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Middle East Brief

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Morocco's Salafi Ex-Jihadis: Co-optation, Engagement, and the Limits of Inclusion

Mohammed Masbah

In the wake of the political protests that erupted in Morocco in 2011, King Mohammed VI issued royal pardons in March 2011 and February 2012 to a group of prominent Salafi ex-Jihadis, that is – Salafi Jihadis who had renounced violence. He offered to release them from prison on the condition that they either remain apolitical or participate in the legal political process. The offer was part of the monarchy's broader effort to battle and defeat extremism. As a consequence of the pardon, several Salafi ex-Jihadi sheikhs chose to join political parties and stood as candidates for the first time in the Moroccan parliamentary elections in October 2016. Taken together, these moves reflect a major turning point in the trajectory of Moroccan Salafi Jihadism from their total rejection of the existing political system to their limited acceptance of working within it. This significant shift toward taking part in mainstream politics has been attributed by seasoned observers to the regime's inclusiveness, and it allowed Salafi ex-Jihadis to enjoy the benefits associated with becoming legal political actors.

Though at first sight the moderation of such a prominent group of Salafi ex-Jihadi sheikhs would appear to be a sign of the success of the regime's policy of inclusion, in fact there is growing evidence that the wider Salafi Jihadi community has remained untouched by the regime's approach. At the time of their release, the majority of Salafi detainees refused to follow the sheikhs into

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party politics; now, more than five years after their release from prison, at least 224 former Salafi detainees have joined fights in Syria,¹ while the rest of them have remained apolitical. Among hundreds of former and current Jihadis, only a few dozen remain engaged in the legal political sphere.

Two questions remain: To what extent did the regime's inclusion of Salafi former detainees into the legal political sphere succeed in its primary objective of encouraging their ideological moderation? And why have so many former Salafi detainees refused to participate in party politics?

This Brief argues that the political participation of prominent Salafi ex-Jihadi sheikhs within the regime's predefined framework seems to have been counterproductive. Rather than leading to the moderation of Salafi former detainees, it has instead contributed to the marginalization of sheikhs from their ideological base, thereby shrinking the scope of their influence on their followers and preventing the government from controlling the actions of radicals and stemming the flow of youth to conflicts abroad. The Brief begins by providing a short historical overview of Salafi Jihadis in Morocco between the late 1990s until their release from prison in 2011, and considers how processes of radicalization and deradicalization evolved throughout that period. It also examines how the Moroccan regime's intended co-optation of Salafi ex-Jihadi detainees tended to limit the scope of their activities by exerting pressure with respect to their involvement in public life and leaving them with two options: either comply with the regime's rules of the game, or face renewed marginalization from the political scene.

The Brief also describes the different forms of Salafi ex-Jihadis' engagement in the public sphere, such as creating NGOs and establishing or joining political parties. Finally, the Brief considers the limits to the regime's inclusiveness of Salafi ex-Jihadi sheikhs.

The radicalization of Salafi Jihadis has been a multifaceted and complex process, and the same has been true of their "moderation." Throughout this Brief, I regard radicalization as the readiness to use violence for political ends, accompanied by a refusal to engage with a pluralistic society. Moderation, I take to be the opposite orientation, involving renouncing violence and accepting political participation and civic engagement with other social and political forces. Both radicalization and moderation are understood in this brief as dynamic processes, rather than as static or absolute categories.

Salafi Jihadism in Morocco

Salafi Jihadism emerged in Morocco in the 1990s, thanks to the conversion of many sheikhs from different venues of Islamism after the spreading of literature by prominent global Salafi Jihadi ideologues such as Abu Qatada al-Filistini and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. The phenomenon has been characterized by its local aspect, meaning that each sheikh had his own followers in his own respective city: Mohammed Rafiki Abu Hafs in Fes, Mohammed al-Fizazi in Tangier, Hassan Kettani in Salé, Omar Hadouchi in Tetouan, and Abdelkrim Chadli and Miloudi Zakaria in Casablanca, to name a few. Most of these leaders preached about *tawhid* (unification of God) according to a strict Wahabi interpretation and supported al-Qaida's ideology regarding prioritizing Jihad against Western countries rather than Arab regimes.²

In its early formation, the so-called ‘Salafia Jihadia Organization’ consisted of a loose network of the followers of these sheikhs: hundreds of young converts inspired by radical ideas of Jihadism but lacking ideological coherence as well as an organizational framework for effective mobilization capacity. Moroccan authorities had therefore often chosen to turn a blind eye to this phenomenon, as long as it did not appear to threaten the regime’s stability.

