafi parties would like to end interest-based banking, which they view
as *haram*, and have a very narrow view of the rights of minorities, women, and homosexuals. But bringing them into the mainstream political process holds the possibility of drawing individuals away from the more extreme jihadist interpretations of Salafism. These movements may be troublesome political players, but democracy provides a more positive outlet for change than violence.

Awdah’s remarks highlight an important ideological shift within the Salafi movement over the past year and a half. It suggests that the United States should continue to pursue a policy that helps and encourages the emerging Arab democracies to open up so that individuals within them can shape their own futures. Salafis are poised to become key political players in the new Middle East, and should be given the space to continue their ideological evolution.

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**Who are Tunisia’s Salafis?**

*By Monica Marks, September 28, 2012*

Recent protests at the U.S. embassy in Tunis and corresponding attacks on the nearby American Cooperative School have cast sharp light on the Salafis allegedly responsible. Media accounts quickly dismissed the protesters as “Salafi fanatics,” though some resembled rioting football fans more than religiously garbed ruffians.

Local journalists covering previous instances of Salafi-oriented unrest — from the October 2011 demonstrations against the film *Persepolis* to this June’s riots at an art exhibit in Tunis’s upscale La Marsa district — have tended to narrate events from afar without directly interviewing Salafis. Such slipshod coverage has tended to leave readers with a broad-brush portrait of Tunisian Salafism — one that obscures important details concerning the movement’s composition and complexity. Far from being a monolithic group of highly organized extremists, Tunisia’s Salafis are in fact a loose collection of religiously right-wing individuals whose identities and motivations require far closer scrutiny.

The emergence of “Salafism” as a political category is itself a very recent development in Tunisia. Before the January 2011 revolution, Tunisia’s Salafis seemed virtually invisible and almost entirely apolitical. During the 1990s and, to a lesser extent, the 2000s, both moderate and militant Islamists were imprisoned, forced underground, or driven into exile. Like leftists, insubordinate trade unionists, provocative bloggers, and a whole host of perceived regime opponents, Islamists — who sought to engage in faith-based forms of political activism — were systematically silenced. Former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali likely allowed a small window of space for ultraright wing activities, largely as an effort to justify his rule as a necessary bulwark against terrorism during the 2000s. For the most part, however, Islamists — both mainstream moderates and potentially militant right-wingers — spent the better part of the 1990s and 2000s simply trying to fly under the regime’s radar and avoid arrest.

Following the revolution, Tunisia’s long-muzzled media establishment — which had little experience in meaningfully critiquing social or political developments — struggled to make sense of the upsurge in conservative forms of religious dress, such as long beards and full face
veils. Last summer, many secularly inclined Tunisians described Ennahda and the Salafis as practically synonymous. This year, as Salafi styles of conservative dress and religiously oriented protests have become increasingly commonplace, media outlets have begun devoting more attention to unpicking the divisions between the two groups. Though many secular opponents of Ennahda still believe the two movements are interchangeable, Tunisian press coverage now generally portrays Salafis as ultra-conservative, violently natured persons whose sympathies lay to the right of Ennahda. Ennahda has sought to encourage that interpretation, repeatedly characterizing itself as a centrist movement caught between Salafi and secularist extremes.

The distinction between Tunisian Salafism and mainstream Islamist politics is an important one, and represents a step toward better understanding the dynamics of intra-Islamist competition in Tunisia. While the most liberal strain of Salafism overlaps with the most right-wing strain of Ennahda, the two movements are distinct and often at loggerheads.

Simply positioning “Salafis” as a broad group of radicals who may challenge Ennahda from the right, however, fails to sufficiently explain the nature of Salafi activism in Tunisia. Tunisian press and political commentators continue to regularly employ the term “Salafism” as a convenient by-word for “bearded youths whose rage we don’t understand.” The term “Salafism” has, in fact, become a convenient conceptual dumping ground, a kind of catchall waste bin into which journalists and some academics have tended to blithely toss individuals and actions that seem aggressive or incomprehensible. Like “Islamism,” a term that has been used to link actors as disparate as Osama bin Laden and Oxford professor Tariq Ramadan, the word “Salafism” often confuses more than it clarifies.

“Salafism” in Tunisia refers to a broad umbrella of religiously conservative social movements that position themselves to the right of Ennahda. Within the broad stream of Salafi social movements, we can differentiate two main currents: Salafiyya ‘Almiyya, often translated as “scientific Salafism” but probably better understood in English as “scripturalist Salafism,” and Salafiyya Jihadiyya, or jihadi Salafism. Tunisian Salafis, particularly jihadi Salafis, frequently use these terms to explain divisions within the Salafi movement and to describe their own positions vis a vis social and political norms. According to Lubna, a 27 year-old student who calls herself a Salafi jihadist, the scripturalists are “too weak to ever change the system.” “They might pray and dress like Salafis,” explained a 21 year-old jihadi Salafi named Mejdi, “but they’re very different from us.”

Scripturalist Salafis generally eschew political involvement as impious and pointless — a sign of buying into a corrupt, worldly system destined for decay. These Salafis look toward a morally pure caliphate characterized by the complete imposition of sharia law — which they tend to interpret with varying degrees of conservatism — as the ultimate goal. They see elections as a treacherous path leading away from that pious caliphate, and generally disparage the concept of democracy as a misguided ruse — a tempting but ultimately vapid distraction best avoided. Instead of engaging in politics or throwing their efforts into protest-oriented jihad (most literally understood as a righteous struggle, but generally understood by Tunisian jihadi Salafis to mean very public, potentially violent protests), scripturalist Salafis usually prefer to hunker down. They focus their lives on following the texts of Islam and living according to the example of the first three generations of Muslims who followed Muhammad, a group known as the salaf al-salah (literally, followers of the prophet), from which the word “Salafi” derives.

A small group of scripturalist Salafis, led mainly by individuals who found themselves on the right wing of the Islamic Tendency Movement (Ennahda’s predecessor movement) in the 1980s, has embraced a more political path. These individuals, including, perhaps most notably, Mohamed Khouja, leader of the mildly Salafi party Jibhat al-Islah (the Reform Front), had ties to Ennahda leaders in the 1980s but ended up breaking off, often going into exile or joining the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan.
This political wing of scriptural Salafism seems to be quite small, especially in comparison to other Arab countries such as Egypt, where Salafism has become a mainstream political force. The overwhelming majority of Salafis, scripturalist and jihadi, claim to have rejected politics. Many, if not most, Salafis did not vote in the October 2011 elections. Those who did vote, however, tended to cast their ballots in favor of Ennahda, believing it to be a pure, Islamic party that would enshrine sharia as the key cornerstone of constitutional legislation. When this failed to happen, many on the religious right were crestfallen and deeply disillusioned with Ennahda’s so-called “Islamic” credentials. Like Houda, a 24 year-old Salafi girl who participated in the pro-niqab protests at Manouba University this January, many swear that they will never again be “duped into voting” for any political party, even those who claim Islamic credentials.

Like their scripturalist counterparts, jihadi Salafis usually reject political participation, but they tend to view the scripturalists as increasingly out of touch and irrelevant. Jihadi Salafis often deride the scripturalists’ quietist approach as foolish. They argue that the best way to transform Tunisia’s inefficient and corrupted political system into a just Islamic government, or caliphate, is to preach vocally and uncompromisingly through both personal example and protest. Preaching, or making dawa, they say, involves more than just quietly busying oneself with selling Islamic CDs or wearing a niqab. It involves a very direct and deliberate challenge to Tunisia’s state system, which jihadi Salafis see as a rotten and irredeemably corrupt holdover from the dictatorial days of the pro-secular autocrat, Ben Ali.

Support for jihadi strains of Salafi thought grew during the 2000s, as Ben Ali ratcheted up arrests of domestic opposition forces and suspiciously bearded young men under Tunisia’s 2003 Counterterrorism Law, adopted under U.S. pressure and widely denounced by international human rights organizations. The combination of widespread local arrests, which provoked resentment and feelings of marginalization, and the increasingly symbolic debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan motivated certain Tunisian young people to look toward more radical internet preachers during the 2000s — preachers who sometimes espoused support for a more violent brand of jihadist activism against “infidel” forces, both domestic and international.

The relationship between Salafi jihadists and Salafi scripturalists in Tunisia is that of a vocal, sometimes violent activist movement to a more pacifist and sometimes integrationist movement. This dynamic is comparable — in the very loosest of terms — to the relationship that existed in the 1960s between the supporters of the Black Panthers and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States. Though the struggle for a sharia-based caliphate in Tunisia is far from directly comparable to the struggle for African-Americans’ civil rights, the Salafis’ perception of their own activism is important here: Salafis tend to see themselves as deeply marginalized actors in a context of lingering secular authoritarianism and global oppression of Arab voices. Most Salafis seem to hail from lower middle class or poor backgrounds, and most are quite young — in their 20s or 30s. Many come from precisely the same socioeconomic stratum as the young men who die on boat journeys to Italy, or the youths in depressed interior towns like Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa, and Kasserine who first agitated against the old regime and in favor of their economic and personal rights. These young people tend to feel angry, voiceless, and rejected by an elite class of educated secularists living on the coasts.

Broadly speaking, the two groups — Salafis and secularists — have very little contact, and many nurture deep-seated stereotypes and conspiracies about the other. For Tunisian secularists, Salafis can appear to be bearded, violent caricatures — senseless radicals bent on destabilizing Tunisia. Rumors that young Salafis are being paid by shadowy Saudi sheikhs abound. Secularists tend to place blame for the U.S. embassy violence squarely on Ennahda’s shoulders, arguing — with some justification — that Ennahda has been taking an overly soft accommodationist approach to Salafi extremism. Many feel Ennahda may actually be in alliance with the Salafis, and are disgusted that the party has, in their opinion, failed to stand up for
“Tunisian values,” which they frequently define as freedom of artistic expression, openness, and moderation. Some secularists go so far as to believe that Britain and the United States may be creating a Salafi monster by feeding secret funds into Ennahda. “Before you ask me my opinion on politics here,” one anti-Ennahda protester at last month’s National Women’s Day rally told me, “go back to Britain and tell that government to stop funding Ennahda. Without British and American money, they’d be nothing!”

Salafi youths, on the other hand, frequently perceive Tunisian secularists to be tools of the French — unreflective, extreme elitists whose only concern are drinking beer and parading about in skimpy bathing suits. Salafis of all stripes often accuse more secular-oriented Tunisians of taking money from Europe and the United States to fund their civil society organizations. Many believe that the country’s mainstream Islamist movement, Ennahda, is pandering to the Americans and potentially even accepting U.S. funding. Salafis, particularly the more vocal jihadi Salafis, tend to share secularists’ rage against Ennahda, blaming the party for failing to stand up for “Tunisian values,” which Salafis generally define as sharia-based Islam and restrictions on blasphemous forms of expression. “Where was Ennahda when we were protesting against the blasphemy in La Marsa?” a 23 year-old jihadi Salafi recently asked me. “They were trying to be hands-off, to play it safe — but they forgot Islamic values. They don’t have Islamic principles — that was just a political trick for the last election.”

For young Salafis, many of whom feel unrepresented by Ennahda, economically disenfranchised, and increasingly shunted aside by the elitism of Tunisian party politics, the promise and purity of Islam remain immensely inspirational. Leaders like Abu Iyadh — whose admonition not to fear America and to stand up for Islamic values stirred hundreds of Salafi hearts in a downtown mosque last week — command immense popularity among Salafi youths in general, and jihadi Salafis in particular. Abu Iyadh, a founding member of the Tunisian Combat Group, which was active in the jihad against the United States in Afghanistan, has become something of a legend amongst such young people, who frequently invoke him as a proud symbol of Arab power against unprincipled regimes, both in Tunisia and abroad. Many are members of the Facebook pages for Abu Iyadh’s group Ansar al Sharia, as well as the Tunisian wing of the international group Hizb al-Tahrir, which, although strictly speaking not a Salafi group, enjoys widespread popularity amongst Salafi youth for its strong line on Palestinian liberation and other popular causes.

Violent outbursts, such as occurred in front of the U.S. embassy on September 14, have been happening on a smaller scale throughout the country since this winter, as attacks on liquor stores and protests against various concerts and cultural events deemed “un-Islamic” have spread. Such instances are symptomatic not just of intra-Islamist ideological divisions, but of broader questions surrounding the weakness and disorganization of Tunisia’s security apparatus and the flagging state of Tunisia’s economy, which has worsened since the revolution. The identities and motivations of the protesters involved in these various incidents remain unclear. Certain residents of Sidi Bouzid have privately confided that some “Salafis” accused of raiding their city’s liquor providers were actually local thugs who only donned beards after the revolution. The absence of reliable investigative journalism in Tunisia makes it very difficult to verify or deny such claims without physically going to Sidi Bouzid and other towns that have experienced incidences of religiously tinged unrest to personally interview the so-called Salfis involved.

Ben Ali’s departure on January 14, 2011 released a host of formerly unaired and long-suppressed grievances. After decades of repression, many Tunisians are talking openly across the political table — hearing one another’s views in an atmosphere of free debate for the very first time. This process of self-reckoning has proven both exhilarating and immensely frightening for many Tunsians, some of whom are shocked to see their so-called Islamist party rejecting a fully sharia-based constitution, others of whom find it difficult to fathom that their seemingly secular state could be the site of anti-blasphemy protests and pro-niqab rallies.

The U.S. embassy protest must be seen as one particularly regrettable episode in Tunisians’ long-term attempt to
come to grips with a legacy of deeply destructive state authoritarianism — a system that violently suppressed political expression and dissent. Working out precisely what freedom of artistic expression means, for example, in a country that has not yet even determined whether its political model will be presidential, parliamentary, or a mix of the two will take time. There will be messy episodes along the way as Tunisians go through a long, sometimes grueling process of self-reckoning and state building.

Ultimately, a measured understanding of Salafism is at the very heart of the struggle to build an inclusive Tunisia that offers a peaceful, politically representative arena where the voices and concerns of all groups can be heard.

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Planting the seeds of Tunisia’s Ansar al Sharia

By Louisa Loveluck, September 27, 2012

The attack on Benghazi’s U.S. consulate propelled a new jihadist organization into the political spotlight: Ansar al Sharia. As a number of groups sharing the same name have emerged across the Middle East and North Africa, pundits now scrabble for details of this little known yet seemingly ascendant force of global jihadism. This week, an interview with Hassen Brik, a spokesperson for Ansar al Sharia Tunisia, offered some clues as to the motivations and personalities behind the organization’s development in Tunisia.

