



Hazards and Pitfalls of the Islamic Movements

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The most serious ideas in the Arab World attempting to challenge the rigidity of conventional *Salafi* ideology lately seem to emanate from North Africa; most notably Morocco and Tunisia and to a lesser extent Egypt. These writers generally follow in the footsteps of their earlier enlightened Islamic ones dating all the way back to Averroes (*Ibn-Rushd*), the twelfth century philosopher. [PI Online](#) examines recent criticism and interpretations of Islamic dogma by some of those writers who are attempting to reform Muslim thinking and counteract the rigidity of *Salafism*.

Tunisian writer *Khaled Al-Tarawli* clearly describes one of the major problems encountered in *Salafi* ideology; its reliance on historical facts that have inappropriate applications in the present world and inaccuracies in their interpretations. He also elaborates upon the two principal pitfalls of rigid Islam: empty repetitive slogans like the one adopted by the Muslim Brotherhood “Islam is the solution”, and the selective use of historic references, which results in ignorant edicts, and *fatwa*, which further distort the religion.

Al-Tarawli also criticizes a major ideological belief of *Salafism*, the belief that all Muslims, regardless of their national identity, belong to one Islamic *Ummah*. That lack of geographic national importance, *Al-Tarawli* contends, has resulted in a lack of concern about the economic factors affecting the population and about the particular national social and cultural characteristics of the country to which they belong.

In another article, writer ‘*Abdel-Hakim Abu Al-Luz*’ addresses the fact that the *Salafi*, in the Maghreb, are conscientiously unengaged in politics. Quoting Sheikh *Muhammad Al-Maghrawi*, one of the most prominent *Salafi* in Morocco, the writer explains that the *Salafi* believe for the moment in “political conformism”, a term he explains as their refusal to be part of any political opposition. Their immediate concerns, they allege, are religious, concentrating on proselytizing and expanding their ideological and educational platform. The *Salafi* do not consider elections an acceptable political process and do not encourage the population to vote. Their lack of participation, *Abu Al-Luz* contends, could have been an important factor in preventing the politically active Islamic party of “Justice and Development” in *Marrakesh* from achieving successful results in the city’s last elections.

Similar to the case in Morocco, the number of those in Egypt who also seem to be identifying with Salafism is expanding, with a power concentration in Alexandria, the country’s second largest city.

¹ *Abdel-Hakim Abu Al-Luz* is a researcher at the University of Hassan II in Casablanca, Morocco

These groups similarly refuse to participate in the political process in order to avoid the government animosity that has haunted the politically active Muslim Brotherhood.

Expansion of the *Salafi* movement in countries like Morocco and Egypt was aided by two main factors. First, the governments are tolerant towards these groups because they believe they are not an imminent threat to their authority and that they could help fight other politically active Islamic movements. The second factor is the dismal educational level, particularly in Egypt, which has caused many jobless youth to flock to the *Salafi* movements, less out of conviction and more out of a desire to escape their economic burdens. As in Saudi Arabia, where *Salafism* is dominant, the expanding groups in Egypt follow the principle, necessary for their survival, enunciated by the two widely popular Saudi sheikhs in the Kingdom, Sheikh Adel Gami and sheikh Rabi' al-Madkhili. Both sheikhs contend that Muslims should adhere to the principle that the Arab rulers have the legitimate right to act in the name of the Islamic *Ummah* as long as they maintain their basic adherence to Islam and the public call to prayer throughout the land. The pact between the *Salafi* and the Arab governments has therefore been sealed with this key principle – as long as the authorities are not politically challenged, the *Salafi* can continue to enjoy religious freedom and expand their base.

What the authorities are fully aware of but still prefer to ignore is that the current attitude of these movements may simply be a reflection of the Salafi doctrine which holds that, until the strength of the currently weak Islamic *Ummah* is restored, it is acceptable to engage in non-violent methods to promote the dominance of Islam. Reviewing the words of one of the preeminent authorities on Jihad, Dr. Fadl [[see PI Online Special Series](#)], it becomes apparent that the *Salafi* practice of refraining from confrontation with the authorities is temporary in nature and their desire to rule is omnipresent; it is simply postponed.

There is little doubt that the *Salafi* expansion is worrisome, particularly if the movement ultimately turns to force. There are however some analysts who believe that the difference between the socio-cultural composition of the population in Saudi Arabia and in countries like Egypt is considerable and that these differences would prevent *Salafism* from being embraced by the majority of the population. This week, writer *Islam 'Abdel-Tawwab* addressed the complex reasons why this is so. The most striking manifestations of *Salafism* in Egypt have been the growing numbers of women using the hijab and the increasing number of men with the traditional beard. 'Abdel-Tawwab points out, however, that beyond these superficial signs of religious conservatism there are aspects of Egyptian society that are profoundly incompatible with the Salafi movement. The most important of these is the institution of marriage and family, which has progressed in Egypt to the point where a large majority of women work, contrary to the role of Salafi women who are to remain at home. The writer also states that in a country where it is difficult to own or rent an apartment, economic and financial considerations often outweigh religious ones when it comes to marriage.

On the dogmatic side, 'Abdel-Tawwab deconstructs the *Salafi* doctrine by pointing out that the ideology is primarily centered on religious studies and what is permitted or forbidden under the *Shari'a*. It fails to take into account other aspects of daily life. He also agrees with the point that the *Salafi* reluctance to organize officially is simply a means to avoid the hostility of authorities and to distinguish itself from the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, the *Salafi*'s rigid interpretation of the *Quran* and the *Hadith* is difficult for many in the population to embrace and thus becomes a negative for the movement. Despite these criticisms, 'Abdel-Tawwab states that there is a place for

Salafism in society but not in its present form. It is unclear, however, in what form *Abdel-tawwab* would accept *Salafism*. If by reforming the movement he means to expose the fallacies of its ideology; that could contribute to the creation of an effective deterrent to the spread of the movement.

In countries like Egypt and Morocco, there is no doubt that *Salafism* is a phenomenon that can be easily ignited if ignored or most probably extinguished or limited, if these new thinkers continue to challenge its doctrines and promote a more rational view of Islam.

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<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/6F4B10FE-7284-4474-81E6-870DD1C66730.htm>

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