This changed in 2003, however, as the radicalization of Salafi Jihadis became a visible problem in Morocco. On May 16, 2003, fourteen young men from the socially marginalized Casablanca shantytowns blew themselves up in front of hotels, restaurants, and a synagogue. Moroccan authorities linked these terrorist attacks to al-Qaida’s transnational attacks³ and accused the Salafi Jihadis’ sheikhs of having provided the ideological training and legitimization for the attacks. Some of the suicide bombers had indeed attended some of these sheikhs’ courses, but these accusations were never proven, and some of the sheikhs were already jailed when the attacks were perpetrated. In any case, in the wake of the 2003 attack, Moroccan authorities arrested hundreds of people linked to Salafi Jihadism, including a number of prominent sheikhs who were accused of praising terrorism and plotting terrorist attacks.

During their imprisonment between 2003 and 2011, these Salafi Jihadis detainees underwent a process of “deradicalization”: a course of ideological transformation whereby detainees abandon their radical views, cease supporting al-Qaida and other Jihadis groups, renounce terrorist attacks on civilians, and (in the Moroccan case) accept the legitimacy of the monarchy. In contrast to several other countries, however, the Moroccan regime did not initiate a specific deradicalization program in its prisons; rather, in what might be a relatively peculiar case, Moroccan Salafi Jihadis inmates *self*-deradicalized, thanks to an internal process of dialogue between the sheikhs and other Jihadis in prison. Moroccan authorities’ role was indirect: through a blend of carrots and sticks, the regime rewarded deradicalized Jihadis—and hence encouraged the process—by granting them incentives, such as enhancing their living conditions in prison. A famed Salafi ex-Jihadis told the author that after 2005, “we lived as ‘kings’ in the prison: we got more free time for recreation and with families, intimate meetings (*al-kholwa al-share’ia*) with our wives, access to entertainment such as TV, and access to the prison library, and many of us were able to pursue their formal education.”⁴ At the same time, the regime tightened its grip on the most radical elements among imprisoned Jihadis.

But, the most relevant incentive in the eyes of Jihadis detainees was the authorities’ promise to release from prison those who made significant efforts to renounce radical views. With that in mind, several Salafi ex-Jihadis detainees wrote letters to the administration of the prison in which they renounced violence and accepted the monarchy, in the hope of obtaining a royal pardon.⁵

In the aftermath of the popular political protests of 2011, these sheikhs were released from prison through a royal pardon; after their release, they not only condemned violence, but chose to engage actively in the public sphere with other political actors. In early 2012, the released sheikhs launched a PR campaign aimed at redefining their political and ideological identity and changing the image people had of them. To promote their new ideas, they have been active on social media and participated in seminars and press conferences; they also engaged the public sphere through alternative outlets such as virtual spaces, university amphitheatres, and Islamic-oriented associations like the Renewal Students Organization and the Unification and Reform Movement,⁶ organizations both close to the Justice and Development Party, or PJD.

The Regime Formula for Taming Radicalism

The Moroccan regime has a long history of experience in dealing with different categories of Islamists through a *pre-emptive* approach involving a top-down, manipulated integration of Islamists into the political sphere. It is a nuanced approach based on tactics that distinguish among categories of Islamism. The regime incorporates the more moderate, dissenting elements into the formal political system and isolates the most radical elements. With moderate Islamists, the regime employs a strategic combination of incentives and low-level repression, while radical Islamists are subject to harsh repression through the application of security-oriented measures.