As we enter the family home in Tunis, it becomes clear that the lives of Tunisia’s vilified jihadists cannot be reduced to the images of pious fanaticism on which the western media relies. We are greeted by his sister; unveiled, she is casually dressed in khaki cut-offs and a vest top. She says she feels under no pressure from Hassen to dress conservatively. His brothers, too, have followed very different life trajectories. Karim, in fact, goes by the stage name “Minissi” and has gained a large domestic following for his self-produced rap music. In contrast, their eldest brother is a military man, having served as an army sniper during the Ben Ali era.

The life of 34-year old Hassen has, of course, taken a different turn. In 2003, he traveled to Iraq as a fighter but ended up stationed across the border in Syria, operating a safe house for potential jihadists as they were vetted and trained for the mission ahead. There, he was arrested and deported back to Tunisia where he was imprisoned under the anti-terrorism law. And it was in these jails, Hassen tells us, that Ansar al Sharia was born. He claims that communal prayer time served as a forum for discussion and refining ideas that would be put into practice on release.

Ansar al Sharia’s moment arrived with Tunisia’s revolution. In March 2011, the new transitional government pardoned a number of prisoners who had been convicted under the Ben Ali regime’s repressive anti-terrorism laws. Among their number was Sayf Allah bin Hussayn (more commonly known as Abu Iyadh), who would lead a press conference the following month to announce the public debut of Ansar al Sharia.

A fighter abroad and a preacher at home, Hassen believes that it is now his duty to open da’wa offices across the country, offering a religious education that conforms to
Ansar al Sharia’s interpretation of Islam. “This is a long-term vision to prepare society,” he says, “We are for jihad, armed revolution, but we cannot do this if the people are not with us. It will only be possible when everyone is behind the vision. Look at Libya, the insurrection was only successful once armed and sharing a common vision.”

Although little is known about Ansar al Sharia, Hassen emphasizes that its members do not want to stay in the shadows. “Now we want to talk,” he says, “We want to be open, even if you are from the CIA.”

References to American power run through many of his assertions and he attributes his own imprisonment to the counterterrorism policies of the Bush administration. “It used to be permissible to study the Koran openly,” he says, “but after 2004 the government terrorized us on American orders.”

He is referring to Tunisia’s 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law, legislation that allowed security forces to arrest civilians with alleged links to terrorist organizations drawing praise from the U.S. State Department. Cases were usually held in private court sessions and many defendants claim that their convictions were based on confessions extracted through torture.

Popular reactions to Ansar al Sharia’s emergence have been hostile. Described in the Tunisian media as an “Islamist cancer,” the secular middle classes have greeted its rise with a mixture of horror and revulsion. Nor has it found favor with more moderate Islamist groups. The ruling Ennahda party has blamed the organization for this month’s attacks on the U.S. embassy, and followers of the more moderate “scripturalist” brand of Salafism also distance themselves from the violent tactics of their theological counterparts.

When asked if Ansar al Sharia can realistically attract wider support, Hassen counters that Tunisian society has failed to listen to its message: “We are trying to extend our hand to the Tunisian people but they aren’t taking it yet. We bring a new vision of politics for the Arab world, but we know this will take time. After 50 years of Bourgiba and Ben Ali, people have lost their religion and we are feeding it.”

References to the broader regional context litter his speech, although he denies that his organization is operationally linked to organizations in Libya, Yemen, Egypt, and Morocco that share the same name.

Turning to the subject of attacks on U.S. targets in Tunis the previous week, Hassen chooses his words carefully. Young Ansar al Sharia followers were involved, he says, but not on the direct instructions of the leadership.

“We do not deny that violent acts were committed in our name. We have made mistakes and many of our number have been behind bars. Now we are rehabilitating them, but this will take time. They need to be educated in the very foundations of Islam.

These boys of the districts follow us because they are tired of politicians’ immorality. They appreciate our coherence: our words come straight from the heart.”

A visit to Tunis’s working class El Khadra suburb the previous day suggested that there is truth in this sentiment. Although few were willing to openly align themselves with Ansar al Sharia, several young men expressed admiration at the organization’s piety and its refusal to engage in high-level political squabbles. Abu Iyadh’s name commanded particular enthusiasm, in the words of one young man, “he is strong where Ennahda are weak. He is the only man to stand up against the Americans.”

Demographic studies of those convicted under Tunisia’s anti-terrorism laws show that the jihadists have previously found these neighborhoods to be fertile ground for recruitment. Today their inhabitants remain as socially and economically marginalized as they were under Ben Ali, a reality which continues to escape many who rail against Ansar al Sharia as an aberration within Tunisia’s cosmopolitan society.

“We stand in solidarity with the weakest,” Hassan says, “and in time we will have local leaders who organize the boys.”
Yet the notion that Ansar al Sharia’s message has found real resonance within small sections of Tunisian society continues to escape the country’s chattering classes. High-level political discussion revolves around constitutional issues with little attempt to address the grievances of the most vulnerable. But this is a social blindness that they cannot afford to maintain. “For us, this is an opportunity to plant our seeds in the sunlight.” Hassan concludes, “and we are starting to see the fruit.”

**Tunisia’s student Salafis**

By Monica Marks, January 8, 2012

Giggling over a communal pot of couscous, the girls swap stories and take turns pushing each other across the room on wheely chairs. Douha Rihi, 20, a German language major, wants to study abroad in Berlin. Sana Brahimi, 23, is pursuing a master’s degree in Microbiology. They don’t look like the kind of young women you’d expect to find at the center of a major ideological controversy, but here they are — all ten of them — perched on the second level of the university administration building, fighting for their right to wear the full Muslim face veil, called niqab, inside classrooms and during exams.

Along with a group of scraggly-bearded young Salafi men, these girls have been occupying the University of Manouba College of Arts and Humanities administration building since November 28 of last year. Their protest has resulted in the continued closure of one of Tunisia’s largest campuses since December 6 and has kept an estimated 13,000 students from attending their classes.

What began with the demands of two students, Iman Melki, 20, and Faten Ben Mahmoud, 21, to wear the face veil during exams in late November has mushroomed into a seemingly intractable standoff between secularist university administrators and a tiny but determined group of about 50 to 60 Salafi-sympathizing youth on campus.

“At the beginning we had two demands,” explains Mohamed Souli, a 21-year-old student standing sentry in front of the administration building. “We wanted a prayer room inside the university and the right of all girls to wear niqab inside classrooms and during exams. These are still our demands.”

The faculty board at the University of Manouba, however, has steadfastly refused to allow niqab in classrooms or during examinations, citing a variety of security and pedagogical concerns. These concerns include the danger that students may hide weapons or cheating devices under their niqabs and the difficulty of teaching pupils whose facial expressions are concealed.

Some professors noted that the revolutionary atmosphere has inspired a wave of more vocal student demands on Tunisian campuses. “After the revolution there were so
many student demands,” said Faiza Derbel, an assistant professor of linguistics at the University of Manouba. “Students wanted their papers re-graded and said that their exams were too difficult. I was able to handle their problems on an individual basis. But this seems to be an unmanageable situation.”

In the wake of last January’s revolution, Tunisians have breathed a collective sigh of relief. Ben Ali’s clampdown police state has been replaced by a startlingly vibrant atmosphere of laissez-faire engagement. Students are speaking up, a raft of new non-government organizations (NGOs) and media outlets has been founded, and people are feeling comfortable experimenting with formerly suppressed modes of religious expression. Whereas Ben Ali’s Ministry of Religious affairs scripted preachers’ Friday sermons and distributed them to mosques across the country, local mosques are now free to preach what they wish, and Tunisians can wear headscarves, niqabs, and long beards without fear of imprisonment or government reprisal.

Unable to reach a compromise with the protesters, Habib Kazdaghli, dean of the College of Arts and Humanities, called upon the Ministry of Higher Education in early December to resolve the Salafi issue. Mr. Kazdaghli and the faculty board presented the ministry with requests to relocate the sit-inners away from the administration building and evacuate any protesters who are not registered students at the University of Manouba.

The Ministry of Higher Education, for its part, has hesitated to involve itself in the controversy, possibly afraid that sending police to forcibly remove protesters will exacerbate an already volatile situation and serve as an unwelcome reminder of the former regime’s heavy handed treatment of protesters. In a statement broadcast on Tunisian radio yesterday, the newly appointed Minister of Higher Education, Moncef Ben Salem, reiterated that the sit-in is “an internal affair” and that police will not enter the university.

Fed up with the sit-in, which has now lasted over one month, a group of about 200 anti-niqab demonstrators gathered in front of the Ministry of Higher Education on Wednesday. The group, comprised mainly of professors and students from the University of Manouba, called for immediate government intervention to disperse the Salafi protesters and restore security on the Manouba campus.

Many professors at the University of Manouba are incensed at the Ministry’s lack of involvement and have joined in the anti-niqab protest. “We needed a categorical answer — either these Salafi sit-inners go or we stay. That’s why we came here today,” said Amel Grami, a lecturer in Gender and Islamic Studies.

Ms. Grami and a number of other female professors reported being verbally harassed by the Salafi students in early December, and Mr. Kazdaghli was pushed and physically prevented from entering his office in the administration building on December 6. In a report issued on December 9, Human Rights Watch called on the Tunisian government to “ensure swift intervention of security forces whenever requested by the faculty to prevent third parties from seriously disrupting academic life.”

The niqab dispute at Manouba has acquired a politically polarized and ideological tone. Ms. Grami, like many of the professors at yesterday’s demonstration, places much of the blame for the Salafis’ rise squarely on the shoulders of Ennahdha, the center-right Islamist party that won a plurality of the vote in October’s elections. “At the end of the day, this is Rached Ghannouchi’s decision,” said Ms. Grami, pushing her black bangs away from her sunglasses. “Ennahdha has created an environment where these people feel comfortable imposing their will on us.”

Said Ferjani, an official spokesperson for Ennahdha Party, said that Manouba must find a solution to the niqab dispute “without infringing in any shape or form on a woman’s fundamental right to choose her own clothing.” The niqab debate and controversy over women wearing skimpy bikinis on Tunisian beaches, Mr. Ferjani said, “are two sides of the same issue. We live within the dynamics of a fledgling democracy, and we must respect democratic principles.”
For some students, the standoff at Manouba represents little more than a frustratingly alarmist tug of war over largely irrelevant issues of “Tunisian identity.” “We, the students, are the losers” said Houda, a head-scarved 21-year-old who attended yesterday’s anti-niqab demonstration purely out of curiosity. “We want to return to our studies without thinking of any ideology. These girls who wear niqab are just as Tunisian as all the people here.”

The faculty board at Manouba, however, seems unlikely to budge. Other universities around the country, in Sfax, Sousse, Ariana, and Kariouane, have dealt with similar instances of girls wearing niqab to class. Some have found creative compromises to end the standoff. According to members of the Manouba faculty board, the dean of April 9th University in Tunis solved his university’s niqab crisis by offering the three girls wearing niqab the option of taking their exams in a classroom with blind students and a female invigilator. They accepted his offer, and things appear to be running smoothly.

Many professors at Manouba, however, feel their university has a special role to play as a key holdout — a fortress of secular enlightenment, so to speak, in a nation that is backsliding into the recesses of Saudi-style Salafism. “We are ashamed of what happened at April 9th,” said Nabil Cherni, a lecturer in English at the University of Manouba. “Our position is uncompromising.”

Meanwhile, back at the administration building, the bearded boys have taken a break from playing football to roll out large green floor mats for the sunset prayer. It seems they’re taking delight in “protecting” the niqabbed young ladies upstairs and they make sure to register my name and contact information before I walk up to meet the girls. I ask Mohamed Souli what the boys would do if the security forces came to physically expel the sit-inners from their building. “We will resist and try to be tolerant,” he says, “but if police use violence we will respond. Our only protector is Allah, and we’re serving him.”

Later, sharing dates with the niqabbed girls upstairs, I ask Ms. Melki what has motivated her to spend 37 days in a chilly upstairs administration room. “Every girl has the liberty to wear whatever she wants,” she proclaims. “This is a university and we are free.” Then she stands up, lowers her face veil, and carries a pot of food down to the boys.

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Jihadists and Post-Jihadists in the Sinai

By Omar Ashour, September 5, 2012

“There is no animosity between the authorities and the Islamist current. The brothers in Sinai know this...and the [Rafah] operation in this frame makes no sense. It is a criminal act and we all condemn it,” said Magdi Salem, one of the leaders of what was known once as al-Jihad Organization of Egypt. Salem, along with three others, arrived in the Sinai on a mission last week: to limit the scope of the conflict and isolate the perpetrators of the August 5 Rafah massacre, in which an armed group killed 16 Egyptian border guards and then infiltrated Israel.

Why are the Post-Jihadists in the sensitive and turbulent Sinai environment? In fact, this is not the first interaction between Salafi-Jihadists and Post-Jihadists in that geostrategically sensitive and marginalized peninsula, and it certainly won’t be the last.

The uneasy dalliance between the Egyptian state and the jihadists over the Sinai dates back to the Taba and Nuweiba simultaneous bombings in October 2004. After that disaster, the State Security Investigations (SSI) and the Central Security Forces (CSF) had almost no information about the perpetrators and therefore conducted a brutal crackdown in North Sinai. They arrested around 3,000 people, and took women and children related to suspects hostage until the suspects surrendered. One of the detainees from 2004 reported, “they electrocuted us in the genitals for a day or so before asking any questions. Then the torture continues during and after the interrogations. Many of the young-men swore revenge.”

A second wave of bombings hit Sharm el-Sheikh in July 2005. This time, an organization declared responsibility for the attacks. *Al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad* (TJS), Monotheism and Struggle, in Sinai was inspired by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s organization in Iraq, but most of its leaders and members were locals. The founder, Khaled Musa’id, was a dentist from al-Arish City and a member of al-Swaraka tribe, one of the largest and most influential in North Sinai. Musa’id was killed in a fire-fight with the CSF on September 28, 2005. Despite his death, his main contribution was transforming an ideological current in books and speeches into a real organizational structure, with a hierarchy and multiple cells in at least five cities or regions (al-Arish, Rafah, al-Isma’iliya, Central Sinai/Halal Mountain, and Nakhla).

