

# BOOK REVIEW

**Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars. *Salafism in the Maghreb: Politics, Piety, and Militancy*.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 240 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-19-094241-0.

The phenomenon known as Arab Spring started in Tunisia with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, whose aim was to denounce injustice, police brutality, corruption, and poor governance in his country. This human sacrifice was seized upon as a motive for the uprisings that led to the fall of Tunisian president Ben Ali in January 2010. From Morocco to Egypt, borders fell, followed by regime changes in Tunisia and Libya, and changes in government policies in Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria. In the surge of protests, young Muslims and preachers of Islam took the center stage, where they met the Salafists; these two groups occupied the public sphere left by politicians. It is this ebb and flow of Islam and the surrounding confusion that the authors Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars methodically dissect in *Salafism in the Maghreb: Politics, Piety, and Militancy*.

In this book, Salafism is understood in its daily deployment alongside its preachers and imams, activists and dissidents, militants and militias, and political parties, all in an interconnected world. The authors did fieldwork across the Maghreb, conducted interviews with Salafists (sometimes referred to anonymously), and talked to diplomats, political authorities, people from academia, members of civil society, and activists. There are numerous references from the Internet—which could compromise the credibility of the given information—but this is quickly offset by an extensive bibliography.

The authors attempt to give a comprehensive study of the origins and development of Salafism across the Maghreb, by indicating the socio-economic, political, and translocal causes in each country studied: Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. In relation to other Salafist movements around the world, they try to understand how Maghrebian Salafism has been reshaped by local context as well as international issues, and how in turn those facts—a total social phenomenon—have affected politics, economics, and society in the sub-region (3).

The book can be divided into four main themes to facilitate a better understanding of these complex phenomena, along with one theoretical

field still under considerable debate: 1. Quietist Salafism through propaganda, preaching, and education. 2. The reaction of Salafists to public security policies carried out by the State. 3. Jihadist Salafism. 4. Rehabilitation and re-education of radicalized Salafists 5. Relations between Sufis and Salafists.

North African Quietist Salafists are led by Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali; al-Madkhali is a professor at the University of Medina, and in his public speeches and sermons he supports the Saudi King. The Madkhalis are divided between Rabi and Muhammad bin Hadi al-Madkhali, who are from the same Saudi ethnic group, but who sometimes hold opposing views and positions on Islam. Today, Madkhalists of both sides are numerous in Libya and Algeria. They are active in the social and Islamic propaganda, just like other Salafists, for example, in the suburbs of Nouakchott and Tunis.

The authors devote long chapters to jihadist Salafists in Libya and Tunisia, where the most serious terrorists threats have occurred, with several attacks starting in 2002 that intensified between 2011 and 2016. “Disenfranchised” and underemployed young Tunisians entered Ansar al-Sharia (founded in 2011), and called for a terrorist war in 2013. Some of their fighters are still in the battlefields in Syria, Mali, and Libya (95). With the Arab Spring, the Libyan fighters returned from Syria and Iraq, and the sleeper cells of terrorist groups and local militias had difficulty controlling oil resources and the Central Bank of Libya. The result was a civil war in 2014, which divided Libya between the West under a government supported by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and France, and the East backed by Qatar, Russia, and Turkey. The rivalry between those foreign powers has implications for the civil war in Libya.

Many questions remain. What is the reaction of the Sufis to the Salafi offensive? Are they as passive as they appear to be throughout the book? What is the role and involvement of the North African Salafi militias in the anti-black (African) migrants campaigns? Are sub-Saharan migrants involved in these different Salafist groups or in their transnational *jihad*, and if so, how? As an epistemic reflection, is it possible in the North African context and in many other cases, to read Salafi-Sufi relations as a single identity and not in a binary distinction? In other words, can one be Sufi and Salafi at the same time?

The authors conclude that the wars in Syria and Iraq have had negative repercussions for the Maghrebian Salafists. The internal problems that feed Salafism are injustice, state violence, youth marginalization, patriarchal authoritarianism, and the brutality of security forces. It remains to explore the cultural and even psychological motivations that reinforce Salafism, which, according to Wehrey and Boukhars, will endure in North Africa.

This book will be of great interest to advanced students, scholars of Islam, and researchers of Islam in North Africa and violent religious extremism around the world. It can also help journalists, politicians, policy makers and

people from non-governmental organizations to better contextualize and understand the very complex debates on Salafi Islam.

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