Between 2003 and 2011, through the selective application of incentives and repression, Salafi ex-Jihadis detainees were encouraged to make strategic calculations weighing the pros and cons of abandoning their radical positions. The regime’s imposition of varying degrees of repression on detained Salafi Jihadis⁷ led many prominent sheikhs to accept the political limits set by the regime, while the existence of new political opportunities tended to moderate their most radical positions.

In the aftermath of 2011, in addition to issuing a royal pardon, the Moroccan regime provided indemnity for some former Jihadis detainees⁸ and provided public media coverage for Salafi ex-Jihadis sheikhs. For instance, when

Sheikh Mohammed al-Fizazi—a former radical who had been sentenced to thirty years in prison under the 2003 anti-terrorism law for condoning terrorism—led a Friday sermon in the presence of King Mohammed VI in Tangier in March 2014,⁹ he was widely covered by media, and he has since agreed with almost all of the regime’s positions, including when the Ministry of the Interior banned the *niqab* (full veil for women) in early January 2017.¹⁰ Mohammed Rafiki Abu Hafs, who had been a radical sheikh in the city of Fes in the late 1990s and was famous for praising Taliban rule, was also invited on several occasions to talk on public television about changes in his ideology. For these and other sheikhs, the expected benefit of abandoning their radical views exceeded the expected utility of remaining radical,¹¹ as they came to understand that it was possible to avoid repression and have some room for maneuver if they managed to avoid any clash with the regime.¹²

Salafi ex-Jihadis and Modes of Public Engagement

As noted above, some Salafi ex-Jihadis responded to the political opportunities that opened up in 2011 by opting for public engagement, with the aim of unifying the former Salafi detainees into a coherent movement. They planned to form their own political parties and establish NGOs as well as join existing political parties.

Establishing a Political Party

At first, Moroccan authorities did not clarify the specific contours of the political role that was to be filled by Salafi ex-Jihadis. The sheikh Mohammed al-Fizazi attempted to establish a political party in 2012, under the name Party of Knowledge and Work,¹³ which he hoped would serve as an umbrella for political Salafis, as had similar parties in Egypt and Tunisia.¹⁴ In particular, al-Fizazi admired the experience of the al-Nour Party in Egypt and intended to replicate this experience in Morocco.

But, the creation of a Salafi political party in Morocco proved to be a greater challenge than anticipated, as it requires the political approval of the regime. Al-Fizazi’s initiative to create a Salafi party was aborted at an early stage, in part because he failed to garner the authorities’ permission. The monarchy was hesitant to accept the Salafis’ political participation because they believed that a Salafi party will disrupt the balance of power that the palace seeks to maintain. In particular, the regime is wary of the possibility of a “fundamentalist alliance” between Salafis and mainstream Islamists that might compete with the King’s religious and political legitimacy. In addition, authorities believed that Salafis were not yet committed

to the constitution, to democracy, and to women’s participation in public life, among other things.

The second reason for the Party of Knowledge and Work’s failure was that the idea of a united Salafi political party had not yet found support among the rank and file of the different currents of Salafism in Morocco, and al-Fizazi was unable to convince other sheikhs to join his initiative. Indeed, al-Fizazi lost the support of many of his own followers because they were not sufficiently prepared for the shift toward political participation. Many were discontented with al-Fizazi’s ideological and behavioral adjustments, which they described as *tarajoua’ate* or “setbacks.”¹⁵ Faced with isolation from his social base, from the regime, and from other Salafi leaders, al-Fizazi abandoned the idea of founding a political party and took a regular position as Friday preacher and member of the Tangier Council of Religious Scholars.

Establishing Legal NGOs

For released Jihadis hoping to attract new followers and unify Salafi constituencies, working within civil society was also an option. With these objectives in mind, two sheikhs, Hassan al-Kettani and Mohammed Rafiki Abu Hafs, established the House of Wisdom (*Dar al-Hikma*) Association at the end of 2012. Dedicated as it was to research in theology and training in the field of human skills, this organization was intended to test whether the regime was willing to deal positively with former Salafi detainees by helping to integrate them into civil life.