The offshoots of TJS went in different directions. All of them attracted new, like-minded groups and individuals. The largest faction became content with preaching Salafism and locally engaging in Salafi-style social work. This included arbitrating disputes on *sharia* basis and providing a range of social services. This is represented by the *Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama’a* (ASJ) Salafi Society, the Legitimate Committee for Conflict Resolution in North Sinai (LCCR), and around five other smaller organizations. Another offshoot was more content with paramilitary training without engaging in any armed activities, whether in Egypt or against Israel. And a third offshoot did both the stockpiling and the training and then engaged in a series of armed operations, mainly against Israeli targets. Among those is *Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis* (Consultative Council of Holy Strivers Near Jerusalem), which declared its responsibility for attacking a military post in Kissufim in northwestern Negev desert with two Grad missiles.

After the 2005 bombings a second wave of arrests and crackdowns ensued. Many suspected TJS members and sympathizers as well as their relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors were arrested. “We met them in prison. Most of them did not know anything about ideology, theology, or jurisprudence. Some were illiterate and we had to teach them how to read,” said a former Islamist detainee who was imprisoned with the “Sinai group,” as they were known. “All what the actual TJS members have studied were three booklets written by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi [famous Jordanian Jihadist ideologue] and this led them to go wide on *takfir* [excommunication of the ‘other’].”
The Sinai detainees were mainly distributed in five prisons: Damanhur, Highly Guarded (known as The Scorpion), Liman Torah, New Valley, and Natrun Valley. Most of the interactions between them and the Post-Jihadists took place in those prisons between 2004 and 2009. The Islamic Group (IG), several former al-Jihad leaders, and independent, Salafi figures gave them lessons in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), creed (aqida) and the revisions produced by the IG and others. In prisons, some of the TJS members abandoned the core belief of Jihadism: that armed action is the sole theologically legitimate, instrumentally effective method for social and political change. One was led by Sheikh Hamadin Abu Faisal, the current head of the ASJ Salafi Society and allegedly one of the former TJS commanders. He spent 18 months in detention following the Taba bombing. “I owe the Sheikhs [in prison] for many things … but I am really worried about the return of the old days,” he said. By “the old days” he meant a brutal crackdown, part of it related to Operation Eagle (al-Nisr), a military-security sweep that resulted in the arrest of more than a 100 suspects and the killing of more than 11 (including the alleged leader of the Rafah operation). Some of the old practices showed up in al-Nisr, including alleged revenge arrests and settling old scores between security officers, tribal leaders, and Islamists. But the vindicated suspects were released much quicker compared to the times of the Hosni Mubarak dictatorship — days instead of decades.

The worries of Abu Faisal and the volatile situation in Sinai sparked several recent initiatives by Salafis and Post-Jihadists. The IG has developed quite a comprehensive strategy to deal with the situation, submitting it to the defense and interior ministries as well as the presidency. “We are awaiting their reply and we are ready to help in any way we can,” said Tariq al-Zumur, the spokesperson of the IG and the head of the political bureau of its party, Construction and Development.

But the perception of some of the IG leaders is controversial mainly because of the revisions and the “de-radicalization” process. “Those guys [specific leaders were named] signed the revisions and supported it. They are considered ‘snitches’ by many jihadists,” stated a former detainee from Sinai. Indeed, for many Egyptian and Arab Salafi-Jihadists, the fault-line between loyalty and betrayal is the stance on the revisions. Despite its major results in the 2000s, in the 2010s the processes of de-radicalization — as endearing to moderates — limits, and sometimes kills, the influence of the ones associated with it over any armed Islamist organization.

Al-Nour Party, the political wing of the Salafi Call in Alexandria took another initiative. Although they have a history of rivalry with the Jihadi current, al-Nour initiated a three-day lecture series of what can be termed as “Counter-Jihadism” and “Counter-Takfirism” events. Several Salafi figures and parties are intending to do the same. But their role will be limited to prevention, as opposed to mediation, due to the history and the ideological differences.

Mohammed al-Zawahiri is a more credible mediator for the Sinai Jihadists, but not for other parties. He also is preparing an initiative. A more generic one that goes beyond Sinai, the 13-point initiative proposes “mediation” between the various groups that belong to the Jihadi current and the “West.” The objective of the “mediation” is to cease armed operations against Western targets and even to protect western citizens and interests, in exchange for releasing Jihadist prisoners in the West, and the withdrawal of western military personnel from Muslim-majority states. In its current form, the initiative is more likely to attract media attention on the September 11 anniversary, and less likely to convince decision-makers and develop into a serious mediation attempt.

On a local level, Sinai’s Post-Jihadist and Salafi-Jihadist figures have established a local conflict resolution committee: the Legitimate Committee for Conflict Resolution in North Sinai (LCCR). The LCCR has been successful in arbitrating tribal disputes on Islamic sharia basis rather than the usual tribal norms. It has been the focal point of the aforementioned initiatives and efforts to ceasefire. But the LCCR has its own problems as well. “Everybody here has a weapon. Now the army arrests anyone with a beard and a weapon,” says a local
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LCCR arbiter in al-Arish. “Sheikh Amin Abu Talha the coordinator of LCCR in Sheikh Zuwayd was arrested ... he used his weapon to guard al-Arish Church during the revolution ... now the media liars are calling him a terrorist who has been a fugitive for five years. They are smearing us,” he said. Abu Faisal agreed and elaborated on other dimensions of the crisis: “Why is the media coming to us? ... they should go after the drug barons, the state security torturers, and the remnants of Mubarak’s regime for answers.”

The current crisis in Sinai is with tens of armed Jihadists, not with hundreds and certainly not with thousands. If it is not quickly contained or eliminated, it can become worse in terms of scope, scale, and intensity. But any of the models of armed organizations on volatile borders, like that of Hezbollah (full state-sponsorship), Lashkar-e-Taiba (partial state-sponsorship), or Chechen Mujahidin groups in Pankisi Gorge (limited state authorities) are not likely to develop. For the containment of the situation in Sinai, however, a centralized local leadership body, comprehensive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program (DDR) and a structured method of interaction with Salafists and Post-Jihadists to legitimate the transitions and limit armed dissent will be required.

Over the longer term, the Sinai Peninsula should not be dealt with as merely a potential geo-strategic security threat for Cairo. The policies and standard operating procedures based on such assumption should be revised and altered under President Mohamed Morsi. The sweeping crackdowns; discrimination against, and humiliation of, the local population; hostage-taking by security services; torture; and degrading treatment of the locals were practiced in Sinai, with long lasting repercussions even after the revolution. Similar policies were applied in Upper-Egypt throughout the 1990s and they had disastrous consequences, ending with the Luxor massacre of November 1997 and a long list of local vendettas.

In the last six decades, Sinai has been a decisive factor in Egypt’s high politics: from the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser as the new Arab leader in 1956 until the removal of Field-Marshal Hussein Tantawi and his generals of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in 2012. It will remain so in both Egyptian and regional politics in the foreseen future. Under the first elected civilian president of Egypt, it is time to break the vicious cycle of the ad-hoc, reactive, repression-intensive tactics and begin the implementation of a comprehensive policy toward the Sinai that addresses both the short-term and mid-term security threats (with very specific features and targets including defining the threat, its nature, its supportive conditions, and the legitimate counter-tactics and counter-strategies). Additionally, any comprehensive policy should also address the long term developmental needs of the region, including the tribal, socio-economic, political, identity, and demographic dimensions of the problem as well as conflict resolution and conflict prevention strategies and alternatives.

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Since becoming Egypt’s first Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi has surprisingly done virtually nothing in the area of religion. He has appointed a new minister of education from the Muslim Brotherhood, but thus far has not pushed religious educational institutions toward a more Islamist approach. Over the past week, however, several controversial moves have sparked a public confrontation over Al-Azhar and the future of Egypt’s religious establishment. The battle for Al-Azhar could have profound repercussions for Egypt’s Islamic politics — and for the broader world of Sunni Islam.

Al-Azhar University, the oldest Sunni Muslim educational institution in the world, dominates Egypt’s mainstream Islamic institutions. The Azhar establishment has been viewed inside and outside of Egypt as tolerant, welcoming of engagement with modernity, and respectful of pluralism, within and without Islam. It’s been generally suspicious of the modernist Salafism that informed the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). It frowns upon the politicization of religion, and its faculty broadly considers the modernist Salafi methodology favored by the Brotherhood unsound or weak. It is far more stridently opposed, openly so, of purist Salafism of the Saudi variety for creedal, juristic, and spiritual reasons. This is not new. When purist “Wahhabi” Salafism was first established in the 1700s, it was regarded as a heterodox movement by the Sunni religious establishment of that time on account of its extremes. Much of the Azhari establishment still considers it as such. Thousands of students come from around the world to study at the Al-Azhar every year, making it a key counter-weight to the Saudi universities that promote purist Salafism.

This accords with popular religious feelings in Egypt. Most Egyptian non-Islamist political forces recognize the importance of moderate religious institutions such as Al-Azhar in a country where religion is important for 96 percent of the Egyptian population (based on recurring Gallup polls). Al-Azhar enjoys the confidence of nearly all Egyptians (95 percent). The success of Islamist political movements does not mean that Egyptians embrace radical conceptions of Islam. For instance, in the aftermath of the January 25 uprising, some zealous Salafi adherents took advantage of the lack of security, and attempted to demolish the graves of Sufi saints in Egypt, against the decrees of the Azhari establishment. They were met with stiff resistance from the locals: culturally, Sufism is as ingrained into the traditional Muslim culture of Egypt as it is in the Azhar establishment.

But many Egyptians nonetheless have reservations about the Azhar’s structural flaws, the drop in educational standards, and the overall lack of faith in public educational institutions due to poor government policies. These have resulted in a substantial number of graduates, and even faculty, who are ignorant of its historical creed, as well as those actively opposed to it. Moreover, the deconstruction of much of its independence from the state, begun under former President Gamal Abdel Nasser but continued under successive administrations, has damaged the credibility of the Azhar domestically as well as internationally. Its firm institutional stance against al Qaeda-style radicalism worldwide, however, has overshadowed much of that criticism. Moreover, non-Islamist political forces consider the Azhar to be a bulwark against the more politicized MB or the puritanical purist Salafis who seek to dominate the post January 25 religious space.

Al-Azhar has taken center stage at several key moments in the revolution. The first was the day after the resignation of Hosni Mubarak when Sheikh al-Azhar announced that Azhar scholars would choose his successor, and any other successor after that, instead of the president of the republic. This followed long-standing criticism that Al-Azhar suffered from reliance on the state, and enjoyed little independence vis-à-vis the regime. The next moment came with the issuance of a constitutional principles document,
which was built on the basis of consensus with many different political forces in society, with Al-Azhar acting as the convener. Not long thereafter, nearly every political and civil force in the country declared Al-Azhar, including the MB and most Salafi movements, to be the “Islamic frame of reference.” These moves gave many Egyptians hope that Al-Azhar would recover its independence from the state, and speak truth to power when the situation called for it.

The new round of controversy began when a well-known Salafi cleric tweeted that he had been approached by Prime Minister Hisham Qandil to be the new minister of religious endowments, and had accepted the post. Such a new minister could encourage the official propagation of Salafism on the grassroots level through the imams and mosques under the ministry’s control, rather than maintain the traditional Azhari approach. There were other unconfirmed reports that the new government was considering appointing a MB leader as mufti in due course — another key role within the religious establishment of the Egyptian republic. The next logical and final step would be to install a Salafi in the role of Sheikh al-Azhar. Or to put it another way: to “Salafize” Al-Azhar’s establishment leadership.

The response of the Al-Azhar was firm: public denouncements were made, with letters being released to the press that indicated the opposition from within Al-Azhar to the proposed appointment. In the end, it was an Azhari who was appointed officially today, as the result of Al-Azhar’s pressure. In taking their criticism public, Al-Azhar stayed within the realm of legitimate civil activity for non-state actors in the new Egypt. What complicates matters are the reports that Sheikh Al-Azhar went to the leader of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to express his disapproval at the appointment. A couple of days later, it was clear that the new government had backed down — but possibly at the expense of Al-Azhar being indebted to the armed forces for intervention in a civil and religious affair.

There are difficult times ahead for Al-Azhar’s establishment. There appear to be three options for it, the first being the obvious one of sacrificing its independence from the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements, and allow the “Salafizing” of the establishment to take place. As noted above, this has serious implications. The second would be to align with the non-civil forces in the deep state whose aim is to minimize MB and Salafi influence in Egypt, which would also involve sacrificing its independence in the process. The more difficult route would be to chart another course, where it is engaged in critique of both the deep state and the MB. This would be, of course, the path chosen by individual prominent Azharis, such as Sheikh Emad Effat, who was popularly recognized as the “Sheikh of the Revolution.” He was killed in the midst of clashes with military forces on Cairo’s streets in December 2011.

Many questions remain. Did the first post-Mubarak, civilian led government consider changing the religious establishment in this manner, especially with this kind of appointment? Does this represent a deepening of influence of purist Salafism within the Muslim Brotherhood? Does the MB intend to use its partisan political power in the future to accomplish “religious engineering” within Egypt? Is that a role that any Egyptian political power should have? But also — will Al-Azhar University withstand the pressures in this new religious space, and if so, how? Is it equipped to maintain its current official creed and simultaneously increase its independence from the state, calling its institutions and leaders to account when the situation calls for it? Clearly, the Egyptian revolution is not over yet, and its outcome will not only affect Egypt.

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Egypt’s ‘blessed’ Salafi votes

By Khalil al-Anani, May 2, 2012

The green backyard at the Salafi sheikh's house in the old Mediterranean city of Alexandria was full of guests. They weren't students who came for religious lessons as usual but rather politicians appealing for the sheikh's political blessing in the presidential elections. It should be no surprise: Yasser Burhami, the ultraconservative Salafi leader and patron of al-Nour party, has become a key player in Egyptian politics. Ironically, a year ago, Burhami kept his distance from the Egyptian revolution and requested that his followers also do so. But today, he is deeply immersed in political strategy and tactics as he struggles to navigate the new terrain confronting the Salafi movement.

The Salafi movement’s strategy has become clearer with its surprising decision to endorse the Islamist candidate Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh for Egypt's presidency. This was not an obvious call. The decision to choose Aboul Fotouh over the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohamed Morsi or other possible contenders took weeks of negotiations and discussions within al-Dawa al-Salafiyya (the Salafi Call), the main political Salafi force in Egypt, and its political arm, al-Nour party. That decision has once again reshuffled Egypt’s political cards — and offered new insight into where the Salafi movement is headed.

Conversations with trusted Salafi sources reveal a wide range of factors behind the Salafi decision to back Aboul Fotouh. The political partnership with Aboul Fotouh is based on mutual political interests, not ideological or religious affinities. Such a partnership will be tactical until both parties consolidate their relationship. A key political goal is to counterbalance the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which they claim seeks a political monopoly over all institutions in Egypt. They also hope to avoid voting fragmentation among Salafis which would only benefit the “feloul” candidates (the remnants of the Mubarak regime), such as Amr Moussa and Ahmed Shafiq. “We were looking for a ‘consensual’ candidate who can unite Egyptians and has a clear vision to the future,” a Salafi source said.

The calculations of the Salafis have also been shaped by the disqualifications of two leading candidates by Egypt's electoral commission. The disqualification of the popular Islamist candidate Hazem Saleh Abu Ismail “made our job easy,” mentioned a high Salafi source. “We’ve managed to throw two birds by one stone: bargaining with Aboul Fotouh on the one hand, and overcoming an organizational and ideological burden on the other,” referring to the internal rifts over Abu Ismail's candidacy. The disqualification of Muslim Brotherhood Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat el-Shater left the MB with Morsi, a less formidable candidate. Backing Morsi, they feared, would strengthen the MB position at the expense of the nascent Salafi movement. Alternatively, leaving the Salafi grassroots to decide on their candidate would risk causing organizational disintegration (plus losing a good card in the political game). For many Salafi leaders, therefore, the Aboul Fotouh card was the only way out of such a predicament despite their real concerns about Aboul Fotouh's liberal inclinations.

It is clear that politics, not ideology, dictated the Salafis’ decision. Both Aboul Fotouh and the Salafis understand the consequences of such a decision, even if just for the short term. Yet the cost-benefit calculus led both to insist on making the deal. Aboul Fotouh will get the political, organizational, and social support of the Salafis, particularly in the rural areas that are difficult to reach. And the Salafis will get a friendly president who will secure them a say in high politics even if he is not from their own movement. Contrary to the stereotypical image of Salafis as “ultraconservative religious monsters,” religion had almost no weight in their decision to endorse Aboul Fotouh. As Nader Bakar, an outspoken young Salafi leader, bluntly put it, “we were looking for a president who can be a mere executive manager not an Islamic caliph.”

The mechanism behind the decision is another astonishing development in the Salafis' dynamics. Known by their
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regressive stance on democracy, the vote for Aboul Fotouh was internally democratic, although it was under the banner of the religious rule “the mandatory Shura.” Both al-Nour and al-Dawa al-Salaffiya held internal elections to vote over which candidate they would endorse in the presidential race. According to many sources and media coverage, the voting process was transparent and clean. Firstly, they held an election debate between Islamist candidates including Mohamed Morsi and Mohamed Selim al-Awa, as well as an aide, Ibrahim el-Zafaria (a former MB member), delegated by Aboul Foutoh who could not attend. After the debate, the candidates and their aides left and the voting process started. To avoid any biased pressures on members’ decisions, they segregated both institutions, al-Nour’s high commission and its parliamentary bloc (105 members), and the Consultative Council of al-Dawa al-Salafiyya (150 out of 204 members voted). And the elections were conducted simultaneously in two different rooms. Aboul Fotouh received 70 and 80 percent of the votes from the institutions respectively.

The gains for the Salafis for endorsing Aboul Fotouh are enormous. First, it will re-position al-Nour and its patron at the heart of the political process in Egypt particularly if Aboul Fotouh wins the elections. Backing Aboul Fotouh, who is relatively without an institutional or social base, will secure a foothold for the Salafis in Egyptian politics. Second, the decision will increase the public appeal and respect for Salafis. It resonates with popular aspirations to have a revolutionary and “consensual” president like Aboul Fotouh. The process behind the decision offers a stark comparison between the MB and Salafis on internal transparency and democracy. Third, the decision will inevitably hurt the MB’s image and political weight. On one hand, it shows the MB as the heartless movement that expelled Aboul Fotouh whereas Salafis safeguarded him. On the other hand, it will increase the alienation and isolation of the MB particularly within the Islamist context. Moreover, the Salafis’ backing of Aboul Fotouh will have a significant impact on a large constituency of undecided voters, especially among low and lower-middle class voters. However most notably, the endorsement of Aboul Fotouh hasn’t only revealed the Salafis’ increasing political savvy and shrewdness, but also proved that politics, not piety will reshape their future.

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Know your Ansar al-Sharia

By Aaron Zelin, September 21, 2012

From Sanaa to Benghazi, Cairo to Casablanca, radical new jihadi groups have adopted the same name in recent months. Is it all just a coincidence?

There is a new trend sweeping the world of jihadism. Instead of adopting unique names, groups increasingly prefer to call themselves *ansar*, Arabic for “supporters.” In many cases, they style themselves *Ansar al-Sharia* -- supporters of Islamic law -- emphasizing their desire to establish Islamic states. Yet despite the fact that these groups share a name and an ideology, they lack a unified command structure or even a bandleader like the central al Qaeda command (or what’s left of it), thought to be based in Pakistan. They are fighting in different lands using different means, but all for the same end, an approach better suited for the vagaries born of the Arab uprisings.

The name Ansar al-Sharia shot into the news last week in the aftermath of the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, when the local organization Katibat Ansar al-Sharia was accused of perpetrating it -- charges the group denied. Many reports seem to have confused Benghazi’s Ansar al-Sharia with another Libyan group, based in Derna.

The naming trend actually started in Yemen, when al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the powerful and ambitious local al Qaeda branch, established the front group Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen in April 2011. It is possible this was born out of Osama bin Laden’s musings over whether to rebrand al Qaeda. None of the names in the documents captured from the late al Qaeda leader’s compound mentioned Ansar al-Sharia as a potential example, however. More recently, one of the preeminent global jihadi ideologues, Shaykh Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, put his stamp of approval on the new wave of Ansar al-Sharia groups.

Shinqiti, who is of Mauritanian origin, published an article in mid-June titled “We Are Ansar al-Sharia,” calling Muslims to establish their own *dawa* (missionary) Ansar al-Sharia groups in their respective countries and then to unite into one conglomerate. It should be noted that most of the Ansar al-Sharia groups were already created beforehand. The most prominent of these organizations are the ones in Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya, along with newer versions in Egypt and Morocco to a lesser extent.

The rise of these Ansar al-Sharia groups points to an end of al Qaeda’s unipolar global jihad of the past decade and a return to a multipolar jihadosphere, similar to the 1990s. One key difference, however is that jihadi groups are now more ideologically homogenous -- in the 1990s, jihadis thought locally and acted locally, while many now talk globally and act locally. These newer groups are also more interested in providing services and governance to their fellow Muslims.

Distinguishing between these differing groups is crucial for better understanding the new landscape of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the trajectory of new salafi-jihadi groups that are not necessarily beholden to al Qaeda’s strategies or tactics. Although there are no known formal or operational links between these disparate organizations, it is possible they may try to link up in the future based on ideological affinity and similar end goals. For now, though, conflating them would be premature. Here’s a guide to the major groups going by this name.

**Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen**

While the other Ansar al-Sharia groups have no known operational links to al Qaeda, the Ansar al-Sharia group in Yemen (ASY) is part of a rebranding effort by AQAP. Shaykh Abu Zubayr Adil bin Abdullah al-Abab, AQAP’s chief religious figure, in April 2011 first voiced this
change by explaining that “the name Ansar al-Sharia is what we use to introduce ourselves in areas where we work to tell people about our work and goals.” The group has since become a major local player in southern Yemen, having taken over parts of the southern Yemeni governorates of Abyan and Shabwa in the late spring of 2011 and only relinquishing its emirate in June 2012 after a counteroffensive by the Yemeni government and local militias, backed by U.S. airstrikes. While ASY was driven out of the cities, it is not dead and will likely come back.

One of ASY’s greatest successes was its ability to provide services, filling a vacuum left by the central government’s inability or unwillingness to do so. ASY boasted about providing electricity, water, security, justice, and education in its newsletter and video series “Eyes on the Events,” which it released via its news wire service Madad News Agency. Although ASY’s law and order was based on a very narrow and rigid interpretation of the sharia, its provision of governance was reasonably popular. So while ASY’s extremist message may not always resonate in cities like Azzan or Zinjibar, desperate citizens might welcome the group nonetheless.

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia

In March 2011, after the ouster of President Zine El-Abdine Ben Ali, a variety of political prisoners and convicted terrorists were freed in a pardon by Tunisia’s transitional government. One of the individuals was Sayf Allah bin Hussayn (better known as Abu Iyyadh al-Tunisi), formerly the co-founder of the Tunisian Combatant Group in Afghanistan, which helped facilitate the assassination of Ahmad Shah Messud two days prior to the Sept. 11 attacks. After being freed from prison, Abu Iyyadh organized the first of what is now an annual conference in April 2011 that founded Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST). The conference attendees grew from a few hundred in 2011 to upward of 10,000 in 2012, suggesting its popularity has grown, though still at the margins.

Since its founding, AST has had a schizophrenic ideology: calling people to the “correct” path of Islam in Tunisia and inciting individuals to join jihad in foreign lands. It appears that while AST has not claimed responsibility for the embassy attacks this past Friday, many of its members were at the very least participants in the protests. AST had been involved in some of the more aggressive Salafi actions in Tunisia over the past year and half, including the “Day of Rage” over a local channel’s decision to air the film Persepolis; some AST members were also involved with the attack against the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and an American school nearby. AST has also provided services in many Tunisian cities, from water to clothes to Ramadan gifts.

Ansar al-Sharia in Libya

In Libya, a number of groups use a variation of the name Ansar al-Sharia. Two of the more prominent groups are Katibat Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi (ASB), which is viewed as the prime suspect in the recent attack on the consulate and the more shadowy Ansar al-Sharia in Derna (ASD), led by former Guantánamo Bay inmate Abu Sufyan bin Qumu. Both groups were established after the death of former Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi, but are not connected to one another. ASB first announced itself February 2012 and is led by Muhammad al-Zahawi, who had previously been an inmate of Qaddafi’s infamous Abu Salim prison. ASB hosted the first of what it hopes to be an annual conference in June, whose roughly 1,000 attendees included a number other smaller militias, all calling on the Libyan state to implement sharia. A few hundred of those attendees are likely members of ASB.

Like the Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia, ASB has been providing local services. ASB members have cleaned and fixed roads, provided aid during Ramadan, and most recently were helping with security at a hospital in Benghazi. Although the group admits to destroying Sufi shrines and graves in Benghazi, ASB has attempted to carve out a niche locally as defenders of a strict interpretation of Islam, while helping with the basic needs of the community. Based on its statements -- which evolved from suggestions that members were involved in an individual capacity in the attack to flat-out denials of any involvement -- ASB seems it understands it overreached and is attempting to salvage its reputation.
Ansar al-Sharia in Egypt and Morocco

Unlike the groups in Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya, Egypt’s Ansar al-Sharia (ASE) has not publicly announced itself as an organized group on the ground, while the Moroccan organization was only created a mere 10 days ago. ASE has only used the Ansar al-Sharia name online when providing releases for al-Bayyana Media Foundation, which is connected with the jihadi ideologue Shaykh Ahmad Ashush, who recently published a fatwa calling for the death of those involved in the making of the film *Innocence of the Muslims*. Ashush has a deep history in the jihadi movement, having been involved with the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s as well as being a member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ). He was arrested in the early 1990s in an anti-terror sweep against 150 members of EIJ and was only released from prison after the fall of Hosni Mubarak’s regime. Based on known evidence, it would be premature to consider ASE a fully fledged group yet.

Ansar al-Sharia in the Maghrib (ASM) is a nascent organization that is only interested in dawa activities. ASM noted in its first and only statement thus far that it is not connected with the groups in Yemen, Tunisia, Libya, or Egypt. ASM’s raison d’être is to spread the word of God and his law, provide social and economic services to the downtrodden, and expose the West’s decadence and to free society from its grip.

Like the other radical groups across the region that share the Ansar al-Sharia name, it is very much worth watching carefully.

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Osama bin Laden and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood

*By Stephane Lacriox, October 3, 2012*

In a recent video entitled “Days with the Imam” in which he recalls Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri declares that the founder of al Qaeda had been a “member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arabian Peninsula” before he was evicted in the 1980s. He was expelled because of his insistence on fighting alongside the mujahidin in Afghanistan while the Brotherhood allowed him to bring aid to Pakistan but didn’t want him to go any further. Zawahiri’s claims seem to have caused some embarrassment among the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), judging from how quick MB spokesman Mahmoud Ghozlan was to refute them.

One reason for the embarrassment may be that, with a Muslim Brotherhood president recently elected in Egypt, the organization is eager to reassure the West of its moderate Islamist orientation and is therefore afraid of anything associating it with al Qaeda or jihadism.

Yet Zawahiri’s declarations shouldn’t be seen as too problematic in this respect, since they portray the MB as an organization unwilling to let its members take part in physical jihad, even against the Soviets in Afghanistan at a time when the issue was far less controversial than it would later become. A more likely reason for the Brotherhood’s distress, however, is that Zawahiri reveals what among Saudi Islamist insiders is an open secret but remains little
known outside those circles: that there exists a Saudi Arabian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Where Ghozlan has a point, however, is that the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood is not exactly a MB branch like all others. From the days of Hassan al-Banna, the Saudi monarchy made it clear that it wouldn’t allow the Brotherhood to establish a section in the kingdom. Yet from the late 1960s onward, different groups of Saudis influenced by Egyptian and Syrian Brotherhood exiles started creating local semi-clandestine organizations claiming an affiliation to the MB. A sign that this was the result of a bottom-up dynamic, not a top-down creation, is that four such distinct organizations saw the light at about the same time: one in the western province, called the Brotherhood of the Hejaz (ikhwan al-Hijaz); and three in the central region — two named after their alleged founder, the Brotherhood of al-Sulayfih (ikhwan al-Sulayfih) and the Brotherhood of al-Funaysan (ikhwan al-Funaysan), and one called the Brotherhood of Zubayr (ikhwan al-Zubayr) because it was established by Saudis whose families had lived in Zubayr, in Southern Iraq. Although the four groups attempted to coordinate their activities and saw themselves as part of one broader entity, they never managed to formally merge.