During the first six months of the organization’s establishment, the two sheikhs demonstrated their willingness to work within legal parameters by focusing on non-controversial issues and avoiding ideological quarrels with secular groups. Within this framework, however, they were not fulfilling their ambitions to bring Salafis together and influence politics, and so they agreed on March 30, 2013 to establish a more ambitious organization under the name *Al-Basira* (Insight), which focused on preaching, educational and charity work, and serving as a bridge for Salafis hoping to integrate into politics. In order to avoid any links with Wahhabism or Jihadism, *Al-Basira* highlighted its Moroccan religious character by adopting the “Sunni Maliki” doctrine—the official religious doctrine in Morocco—in jurisprudence.

In 2016, there was an even more ambitious attempt by several former Jihadi sheikhs to create a new NGO that would bring together the released Salafi ex-Jihadis in order to counter radicalization.¹⁶ This initiative was aborted before it even got started, however, because of competition as well as ideological conflicts among the leadership. The number and variety of NGO initiatives undertaken by the

Salafi ex-Jihadi sheikhs reflect the divisions that existed among them.

Joining Established Parties

The third option for ex-detainees was to join an existing political party. Salafis tended to resort to this option only when they realized that the regime would not allow them to establish an independent political party, and that by staying outside the mainstream political sphere, they would be exposed to renewed harassment by the authorities.

Faced with few alternatives, by mid-2012, scores of Salafi former detainees had joined the moderate Islamist Party of Renaissance and Virtue (PRV), a small splinter group formed from the ruling Justice and Development Party (PJD). In May 2015, Abdelkerim Chadli, another famous Salafi ex-Jihadi sheikh, joined a palace-backed party named the Democratic and Social Movement (MSD). Other, less well known, former Jihadi detainees joined marginal parties, such as the Party of New Democrats, a newly established party headed by a university professor.

The regime and these Salafi ex-Jihadi sheikhs, then, had different intentions. While the regime's pre-emptive inclusion aimed to open up some space for Salafi engagement while maintaining control over the extent of their engagement, the Salafi ex-Jihadis saw political participation as just a means to an end: namely, to increase their visibility and avoid the authorities' harassment.

The Limits of Political Participation

After five years, the experience of Salafi ex-Jihadis in the arena of party politics seems to have largely been a failure. Only a few Salafis remain engaged in politics; most of them are either disengaged from politics or have returned to radicalism. So why has the regime's plan for integration of Salafi ex-Jihadis failed?

First and foremost, political participation was not a priority for most Salafi detainees. The reason is not ideological but rather purely pragmatic: the Salafi former detainees do not see any interest in political participation because it is perceived as not improving their socioeconomic prospects.

After their release, former detainees needed a clean criminal record so as to be able to get a job. For reasons unknown, however, authorities withheld the required document (*fiche anthropométrique*), leaving former detainees without the possibility of obtaining a decent job in the formal economic sector. And in the absence of such rehabilitation measures, former Jihadi detainees faced marginalization and a lack of opportunities after prison life. One ex-Jihadi detainee told me, for example, that he

located a decent job in a private school, but he could not accept it because he could not obtain the required *fiche anthropométrique*—without which he could not take a job in either the public or private sector.¹⁷ His argument about engaging in party politics was purely pragmatic: if it was going to help him ameliorate his socioeconomic condition and lift the stigma surrounding him, then he would probably participate; otherwise, he had no interest in party politics. This reasoning is actually not very different from why many people join political parties in Morocco—which is to use partisan networks for access to patronage and income.

In addition, many former detainees were disillusioned after seeing their leaders receive indemnities from the government upon their release from prison, while they received no such benefit themselves. In the absence of real improvement in their socioeconomic conditions, many followers came to feel that they had been sold out. Relations between sheikhs and their followers consequently became strained: the sheikhs believed that the release and reintegration of former detainees was beyond their reach and remained the exclusive prerogative of the King,¹⁸ while their followers were convinced that their sheikhs had not defended their cause sufficiently.