These groups of Saudi Brothers maintained links to the MB in Egypt and elsewhere, but, because of the sensitivity of the topic, those links remained loose and were never formalized. For instance, Saudi Brothers sometimes attended meetings of the Brotherhood’s international organization in the 1980s, but officially they did so in their individual capacity, not as representatives of their organization. Also, Saudi Brothers generally did not pledge allegiance to the supreme guide in Cairo, as members of the Brotherhood are usually required, because, as Saudi citizens, they were already bound by an oath to the Saudi King. In terms of ideology, Saudi Brothers were also quite different from their counterparts elsewhere: although they did read Hassan al-Banna, Sa’id Hawwa, and Sayyid Qutb, they were also heavily influenced by Salafi authors whom they quoted on issues of creed and on certain issues of fiqh.

In Saudi Arabia, the Brothers were part of a broader social movement called the “Islamic Awakening” (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya), or Sahwa, whose ideology blended the political outlook of the Muslim Brotherhood with Salafi religious views. Other groups within the Sahwa included the so-called Sururis, named after one of their intellectual godfathers, the Syrian ex-Muslim Brother Muhammad Surur Zayn al-‘Abidin. In the 1970s, the Sahwa’s influence grew extensively, especially in schools and on university campuses, to the extent that by the end of the decade, tens of thousands of young Saudis were Sahwa affiliates. This is when the young bin Laden, like many in his generation, joined one of the factions of the movement. It was in his case the Saudi MB, because it was the most active faction in his region of origin, the Hejaz.

Within the broader Sahwa movement, the Saudi Brothers had one major difference from the more mainstream Salafi groups, including the Sururis. While the Salafis were generally quite inward-looking because of their insistence on the need to preserve the purity of the Salafi creed from the corruption of “deviant” Muslim groups, the Saudi Brothers were much more outward-looking and prone to pan-Islamist ideas and sentiments. Among them, there was constant talk about the importance of “Islamic solidarity” and the need to support Muslims everywhere, regardless of how “orthodox” their creed.

This explains why, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and when Abdallah ‘Azzam started calling for Muslims to “join the caravan” of the mujahidin, the Saudis who were the most likely to heed the call of jihad came from a MB background. Among them was Osama bin Laden, as well as Samir al-Suwaylim, later known as Khattab, the future emir of the jihadis in Chechnya. They did so, however, against the will of their own leaders, as Zawahiri mentions in his video. The Brotherhood’s official activities in Afghanistan were limited to humanitarian aid, and the organization was reluctant to allow its members to fight, partly because it feared that they could fall under the influence of rival groups. And so, just like Abdallah ‘Azzam’s membership in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood was suspended, bin Laden and Khattab were expelled from the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood.
After bin Laden’s relationship with the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood formally ended, each took a radically different path. While bin Laden was growing increasingly hostile toward the Saudi regime, the Saudi Brotherhood insisted on keeping a low profile and avoided — with the exception of a short period during the Sahwa’s intifada in the early 1990s — any open criticism of the royal family. In the wake of the Arab Spring, a few Saudi Brotherhood figures, galvanized by the revolutionary events in the region, tried to push for the organization to more explicitly challenge the royal family by demanding political reforms — but again, to no avail. This careful strategy explains why the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood has managed to remain a key element of the Saudi political fabric until this day, while eluding both the wrath of the regime and the attention of outsiders.

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**Lebanon’s Salafi Scare**

*By Geneive Abdo, July, 17, 2012*

Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, a self-proclaimed religious authority with a bushy long beard, is no stranger on the Lebanese scene. His latest incarnation, from his mosque in the coastal town of Sidon, is as a firebrand political Salafist whose objectives transcend the confines of Lebanon.

He is part of a growing movement in Lebanon and other Arab countries in which the Salafists — acting as guardians for Sunni interests — are using the civil war in Syria to gain political power and revive the sectarian conflict with their historical foes, the Shiites. In Lebanon, sectarianism has been a primary feature of the country’s politics for decades.

“For years, the Shias have been controlling and insulting us (the Sunnis),” Assir told me when I visited him at the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque in Sidon. “They control the security, the government, and politics. They pay Sunnis to back them to try to create fragmentation among us and they threaten us with a sectarian war ... We support the Syrian rebels. Here in the Sidon mosque, we raise money for those who come to pray for the Syrian rebels.”

Assir’s candor about his hostility toward Shiites is jarring, but reflects the same kind of sectarian strife I heard during a recent trip to Bahrain and the broader Persian Gulf. Some Lebanese remarked that Assir’s confrontational rhetoric is new even for Lebanon, where, after decades of conflict among the country’s multiple sects, the Lebanese settled on speaking delicately in euphemisms, calling their sectarian feeling “fitna,” the word in Arabic for social disorder.

But no longer. Lebanon was never going to escape the fallout of Bashar al-Assad’s civil war. It was always a matter of when and how. As the Syrian civil war rages across the Lebanese border, the public debate is raw, and Shiites and Sunnis speak openly about their mistrust for one another. The growing anti-Western, anti-Hezbollah, anti-Iran Salafist movement is flourishing in some mosques and in towns, particularly in northern Lebanon. Hezbollah, the party that has dominated the Lebanese government over the last year, is a particular target for its continuing support of Assad, as he orders the massacres of thousands of civilians.
“One of the features of the Arab spring was Sunni (power) and some Islamist forces feel that they don’t have to deal with Iran and Hezbollah on an indirect level any longer. They can face them directly,” Ali Amir, a reporter at Al Balad newspaper in Beirut, told me. Amir specializes in Sunni-Shiite relations.

In the Lebanese city of Tripoli, now home to thousands of Syrian refugees who have fled the fighting, another Salafist imam, Selim al Rafei, is a rising power, who many say is more influential than Assir. On a recent Friday, in the background of posters congratulating the newly elected Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, a leader in the Muslim Brotherhood, Rafei entered the all-male mosque (women are not allowed) to begin his inspirational Friday sermon.

“The Syrian army is killing the people and is supported by Iran, China, and Russia and the U.S. did not interfere to help the Syrian people,” Rafei told the worshippers. “Why are they not supporting the Syrians? Because they are Muslims. The West and America are liars. Their lies are exposed and it is a lesson to our people. The only thing that is helpful for Islam is jihad. Jihad will give us back our dignity.”

At the end of his sermon, Rafei congratulated President Morsi and said he “will spread Islam in Egypt and throughout the Arab world.” Although there was no direct reference to Shiites, it was clear that Rafei’s Islam is that of Sunni Muslims.

The connection between Assir and Rafei, if any, is not apparent. And it is difficult to assess the size of their following and that of other Salafist imams.

Assir recently has been in the media spotlight appearing on national television, denouncing Shiites and calling on Hezbollah to give up their weapons. He also leads protests in Beirut against Assad. During my stay in Lebanon, after his appearances on Al Jadeed (New) television, Assir’s opponents attacked the television building, located a short distance from my hotel, and set tires on fire in protest.

Assir has been making the case in the media that the Shiites across the region are trying to avenge the Sunni rise to power in countries such as Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood now holds the presidency.

The symbol of his grievances is a toy rifle, which he says a Shiite Iraqi businessman has mass produced in China and then distributed in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. There is an audio tape inside the toy rifle: after the sounds of rounds of gunfire — “rat-a-tat-tat” — a voice could be interpreted as saying, “Kill Saida Aisha.” Aisha was one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad and is considered sacred by Sunni Muslims. According to Sunnis, Aisha had an important role in early Islamic history, both during Muhammad’s life and after his death. Regarded by many as his favorite wife, she was an active figure who was involved in continuing his message.

When I visited Assir, he appeared calm, gentle, and composed. He told an assistant to fetch the toy rifle. Then he played the tape inside, which was difficult to make out, but the name Aisha was audible. “The Iranian project started all of this,” he explained. “Iran’s project is to establish the vilayet e-faqih (supreme clerical rule) in the region. I was with the resistance (the term he uses for Hezbollah), but now I am politically their enemy.”

It would be easy to dismiss Assir and other Salafist imams, and in fact, some Lebanese intellectuals I met reduced their antics to a temporary phenomenon that will soon lose its luster.

That may well be true, but the Salafist opposition in Lebanon, which is aimed directly against the Iran-Hezbollah-Assad axis, reflects a more significant outcome of the Arab uprisings. They have discovered that framing the turbulence as a sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims resonates not only with their followers, but with many outside Lebanon. And they are using the Syrian civil war as the cause célébre to fight the case for what they see as discrimination against all Sunni Muslims. Assir openly accuses Hezbollah of crossing the border into Syria to kill Sunnis involved in the uprising against Assad.
“Our mission started in Saida (Sidon),” he told Now Lebanon, a popular website. “But our movement is spreading in different areas. The numbers are increasing because of the pain of injustice.”

Even if Assir fades from the spotlight, his direct affront to Hezbollah is producing two outcomes that are significant on a larger scale: He is magnifying feelings of injustice on both the Sunni and Shiite sides, and he is also provoking a response that makes it difficult for Hezbollah to continue to control its Lebanese constituency.

Hezbollah is a party and movement that is extremely disciplined and organized. The Shiite Lebanese attack on a television station in response to Assir, brings to question whether this is just the beginning of a street protest movement that will be outside the control of Hezbollah, which needs to maintain order as the most powerful faction within the Lebanese government. Similarly, if Assir is issuing directives, what does this say about the established Sunni leadership, or lack thereof? Over the last year, with Saad Hariri, the former Sunni prime minister, away from Lebanon in Paris, figures like Assir are moving in to fill the political vacuum.

As the Syrian war rages on, and is increasingly interpreted as a Sunni-Shiite conflict by those who wish to exploit it, there is little doubt Lebanon could be the first in a series of countries in the region to find sectarianism once again at its doorstep.

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Islamism and the Syrian uprising

By Nir Rosen, March 8, 2012

James Clapper, the United States Director of National Intelligence, warned last month of al Qaeda taking advantage of the growing conflict in Syria. The Syrian regime and its supporters frequently claim that the opposition is dominated by al Qaeda-linked extremists. Opposition supporters often counter that the uprising is completely secular. But months of reporting on the ground in Syria revealed that the truth is more complex.

Syria’s uprising is not a secular one. Most participants are devout Muslims inspired by Islam. By virtue of Syria’s demography most of the opposition is Sunni Muslim and often come from conservative areas. The death of the Arab left means religion has assumed a greater role in daily life throughout the Middle East. A minority is secular and another minority is comprised of ideological Islamists. The majority is made of religious-minded people with little ideology, like most Syrians. They are not fighting to defend secularism (nor is the regime) but they are also not fighting to establish a theocracy. But as the conflict grinds on, Islam is playing an increasing role in the uprising.

Mosques became central to Syria’s demonstrations as early as March 2011 and influenced the uprising’s trajectory, with religion becoming increasingly more important. Often activists described how they had “corrected themselves” after the uprising started. Martyrs became important to a generation that had only seen martyrs on television from Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon. “People got more religious,” one activist in Damascus’s Barzeh
neighborhood explained, “they got closer to death, you could be a martyr so people who drank or went out at night corrected themselves.” Some Arab satellite news stations have also contributed to the dominance of Islamists by interviewing more of them and focusing on them as opposed to more secular opposition figures or intellectuals. In Daraa activists complained that satellite networks were marginalizing prominent leftists.

Clerics were influential from the beginning in much of the country, but their authority is not absolute. Sheikhs have often played a positive role in the uprising, enforcing discipline and exhorting armed and unarmed activists to act responsibly. One reason why Homs has not descended into Bosnia-like sectarian massacres is because of the strong influence of opposition sheikhs.

“Sheikhs have a role,” said a cleric active in the opposition in the cities of Hama and Latakia, “in an area where people are scared a sheikh in his sermon can encourage them to go out.” As a result many sheikhs have been arrested while others have fled the country. Opposition supporters are also vocal when they disapprove of a sheikh’s positions. In November, in the Tadamun area of Damascus, a sheikh at the Ali ibn Abi Talib mosque condemned demonstrations and spoke about conspiracies in language resembling that of the government. A friend stood up in disgust in the middle of the sermon and walked out. Others followed him spontaneously and began demonstrating. After five minutes security forces arrived and they all ran away. “It’s forbidden to pray in front of him,” my friend told me later that day, “either speak the truth or be quiet.”

In the Damascus suburb of Arbeen, opposition leaders spoke sardonically of their local clerics. “The sheikhs here all belong to security and the Baath party,” one leader there told me. “The sheikhs told us not to go out and not to watch the biased channels. We went out against the sheikhs, shouting down with this sheikh or that sheikh. There were no good sheikhs with the people here, either he was afraid or he was with the regime. The sheikhs described the youth as thugs.” Revolutionaries threatened Sheikh Hassan Seyid Hassan, Arbeen’s top cleric, saying they would break his car and burn his house and office. In a sermon he apologized for condemning the uprising.

One of the main causes for the first demonstrations in Arbeen was the demand for the release of 21 local young men arrested in 2006. The young men, and some were boys, had come under the influence of Salafi jihadist clerics and were blamed by the regime for an attempted attack on the state television headquarters. “Here the main reason we came out was to demand the release of our prisoners” one local leader said. “We are religious and that’s why we are oppressed.”

Near Harasta, in Duma, I met with Abu Musab, an insurgent commander. He claimed he had been fired from his job as an imam for “speaking the truth” and talking about dignity. The strict Hanbali school of Islam dominates Duma and not a single woman can be seen on its streets without her face fully concealed by a burqa. Piety was one of the reasons why Duma was so revolutionary, he told me. “A sheikh does not have to say fight Bashar,” he said, “he can just refer to a chapter from the Quran and everybody will understand. Because they are religious they have more motivation and ethics.” But he stressed that most people in Duma did not seek an Islamic state. According to Abu Musab, he supported an armed struggle against the regime from the first day and most others only did after Ramadan. He took me to a funeral for two martyrs of the revolution, one of them an armed fighter. As the crowd of hundreds left they chanted, “The people want a declaration of jihad!”

Many of the names chosen for Friday demonstrations are religious in connotation and many of the insurgent groups who misleadingly call themselves the Free Syrian Army have names that are particularly Sunni Muslim in nature. The insurgent groups’ names are increasingly Islamic and even Salafi in their tone, such as the “Abu Dujana Battalion,” the “Abu Ubeida Battalion,” the “Muhajireen wal Ansar Battalion” and even a group named after Yazid, a divisive figure in Islamic history who is hated by Shiites but respected by hardline Sunnis (who do not like Shiites).
What about the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)? Syria saw MB inspired uprisings in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. In the 1980s a radical group that found the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) too moderate split off and called itself the Fighting Vanguard. They were responsible for much of the violence that was blamed on the Brotherhood that traumatizes Syrian society to this day, much as the regime’s attack on Hama where the armed Muslim Brothers concentrated also left permanent scars that have been reopened in the last year. SMB members fled into exile and remained active in the opposition, which also led them to dominate the Syrian National Council (SNC). During the administration of President George W. Bush the United States reached out to the SMB in order to undermine the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Within the SNC, the SMB is behaving in a very authoritarian fashion and is facing growing criticism from both secular and Islamist opposition. The divides in the SNC are not Islamist versus secular. The secularist SNC President Burhan Ghalioun walks with the SMB. Other Islamists like the Imad al Din al Rashid’s Syrian National Movement are hostile to the SMB.

The regime has sought to conflate the opposition with the SMB of the 1980s, knowing that if it succeeds it can legitimize dealing with them with violence but if it fights them on the political front it will lose. “The ideology of the Muslim Brothers has remained quite influential in Syria, but as an organization, they completely ceased to exist inside the country in the early 1980s,” Thomas Pierret, a lecturer in contemporary Islam at the University of Edinburgh, said. “A proof of that is that the Islamist cells dismantled by the authorities over the last decades were linked to the Islamic Liberation Party or to Jihadi networks, but never to the Muslim Brothers.” In reality popular mobilization does not require the orders of the SMB, but for some in the opposition the uprising is revenge for the 1980s and the SMB is indeed playing a role. Most Syrian supporters of the opposition associate the 1980s with a time of draconian regime repression and collective punishment while regime supporters and minorities associate it with sectarian violence and terrorism.

In January, I spoke with a knowledgeable official from a different national branch of the MB who was based in Beirut. “The revolution in Syria today has nothing to do with the MB of the 1980s,” he said, but he told me that the SMB was involved in the current uprising. Individual members of the SMB played a role organizing the uprising in Homs, Hama, and in the coastal areas, he said. The SMB and its Lebanese branch, the Jamaa Islamiya, were sending money and aid via Tripoli in Lebanon. They were also hosting families fleeing from Syria, providing them with food, clothing and shelter while sending aid to their relatives left behind in Syria. “The Jamaa Islamiya has a very clear loud position on Syria,” he said, “they are against the regime and supporting revolution. And the Brotherhood does not just support with words. It might be money and it might be some tools and facilitation. And if the Lebanese Brotherhood is doing it, it is with the cooperation of the Brotherhood of Syria.” The Jamaa Islamiya was playing a role via the SMB, he explained. “The Brotherhood shares the same school of thinking of Hassan al Banna,” he said, “so I hold the same ideas that a Lebanese, Jordanian, Yemeni, Libyan, Tunisian Brotherhood or even in Jakarta. Every group has the same thoughts. We share ideas and thoughts. We are an organization looking for a new era so we are organized and ready to deal with a new situation in the region. The Brotherhood has a huge responsibility on their shoulders. If they succeed they will have legitimacy to be leaders of Muslims and Arabs and if they fail they might lose their opportunity. We are preparing ourselves for 80 years. We are not dreaming we are dealing with reality.”

“The Brotherhood is not like they were in the past,” said one leader of the Homs Revolutionary Council (HRC) who receives money from them among many others. “There are Muslims Brothers in groups of two or three and they are giving support to people inside Syria. They are not organized like they were before.” Leaders of the SMB in Saudi Arabia do not have good communication with the SMB in other places. Abu Mohammed al Rifai, an SMB leader in Lebanon gives support to some groups in Homs and elsewhere. The SMB does not have cadres on the ground, nor does it have much ideological influence. Most
people I spoke to admitted that their role was limited to sending money but they were not sending it as the SMB, only as individuals who happened to belong to the SMB. In Homs some leaders view their role as positive but they did not see it as the SMB acting as an organization, which it did not have the capacity to do anymore. Homs receives help only from members of the Syrian wing of the MB who are based in the Gulf, Lebanon, or Jordan. Most of the money has gone to aid and medical support. In late 2011, the SMB had a meeting in Saudi Arabia during which they decided against supporting the armed groups. As the SMB they did not want to be involved in this, perhaps as a result of their experience in the 1980s, but individual members of the SMB send money that is channeled to insurgent activities as well.

I met Syrian activists who met senior SMB leader Melhem al Drubi in Turkey, where he was giving money to activists. Members of the Drubi family who live in Saudi Arabia are also important financiers of the uprising. “We told him we want money for weapons when we met him in Turkey in May,” one activist told me. “He said no money for weapons this is peaceful revolution.” We asked for money for hardship funds, he said we have people on the ground but we have not organized ourselves yet. He gave nobody that he met in Istanbul any money. He just wanted to know the situation on the ground. He wanted to know level of support for the Brotherhood. Now the Brotherhood controls a lot of access to money in Homs and the Damascus suburbs. But just because people take money from the Brotherhood does not mean they support it. The Brotherhood wants to improve and increase its name. They are not scary but they are trying to control. Some people are not happy about how the Brotherhood is financing on the ground. Some people who buy weapons are not ready to deal with the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood only gives certain people money for hardship or weapons.”

Abu Abdu, a field commander who deals with military and civilian elements of the opposition in the Damascus suburbs told me that he had received calls from people in Jordan, Turkey, London, and the United States who belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood. “People offer us money but there is a hidden agenda to it and we refuse it,” he said. “This is a popular revolution, I work for God and the nation. I come out against oppression.” He picked up his cigarette pack. “I’m not going to replace Marlboro with Gaullois.”

“The Brotherhood doesn’t scare me,” said one leading activist from the Ismaili sect. “They don’t have representation on the ground that can endanger democracy.” A Christian activist he worked with on delivering weapons and aid throughout the country agreed with the assessment, adding that, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” One prominent Druze activist in Damascus said, “I am not afraid of the Brotherhood. They have been outside, they became more secular. Syrian Islam is moderate and Sufi.” Sufi brotherhoods are mystical groups organized around a sheikh who is believed to have a personal connection to God. Sufism is very mainstream in Syria, since most of the country’s Muslim scholars have received some Sufi training and often specialize as Sufi sheikhs.

Many other members of the opposition are less sanguine about the role of the SMB. One young activist in Barzeh told me he did not want the Brotherhood. “I don’t want women to be completely covered up,” he said. “This is not nice.” But like many people in the Arab world, he associated the word ‘ilmani, or secular, with anti-religious, and as a result was also against Ghalioun. “I want something in the middle,” he said. An older opposition supporter in the same neighborhood told me he wanted a civilian Islamic government “like in Turkey,” he said, “but not Islam by force.” The Brotherhood made a mistake in the 1980s, he continued. While the SMB in Damascus was engaged in peaceful proselytization, the Brotherhood in Aleppo and Hama took up arms. “It’s a mistake to take up arms against a brutal regime. In reaction the regime thought anybody who prayed was in the MB. This is a revolution of the youth and it was good for the Brotherhood to deny that they are behind the revolution. The Brotherhood have no presence on the ground.”
Another Damascus activist worried that many demonstrations in the Damascus suburbs had Islamic slogans. Indeed in Harasta I heard songs about Muslims and infidels. In Duma and Sanamein I heard demonstrators calling for jihad while in Zamalka in evening demonstrations people prayed in the middle of a busy commercial street. The activist told me that in Homs’s Dir Baalbeh neighborhood, the Brotherhood’s slogan of “Islam is the solution” was raised. “In the last months the Brotherhood became strong on the ground,” he said. “Communists told me they won’t go out in demonstrations that say ‘God is great’ and religious things. A lot of demonstrations in Daraa, Homs, Idlib are led by clerics and it scares secular people.” He complained that the SMB chose the names for the Friday demonstrations. “‘So National Unity’ Friday became ‘Khalid bin al Walid’ [the early Muslim leader who conquered Syria in the 7th century] Friday and ‘We won’t Kneel’ Friday became ‘We Won’t Kneel Except before God.’”

Many Syrians with ties to the Brotherhood fled in the 1980s. Now, like the Attasis of Homs and the Abazeeds of Daraa, they send money back home. Throughout Syria I heard concerns from the opposition that money from SMB members was ending up in the hands of the wrong people. In Homs some funds were going to former criminals or to armed groups who acted without consulting with the local civilian political leadership of the uprising. In Hama and Idlib I heard similar complaints.

“We don’t work with anybody,” said Khaled Nasrallah, a leader of an armed group operating in Hama and Idlib, “not with the Brotherhood. We are a popular revolution. They want to control you and we are nationalists. We won’t finish this oppression so somebody else will come and tell us what to do. We are worried about the future, after the revolution, worried about the Brotherhood or Salafis or other parties. We don’t want somebody to tell us what to do in the future.” A senior leader of the Homs Revolutionary Council told me “there is no organization called the Muslim Brotherhood inside Syria. This is the difference between Syria and other Arab countries. The sheikhs in Homs who have a revolutionary role are Sufis. None of them belong to movements.”

In the Jabal Azawiya town of Fleifil people still recall the three times the Syrian army raided the area by helicopter and arrested locals. “They raided every village,” according to one local leader. “From 1980 to 1988 they would constantly raid the villages.” They also point to a massacre committed by the regime in the main square of Jisr al Shughur in 1980. In Idlib’s Jabal Azawiya I met Yusuf al Hassan, a powerful former cigarette smuggler who leads an armed group and has been fighting the regime since June. Hassan, who is said by other insurgent commanders to receive some help from Turkish military intelligence, crossed the border into Turkey and met with SMB Secretary General Riad al Shaqfa. But he didn’t trust the SMB, he told me, and as a result the SMB now opposed him as well. “I asked for five representatives from the whole area to distribute aid through them,” Hassan said. “The Brotherhood was against this. This was cause of my problems with the Brotherhood in Jabal Azawiya. The Brotherhood are not accepted among us, they are racist, thieves, corrupt. We are the middle Islam. They divided the revolution, sent money to a few people. People came to me and I gave weapons and bullets to everybody without discrimination. When our revolution got weaker in the summer four or five months ago, the Brotherhood intervention appeared.” A fighter from Jisr al Shughur agreed with him. “We are Muslims, not Muslim Brothers,” he said, provoking the laughter of other insurgents with us.

In rural Hama leaders of various armed groups resented a man called Abu Rayan who received help from the Brotherhood in Turkey and Jordan to fund his armed group. I met with him and other leaders of armed groups in a mountain safe-house bordering Hama and Idlib. Abu Rayan had a gray beard. He wore a pistol under his armpit. As we talked Abu Rayan sent a group of his men from his Abu Fida brigade to help men from Hama’s Salahedin brigade who were besieged in the city’s Hamidiya area. Other commanders resented him for not cooperating with them. Bassim, a commander from Hama told me that he had asked Abu Rayan for help in the past but had not received a single bullet. He only helped Hama city, the other leaders told me, while others cooperated as needed, including across the line into Idlib. Abu Rayan said he
had met with Turkish intelligence. He was a vulgar man, whose cursing made the other men uncomfortable. “We kiss one thousand asses just so they can send us money for a satellite phone,” he complained. The other men told me he was a former drug dealer in Hama city. “It made me hate the Brotherhood even more that they support a man like this,” said a Sufi sheikh from rural Hama called Sheikh Omar Rahmun who also had an armed group which operated in rural Hama and Idlib.

The city of Hama was still a reservoir for the SMB, he told me, but the resistance was taking place in the rural areas surrounding it and Abu Rayan was not helping out the rural insurgency. “Abu Rayan doesn’t fight,” said the sheikh. “He is a leader. Abu Rayan gets help from the SMB but the people in his group don’t know this. Ninety percent of Abu Rayan’s men would leave if they knew he works with the SMB. We want the revolution to win. We want the people who get help not to put it in their pocket but to give it to the people in need. People have empty ammunition clips. Abu Rayan has money, we don’t.”

“The U.S. won with an alliance with the Brotherhood in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt” he said. “America cooperates with the Brotherhood. But the alliance has to be studied. This alliance is failed. There was a long information war against the Brotherhood and it is now an expired product. It is being treated as bigger than its size on the ground. The Brotherhood does not have a presence on the ground but it gave some money and communication devices to some groups. They give you money now so they can ride on your shoulders in the future. After June or July groups and parties started to appear. ‘I am from this party or that party.’ Our disaster is the Brotherhood in particular. The Brotherhood don’t have future in Syria without coercion. In Syria one party cannot win over other parties. We refuse to work under any party. We don’t want a party that society doesn’t accept. We don’t want people to be coerced. Syria is a Sufi society. With two beats of the of miz-har (a Sufi drum) you can get all of Syria behind you, but they won’t follow Salafis after fifty years.”

The word “Salafi” haunts the Syrian uprising. The regime has turned this conservative practice of Islam into a smear of the opposition, hoping to associate them with jihadist Salafis like those of al Qaeda in Iraq. In nearly every demonstration I attended opposition songs dismissed the notion that they were Salafis. But in Syria, as elsewhere in the Middle East, some practices associated with Salafis have become popularized even if people do not identify themselves as such. In part this is thanks to the influence of Saudi Arabia. And it is Syrians in Saudi Arabia who play a major role in financing the uprising, giving them additional influence. In four months traveling through Syria, I found Salafis to be a minority within the uprising, but nevertheless they play a growing role.

Last November, I first met one of the most powerful men in Damascus’s urban suburb of Harasta. Tough looking activists in tracksuits who arranged our meeting were contemptuous of the local opposition coordination committee. “The Sheikh,” or Abu Omar, was not from the committee, said one, “he is from the group that fears God.” The men explained to me that it was not the coordination committee that was in charge of Harasta, it was the “shabab,” the guys like them. Abu Omar was a thick man wearing a dish dasha and leather jacket. As we spoke over dinner, he asked me if I knew what a Salafi was. I said it was somebody who followed the righteous companions of the Prophet Mohammed. “It’s somebody devoted in his religion who doesn’t stray to one side or another,” he said. “Now they use Salafi to mean al Qaeda or terrorist.” We sat in a room full of religious books and talked about the very active armed opposition in Harasta. “Violence has bred violence,” he said. Abu Omar explained that their struggle against the regime was a jihad, but without foreign military intervention (and he did not care from where), the regime would not fall.