Such distrust has alienated many of the former detainees and contributed to the birth of a new generation of radicals, which has turned to the internet and social media to acquire knowledge rather than follow the deradicalized sheikhs. Some young Salafis have in fact turned against their own sheikhs, publicly condemning them for betraying the “cause.” The case of Achref Jouied (aka Abu Anas Al-Andalousi) illustrates the failure of the political inclusion policy. A former student of Sheikh Omar Hadouchi and Sheikh Mohamed Rafiki Abu Hafs, Jouied became ultra-radical¹⁹ after growing disillusioned with party politics. When the sheikhs launched a media campaign against ISIS, Jouied vociferously condemned his former sheikhs for betraying the “Jihadi cause,” even publishing a letter online excommunicating them and allegedly creating a videotape on YouTube²⁰ that threatened them with death.²¹ Since 2012, young Jihadis have left to join the battlefields in Syria in increasing numbers: more than 1,500 Moroccan foreign fighters went to Syria between 2012 and 2016, while only a few hundred went before 2012.²² Many of them had tried to reintegrate into Moroccan public life or engage in formal politics but left in despair.

The second reason for the failure of political integration lies in the fact that the politicized Salafis experienced considerable organizational difficulties in dealing with the complexities of political life. When they joined political parties, they had to conduct strenuous negotiations with

the old guards of those parties to restructure the party, secure some leadership positions, and achieve internal harmony between new Salafi comers and the various existing party factions. Major difficulties emerged, for example, within the Party of Renaissance and Virtue (PRV) after the arrival of Salafis. When the Salafis joined the PRV in 2013, they tried to mobilize their followers and integrate them into the party's existing structure, thereby increasing the number of members in the party's political bureau—up to about thirty-three members—which made for an upsurge in the already existing rivalry among the competing factions in the party and the subsequent departure of the Salafis in 2016, when Abu Hafs split off from the PRV with some Salafi adherents and joined the relatively strong party of Istiqlal, even though Salafis did not hold any leadership positions.²³

Sheikh Abdelkrim Chadli, who had previously disavowed democracy and refused political participation, surprised everyone by joining the Democratic and Social Movement (MSD)—an openly pro-regime party, with support among Moroccan Shiite personalities known for their hostility toward Salafis.²⁴ After tremendous pressure from other Salafis, he succeeded in pushing out the Shiite members from the party soon after he joined, but his success in eliminating them from the ranks of the MSD did not translate into electoral success. Close to the Ministry of the Interior, the MSD lacked a clear ideology and was built by attracting local notables who could afford guaranteed seats in Parliament and in local municipal councils. In the past decade, the MSD has lost popularity, and by the time of the 2016 elections, it got only three seats in Parliament, or less than 1 percent of seats. Faced with this and other such challenges, many Salafi ex-Jihadis left whatever party they initially joined to join other parties or quit political life altogether.

Finally, Salafi participation in regime politics in Morocco was weakened by the fragmentation within the Salafi scene itself. The continued competition over Salafi internal leadership has limited the influence of Salafis in politics and deepened division among already fragmented networks. This meant that political Salafis were not able to build a coherent platform; nor did they succeed in mobilizing the Salafi populace, the vast majority of whom are apolitical in any case.

In the 2016 elections, Salafis were associated with four different parties: Abu Hafs ran with the Istiqlal party, Chadli's followers backed the MSD, Hamad Kabaj supported the PJD, and Mohammed Maghraoui was aligned with the pro-palace Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM).

Conclusion

The Kingdom of Morocco is continuing to apply the same approach to moderating Salafi radicalization that it originally adopted two decades ago with Islamist activists: instead of allowing them to establish their own political parties, it encourages them to join existing parties in order to bring them into line with the regime's interests. This *pre-emptive integration* approach requires the monarchy to retain control of the process, so that the State determines the manner and limits of Islamists' participation in political life and conducts pre- and post-interventions whenever those limits are exceeded.

This method has had an unexpected outcome, however, as reflected in Salafis' minimal engagement in public political life. The regime's pre-emptive integration policy has been counterproductive: instead of encouraging the organized participation of Salafis, it has deepened animosity between Salafi sheikhs and many of their followers, leading to the sheikhs' losing control over their followers and to their subsequent marginalization in the face of increased radicalization. And, the participation of Salafi leaders in minor political parties has led to their loss of credibility and to an even deeper isolation of the sheikhs from the new generation of radical Islamists.

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