Abu Abdu, a military leader in Harasta confided that many people hoped there would be a declaration of jihad against the regime. “But they don’t want to be accused of being Salafis.” He did not expect such a declaration
because the regime was not led by infidels and there were many Muslims in it, while the opposition also feared being accused of sectarianism.

In the Ghab area of rural Hama I spent many hours sitting with insurgents and local sheikhs. “We don’t meet in mosques because the revolution is Islamic but because mosques are the center of gathering for people,” said sheikh Amer, an imam in the town of Qalat Mudhiq. Men in the room dismissed the government’s accusations that they were Salafis. “Some of these guys drink,” one of them told me. “Our religion Islam is tolerant,” one said, “we won’t be like them,” meaning Alawites. “There will be no mercy for the Alawites who carried weapons or were shabiha,” the sheikh told me.

In March, Sheikh Amer gave a sermon about speaking right in front of an oppressive sultan. A demonstration followed the prayer. Syrian security called him in and asked why he was inciting people. Sheikh Amer is now a spiritual and moral advisor to the armed men. I was told, “he teaches the guys what is permitted and forbidden, values, don’t harm Christians and Alawites, don’t steal.”

I drove through many “liberated” villages where insurgents had their own checkpoints and patrols. I met Abu Ghazi, a self-proclaimed “moderate Salafi” and the representative of the Ghab coordination committee on the Hama Revolutionary Council. Abu Ghazi was respected by other militia commanders in the Ghab. He was in his 30s and had a short beard with no mustache. His house had just been attacked by regime security forces for the third time and destroyed. He complained that the committee was neglected. “The Brotherhood support their group, Salafis support their group, secularists support their group. I am buying a satellite phone with my own money. I have a farm, so I make money from that. People are selling fish so I can buy bullets for the guys. We have a national agenda. I don’t want the agenda of the Brotherhood or Salafis. I want a national agenda, even if I am a Salafi. I know the situation here better than somebody in Europe, Saudi, or UAE. I don’t want a sectarian war here. We would get a lot of help if we gave our area to one current. The Salafi jihadi current offered help. Salafi jihadis have a lot of money but need an oath of loyalty. The man who gives weapons doesn’t give them for free.” He feared chaos in the future if such parties gained influence. “I want law and order,” he said.

I was in the Ghab when Syrian security forces raided nearby villages. Hundreds of fighters from village militias in the area gathered on the mountains above in case they were needed. Among them were insurgents from the Saad bin Muadh brigade, led by a Salafi called Abu Talha, who had links with groups outside Syria. “Abu Talha’s group only works for themselves; a local militia commander complained. “They don’t share and don’t cooperate much.”

Abu Talha was originally from the village of Tweina in al Ghab. Like many Syrian Salafis he had spent time in the Sednaya prison. “They are all graduates of Sednaya,” he said.

A Salafi commander of an armed group called Abu Sleiman united the area against him. “When people heard he wanted to make his own emirate all the mountain turned against him,” said a local village militia leader. “We are all brothers from here to Daraa. We are revolutionaries and that’s it. No parties.”

“Salafis like Abu Suleyman in Jabal Azawia offer to loan you weapons for specific operations,” other insurgents told me. But they had refused. Abu Suleiman was a former drug dealer, they said, who became a Salafi after spending time in the Sednaya prison. “Abu Sleiman had conditions for helping others,” said a fighter from Kafr Ruma village in Jabal Azawia. “He said ‘be under my emirate and give me back the weapons when the operation is over.’ But we won’t remove Bashar to be under somebody else. So Abu Sleiman is rejected by the mountain. We expelled him, he was extreme.” He was now in Turkey, they told me.

In quiet evenings the fighters of Jabal Azawia gathered for large meals in different houses. One night I was with them for an immense tray of knafeh as they watched the nightly talk show with the sectarian exiled opposition cleric Adnan al Arur. He was very popular in the region, they said. Al Arur, whose anti-Shiite rants were divisive long before the uprising in Syria and whose name is often chanted in
demonstrations, famously warned Alawites who participate in the repression that they would be chopped and that their flesh would be fed to dogs. Arur has not often spoken about Alawites and his popularity does not stem from his sectarianism but because he has religious credentials and speaks in an angry colloquial voice when praising the demonstrators every day. But his popularity has encouraged secular Sunni and minorities to prefer the regime.

“We are grateful to the Salafi fighters,” said the Sufi Sheikh Omar Rahmun who led an armed group in Hama. “But I am against canceling people, I am against canceling you and you canceling me. Of the fighters, Salafis are less than one percent.” One night Sheikh Omar led a group of fighters in a Sufi style of singing called a Mulid. “Its good that Sufis raise their head a little bit so people won’t think the revolution is Salafi,” one of the local fighters told me. The role of Sufi clerics in the opposition should not come as a surprise. I have seen Sufi insurgent groups in Falluja and other parts of Iraq and as well as armed Sufis in Somalia and Afghanistan.

Further north, rural Aleppo has hundreds of fighters in the insurgency. In the town of Anadan, slogans for “the Faruq revolution” are written on walls. Faruq is another name for Omar, a figure revered by Sunnis. On other walls people sent their greetings to Omar as well as Abu Bakr and Uthman, who are also revered by Sunnis. Many men from the area volunteered to fight in Iraq. While most of the activist leaders in Anadan have university degrees in subjects like chemistry, mathematics and Arabic, all of them are Islamists and some are Salafis.

A 48-year-old man called Abu Jumaa leads the uprising there. His son spent one year in an Air Force intelligence prison, accused of belonging to the jihadist group Jund Asham and enduring severe torture. Before the revolution many of Anadan’s youths were accused of Islamic extremism and arrested. One Friday in February demonstrators shouted, “the people want a declaration of jihad!”

Abu Jumaa arranged for the armed and unarmed needs of the revolution in Anadan. In his house he has Kalashnikovs, shotguns, and improvised explosive devices.

One of the spiritual leaders of the revolution in Anadan is a sheikh called Yusuf who is not a Salafi. The Muslim Brotherhood still has influence in Anadan, which suffered in the 1980s during the Brotherhood’s uprising and many residents were banned from state employment.

Armed locals in Anadan claim that security forces have not raided the town “because if they come security will be massacred.” Non-Sunnis were removed from the military security headquarters in Anadan so that they would be less likely to be killed by insurgents. One Friday morning in December opposition activists tore down a large picture of Assad in the main square. One of the guards in the nearby security headquarters cheered them on. By February, the security forces had been expelled by the insurgents from Anadan and its men were working on helping their brethren in Aleppo city.

Another pan-Islamist movement, Hizbultahrir, or the Party of Liberation, is also reappearing. In Sanamein, the second largest town in Daraa province, I met with Abu Khalid, one of the political leaders of the uprising there who also often led demonstrations. Sanamein was a conservative town. Most people prayed. All its sheikhs were Shafii, there were no Sufis, and it seemed as though everybody loved sheikh Adnan al Arur. Abu Khalid belonged to Hizbultahrir, a utopian pan-Islamic organization committed to reestablishing the caliphate through peaceful means. Despite his affiliation with this movement Abu Khalid was against the involvement of any political party. “I am against giving a religious tone to the revolution.” He added, “It’s a popular revolution.”

In January, leaders of armed groups in Homs including those from the opposition’s Faruq Brigade sent messages to the Muslim Brotherhood complaining that the Brotherhood was smuggling weapons into Homs but hiding them or burying there. “They avoid to use their weapons now to fight and we are afraid that they want us to defeat the regime and then they will use their arms when we are tired.” The Brotherhood had no people on the ground, all leaders in Homs agreed, but there were signs they were trying to recruit from other groups. The discovery that they were hiding weapons had created a
crisis of trust. The utopian group Hizbultahrir has long had a presence in Homs. Many of its members were arrested over the years, but it was not a violent group and hence they spent less time in prison than others. They have recently made their presence felt in Homs once again, building a network and financing some armed groups.

In late December, some men belonging to Hizbultahrir tried to raise the black and white flag of Islam in the Inshaat neighborhood of Homs. They also distributed leaflets in Inshaat saying it is religiously prohibited to deal with the Americans or ask for support from NATO, people should only depend on God. The local political opposition committee in Inshaat told them they did not want these things in their neighborhood. Likewise HRC activists stopped the Hizbultahrir men from raising the flags, explaining that only flags approved by the HRC could be raised. The HRC leadership warned their people in Inshaat to be careful because Islamists could use this incident to say the HRC is against Islam. But others complained to the HRC about their refusal to raise the flag of Islam.

“Islamists are going so fast,” a leader of the HRC told me. “They are not waiting. A few days ago Hizbultahrir put up flag of Islam, but everybody knows that this slogan is for Hizbultahrir. Hizbultahrir started recruiting, they were arrested in previous years, and now they started again building their networks. They started working with armed groups. Financing them. Other Islamists also started working, they believe the regime is about to fall and they started building their relationships.”

“Some people are disappointed,” said another leader of the HRC. “And don’t expect anything from the Arab League which is a League of Arab dictators and the security council did nothing for us so some Islamists think we have to depend only on god and call on jihad. Those depressed people now blame the sheikhs because sheikhs do not call for jihad and people try to pressure sheikhs to make call for jihad.” But he disagreed with this. “Why should we announce jihad? Just to give regime excuse to kill us?”

He spoke of Syria’s most senior cleric Said Ramadan al Buti. “If Butti spoke in one hundred degrees less than Arur he would be more popular than Arur,” he said. “Buti’s thoughts are good, if he was with the revolution and spoke then Bashar would have left a long time ago. We want a man who is enlightened and a thinker. People liked Burhan Ghalioun at first. They stopped liking him not because he was secular but because they feel like he didn’t deliver. I respect him because he is enlightened and stood with the people. The people are more simple than the parties, the want a program, to eat to live freely, not to live under oppression and a security member will mess up the neighborhood, and they want something tangible and something to be proud of. This generation is not Muslim Brothers, Hizbultahrir, or Salafi. They want somebody who will serve them. But we can’t deny that this is an Islamic society so somebody could take advantage of Islam for electoral purposes.”

The Syrian uprising’s reliance on outside help will only increase radicalization. In January officials from the HRC complained to me that the live broadcasts of Homs demonstrations shown on networks like al Jazeera Mubashar were controlled by a Salafi, Abu Yasir, who falsely claimed he was in Homs and was causing problems for them. During a January sit-in in the Homs neighborhood of Khalidiyeh the HRC tried to arrange for a senior member and founder of their council to speak to protesters live from his exile in Jordan. This member was a Sufi sheikh from the Bab Assiba neighborhood who had played a key role from the first days of the uprising encouraging people to demonstrate and maintaining
discipline over the armed groups. “We wanted him to talk to the crowd because the people of Homs love him and they will obey him,” an HRC official told me. “But the guy on the laptop said first I want to ask the coordinator (Abu Yasir) and the coordinator said no we don’t want him, we want Arur, so Arur spoke to the crowd.” He complained that in Homs too many of the media coordinators were in Saudi Arabia.

Unlike places I visited in Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, in opposition strongholds the residents do not live in fear of Salafis and there are no armed Salafis imposing themselves on the population. But the alleged suicide bombings of December and January in Damascus and February in Aleppo do raise the possibility that the regime’s propaganda will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. “The more time the revolution extends the Salafis will be stronger,” one activist told me. “Each month that goes by the movement turns more Islamic and more radical Islamic. If it had succeeded in April or May of 2011 there would be more civil society.”

The Americans and Europeans assess that the regime was not behind the attacks. A western official based in Damascus said the bombings were both against “known staging grounds for mukhabarat and shabiha. Where they gather and get their assignments. Our defense attache used to see hundreds of mukhabarat in front of the branch buildings every Friday morning.” A senior western diplomat told me, “The car bombs are a murky matter. If my time in Algiers and Baghdad is any guide, we may never know the full story.” Before the December 23 attacks a senior western diplomat told me that al Qaeda was in Syria and he was very worried they might conduct attacks. Syria was a major source of jihadists and suicide bombers in Iraq, as even Syrian security officials often admit. It was a transit point for other foreign fighters going to Iraq. One senior western diplomat worried that veterans of the Anbar campaign would use their expertise in Syria.

Residents of Daraa, the suburbs of Damascus, or other opposition strongholds feel like they live under occupation. Opposition supporters talk about “occupied” or “liberated” areas. Opposition strongholds that are “occupied” are surrounded and divided by checkpoints. Security and soldiers demand identity cards from passers by, ask men to get out of their vehicles, enter bus and check the identity cards of all men on the bus, conduct armed patrols through neighborhoods, kick down doors, and arrest military age men. I was reminded of the feeling I had in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and southeast Turkey. While security and soldiers in Syria are not foreign, they are not local either and often have an Alawite accent. It is enough to create a sense of occupation. Occupation is a major cause of suicide attacks. On Fridays, which is when the suicide attacks occurred, security men gather in large groups at the same places every week so they can chase demonstrators, beat them, and shoot at them. They are a tempting target, easy and unprotected. While Syria is indeed a security state, its security apparatus has been overwhelmed lately and it is very easy to smuggle anything or anybody into and around the country.

One colonel from the political security branch complained that before their primary job was to prevent al Qaeda activity but now they allocated all their resources to repressing activists and responding to the armed opposition. Between 2005 and 2008, while I was researching my book “Aftermath” jihadi Salafis in Jordan and Lebanon from the Zarqawi network told me the final battle would be in Sham, the classical name for Syria. They hated Alawites. They are an experienced bunch who would support suicide bombings against security forces working for a regime they could describe as infidel who attacked people coming out of mosques. As the crackdown increases, as the local opposition’s sense of abandonment by the outside world increases, and the voices calling for jihad get louder, there will likely be more radicalization.

Nir Rosen, author of “Aftermath: Following the Bloodshed of America’s Wars in the Muslim World,” spent four months in Syria reporting on the uprising for al Jazeera.
The dangerous U.S. double standard on Islamist extremism

By Justin Gengler, September 17, 2012

The death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. officials in Libya last Wednesday should serve to draw much-needed attention to an increasingly untenable contradiction in U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Even while it seeks to recover from this latest attack by Islamic radicals, the United States continues to support or tolerate the mobilization of adherents of that very same ideology elsewhere in the region, most clearly in Syria and in Bahrain. There, U.S. policymakers should expect equally frightening results.

The attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi was carried out by suspected members of Ansar al-Sharia, or Partisans of Islamic Law, a group adhering to the same Salafi (or Wahhabi) religious interpretation more commonly associated with Saudi Arabia. And while the popular anti-American protests that have continued to spread across the region cannot be painted with a single brushstroke, and doubtless have roots in local political grievances, still one feature they share is the conspicuous presence — and organizational power — of Sunni Islamists.

When demonstrators in Cairo and Sanaa succeeded in gaining entry into their respective U.S. embassies, in each case they replaced the U.S. flag with a black pennant bearing in white the Muslim profession of faith: “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.” The banners, which U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland downplayed disingenuously as a “plain, black flag,” should by now be familiar enough to administration officials. It is the same one adopted by other Salafi extremists, including those belonging to al Qaeda and its regional affiliates, from Mali to Yemen. Not coincidentally, it has made an appearance in each of the mass protests witnessed thus far — in Benghazi, in Tunis, in Khartoum, and even in Doha.

That the Obama administration would fail to acknowledge the flag’s overt symbolism is indicative of an uncomfortable yet enduring truth about U.S. policy in the Middle East: that the United States’ enemies in one country are its allies of convenience in another. Even as it reels from the first death of a sitting ambassador in more than two decades, the United States continues to supply logistical and other “command-and-control” support to rebels in Syria, while Gulf allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar pour in money and arms. Of little or insufficient concern, apparently, is the nature of those being empowered, or the broader ideological forces underlying their struggle.

While the Free Syrian Army is famously far from homogeneous, prominent among its factions are armed Salafi groups not unlike Libya’s Ansar al-Sharia. Indeed, local newspapers in Yemen have reported that members of the country’s own militant organization of the same name have recently left Yemen to join in the fight in Syria. In early August four members, including the deputy head, of Bahrain’s Salafi parliamentary bloc, al-Asalah, traveled to Syria to break bread with their counterparts in the Free Syrian Army, boasting on Twitter of their support — ideological and monetary — for “the falcons of al-Sham [the Levant or Damascus]” in their fight against “the hated Safavids,” i.e., Allawi Shiites. Upon their return to Bahrain, the members of parliament (MPs) took up a new cause, leading the charge against a planned new Catholic church, which one al-Asalah legislator insisted, “cannot be built in the Arabian peninsula ... [which is] the domain of Muslims.”

Notwithstanding the willingness of such groups to coordinate with the United States temporarily in Syria, therefore, one should harbor no illusions about their political and religious orientations, and what these mean for U.S. interests in places where this dubious alliance does and will not operate. As seen in the sectarian language quoted above, one common feature of the Salafi current is a distinct lack of religious tolerance, especially for Shiite Muslims viewed as both religious and, on account...
of their presumed allegiance to Iran, political heretics. More than doctrine per se, such an understanding reflects the self-serving interpretation of Salafism’s ideational and monetary patron Saudi Arabia, locked in its own competition for regional dominance with the Islamic Republic. With the help of Saudi-sponsored media, religious institutions, and training for a new generation of clerics, anti-Shiite sentiment and violence has appeared with alarming frequency across the Muslim world, from the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant to less likely places such as Kashmir, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

Importantly, this sectarian religious-cum-political agenda has proved useful in mobilizing Sunni citizens not only against their Shiite co-nationals, but against any individual or government seen as complicit in their ostensible quest for societal domination. Nowhere has this been on greater display than in Saudi Arabia’s tiny Shiite-majority neighbor, Bahrain. To counter the force of its popular uprising begun in February 2011 by Shiite and secular opponents, the government of Bahrain has exploited — even cultivated — the fears and suspicions of other citizens, in particular those of its traditional Sunni support base. Afraid of what the state has successfully portrayed as an Iranian-backed conspiracy to install a Shiite theocracy in Bahrain, many Sunnis have organized not only in opposition to Shiite activists as imagined fifth column, but in opposition to anyone who would dare suggest political compromise with them and their longstanding demands for constitutional reform, whether the U.S. State Department or the Bahraini king.

Orchestrated by security-oriented members of Bahrain’s ruling Al Khalifa family with the backing of like-minded leaders in Saudi Arabia, the mobilization of Bahraini Sunnis has emerged as the most effective weapon in their campaign to prevent a negotiated political settlement of the country’s now 18 month-old crisis. One consistent element of this effort has been the demonization of Western, and particularly U.S., “interference” in Bahrain’s internal affairs, despite the countries’ long history of politico-military cooperation and Bahrain’s hosting of the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet.

At the height of mass demonstrations in March 2011, pro-government Salafis singled out a political affairs officer at the U.S. embassy in Manama for his supposed links to, and sympathies for, opposition activists. (He was also, they reported, Jewish.) His photo, address, and other personal details, along with those of his family, were distributed online and via mass text messages. After several days under tight diplomatic security, the officer was quietly sent home to Washington for a “routine” service rotation.

Throughout the spring and early summer, as U.S. diplomats were pressing for a resumption of substantive government-opposition negotiations, Al Khalifa conservatives continued their media campaign against purported U.S. subterfuge in Bahrain. The vitriol culminated in a two week-long series of articles titled “Ayatollah Obama and Bahrain” published in a hard-line newspaper sponsored by the Royal Court. The author, who has since been made editor-in-chief of the publication, portrayed a U.S. president acting against Bahrain not merely out of his country’s strategic interests, but due to personal ideological sympathies for Shiites. The articles stopped only after official complaint by the U.S. embassy.

Later in July, Bahrain’s defense minister (and, not incidentally, brother of the royal court minister) gave an interview to Egypt’s Al-Ahram, in which he accused the United States of no less than conspiring to organize, along with Iran, the entire February uprising. He repeated these claims in February 2012, telling a local Bahraini daily that the “coup attempt” was supported by 22 different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) “managed and funded by the U.S. and a[n unnamed] Gulf state.” Not long after, the official Bahrain News Agency reported a meeting between the defense minister and U.S. Ambassador Thomas Krajeski, presumably to discuss the former’s interesting interpretation of events.

Yet the anti-Western and anti-American onslaught has intensified rather than subsided. Only two months ago, Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated lawmakers agitated for the replacement of Krajeski along with the declaration of U.S. Assistant Sectary of State Michael
Posner, who has been dispatched frequently to Bahrain in the wake of the uprising, as persona non grata. Krajeski, according to one Salafi MP who is among those who would later travel to Syria:

“is demanding the empowerment of [the opposition] under the guise of democracy and human rights. ... The ambassador has since his appointment been particularly active in putting pressure on Bahrain and on threatening and blackmailing the country. His meetings with the opposition do not stop and the U.S. interference in our affairs has reached unprecedented levels.”

Nonetheless, the United States remains seemingly unwilling to ruffle feathers either in Manama or Riyadh by demanding an end to this state-sponsored mobilization of ordinary Sunnis. And in the absence of effective pressure to do otherwise, both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have now doubled down on their shared sectarian political strategy, relying on near-hysterical fear of foreign-aided Shiite empowerment to preclude the emergence of larger, cross-cutting, and ultimately much more dangerous oppositions organized around grievances shared by all segments of society: problems such as corruption, unequal development, and the lack of political accountability. The result is a social and political climate that not only features unprecedented polarization, but that presents a grave threat to U.S. interests — both political and physical — in the region.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, brought to the fore uncomfortable questions about the sources of violent Islamic extremism, and about the United States’ unwitting support for the latter through continued patronage of those who help sow the seeds of this mindset. One hopes that these uncomfortable questions will now be revisited, and to greater substantive effect, when on the eleventh anniversary of 9/11 there should occur yet another act of political violence committed by individuals associated with that very same ideology.

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The failure of #MuslimRage

By Marc Lynch, September 21, 2012

Last week’s wave of protests and attacks on U.S. embassies launched a million op-eds (along with an instantly notorious Newsweek cover) about the return of “Muslim rage,” the failure of the Arab uprisings, the collapse of Obama’s foreign policy, and the inevitability of the clash of civilizations. When a satirical French newspaper leaped forward to run some more hopefully offensive cartoons, everyone braced for another round of violent protests across the region. But a funny thing happened on the way to the apocalypse: almost nothing. There were a few tiny demonstrations, but most Arab countries (in contrast to Pakistan and Lebanon) saw no mass rallies, no burning embassies, no screaming for the television cameras.

The fizzling of the protests against that awful YouTube film was obvious before today, of course. As has been widely noted, the protests last week were actually quite small — vastly inferior in size and popular inclusion to the Arab uprisings protests last year, and small even in comparison to the ongoing pro-democracy or other political
demonstrations which occur on a weekly basis in many Arab countries. The killing of Ambassador Chris Stevens and his colleagues, and the dramatic images of broached embassy walls and al Qaeda flags, radically inflated Western perceptions about the magnitude of the protests.

By far the biggest story of popular mobilization today came in Libya, where tens of thousands came out in Benghazi in an inspiring rally against militias and against the attack on the U.S. consulate. Thus far, millions of op-eds have failed to be produced in response. That's a pity. The failure of the Arab world to follow its assigned script really deserves as much attention as did last week's outburst. I wish that the relative fizzle of today's protests and today's large rally in Benghazi denouncing the attack on the U.S. consulate and militia violence would get even one-tenth of the media attention lavished upon the supposed meaning of last week's embassy attacks.

The fizzling of the protest wave and the Benghazi counter-demonstration suggests better questions than the popular choices such as “why do they hate us” or “why are Muslims so angry” or “how badly has Obama failed.” For instance, why were these demonstrations so small? Why did they peter out so quickly when the Danish Cartoons crisis went on for months? Why did they fail to attract broad-based support outside of their core constituencies? And why have so many leaders of Arab countries in transition, Islamists included, rushed to apologize and to reassure the United States? I don't have all the answers, but here are a few possibilities.

First, the interests of key Islamist actors at this time pushed them toward restraint rather than escalation. This is not to say that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, should be seen as “moderate” (an endless, if somewhat futile, debate). There's little reason to believe that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is less keen to protest offenses to the Prophet or to create a more Islamic society now than they were six years ago. Their ideology hasn't much changed, nor their membership, nor their willingness to take offense at perceived slights. But their interests have changed and they found themselves forced to adapt when their initial instincts backfired. As president, Mohamed Morsi has to worry about Egypt's international alliances and reputation, not least with the United States. As the leading political party in the country, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party needs to worry about how it is perceived in the country at large, and about competition for conservative votes from Salafi rivals. Their initial instincts were to jump on the protest bandwagon, but they were quickly forced to adapt when confronted with political and structural pressures from at home and abroad. And so they call for legal measures against blasphemy and for peaceful protests but denounce violence, make the necessary apologies, and seek to tar their Islamist rivals as irrational extremists.

Second, the Arab uprisings make it harder for a single issue to dominate the public agenda than in the past. In 2006, the Danish Cartoons could dominate politics for weeks on end because it provided a useful political issue for a variety of Islamists, and most Arab regimes found it convenient to have popular anger directed at Western targets. But now there are so many other issues competing for space, and far less patience for any attempt to monopolize the arena. Syria demands attention at the regional level, of course, but local issues are the most potent challengers for attention. In Yemen a few days ago, for example, more than 10,000 came out to demand an end to the immunity for prosecution granted to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Jordanians are protesting about new internet restrictions. Egyptians and Tunisians have a lot on their political mind. What is more, intense domestic political competition means that other political forces have little interest in allowing one Islamist trend to define the public agenda. A sign seen in Benghazi today reading “Our Revolution Will Not Be Stolen” could have stood in for the attitude across many of the region's now well-entrenched activist communities.

The dominance of the local political arena is often missed in analysis, which lumps all the protests, large and small, together into a single narrative of “Muslim rage.” Almost every well-reported account of last week’s protests in particular countries emphasized the local political issues.
in play. In Egypt, Salafis were jockeying with Islamists for political attention, while the actual battles outside the embassy seem to have mostly involved young toughs rather than ideologues. In Yemen, general anger at U.S. policies combined with a concentration of angry young toughs seemed to be the key. In Lebanon, the greater violence in today’s protests than in most other places likely has to do with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah’s attempt to focus on religious affronts rather than his unpopular stance on Syria.

Third, while I don’t think it’s a major factor, perhaps Obama’s outreach to the Muslim world hasn’t actually been the dismal failure declared in a thousand (oddly similar) op-eds after all. It’s true that his Cairo speech and subsequent policies have not granted him enduring popularity or magically generated universal love for America. But that was never really the expectation or the point. The Danish cartoons protest wave was sustained by the broader international “clash of civilizations” atmosphere of the middle of that decade, a seamless narrative of conflict between Islam and the West fueled by the toxic legacies of the high rhetoric of the war on terror and the occupation of Iraq. Obama’s outreach efforts sought to break that spiral toward a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West, by focusing on issues of “mutual interest and mutual respect.” Last week showed that the extremists hoping to spark a clash of civilizations are still there. Who thought they weren’t? But their relatively poor showing suggests that something has changed. And part of that may be that even if U.S. policies remain unpopular, there’s no longer a seamless narrative of a war on Islam that makes sense to ordinary people.

Of course this doesn’t mean that we won’t see more cycles of outrage and protest over these issues. A lot of people genuinely care about them, and they have the ability to organize protests, spread their message, and capture local and international media attention. Sometimes, the interests of key actors will align differently and they will gain more momentum rather than petering out. In Pakistan and Lebanon, for instance, things are far uglier than in most of the Arab countries -- likely for reasons related to the domestic political situation.

I eagerly await the rush of op-eds and cable news talk shows sure to come soon explaining the real meaning of the relative calm in Cairo and today’s rally in Benghazi. I’m sure I’ve misread some of the cases here, and that the next week or two might lead to different dynamics playing out. But questions about these political dynamics, the failure of the mobilization to take hold into a sustained protest, the shifting calculations of key Islamist actors, and the responses by other powerful social forces in places like Libya would be far better questions to be asking than the ones which have dominated the discourse for the last week.