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Salafi Politics: ‘Political’ and ‘Quietist’ Salafis in the Struggle for the Libyan State

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Abstract

Academic literature has tended to divide Salafis into three main categories – jihadi, political and quietist – distinguished by ideological and methodological differences, notably pertaining to the Salafi groups' varying relationships with the state and political authority and their use of violence. What happens, then, when state institutions collapse, when there is no state authority or when state authority is highly contested between different groups, none of which is able to definitively assert itself over the others? In a context of political upheaval and armed conflict, how do Salafis relate to the state and to 'politics'?

Developments in Libya between 2011 and 2019 have provided an ideal opportunity to look into these questions. Actors that identify with Salafism have played important roles in Libya's various stages of conflict and political transformation since 2011. However, they have reacted to these transformations in a way that to some extent blurs the lines conventionally drawn between Salafi currents. Focusing on two currents, 'political' Salafism, represented by leading figures in the former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), and 'quietist' Salafism, represented by the so-called 'Madkhali' Salafis, this paper analyses the two currents' relationships with 'politics' and state institutions in times of turmoil. It counters the idea of a fault line between so-called 'political' and 'apolitical' Salafis and unpacks the different strategies deployed by the two groups to deal with state institutions and the political, albeit different, natures of the objectives that they have pursued.

Introduction

Salafism is, at its broadest, a particular interpretation of Islam that seeks to recapture the pristine religion of the early generations of Muslims, the *salaf al-salih*, with a view to (re-)building a *sharia*-compliant community (*umma*). Members of the Salafi current essentially envisage this as a 'mission' to be achieved through belief and everyday behaviour, 'a moral project' based on the implementation of a core set of beliefs and practices and 'transcending worldly politics' (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019: 6). As a matter of fact, as Wagemakers (2012) notes, the majority of Salafis do not engage in either politics or in violence.

However, the link between Salafi followers and politics has proven to be more ambiguous, and the challenge of 'acting non-politically' in a 'political world' has been highlighted in numerous circumstances (Meijer 2019: 17; Bonnefoy 2008). The academic literature after Wiktorowicz (2006) has therefore tended to divide Salafis into three main categories – jihadi, political and quietist¹ – distinguished by ideological and methodological differences.² It is generally assumed that to change the political order jihadis are willing to use violence against rulers considered illegitimate, whereas political Salafis welcome participation in formal political processes and institutions. As for quietist Salafis, they essentially focus on spreading the faith (*da'wa*), privileging obedience to the ruler and neither employing violence against rulers nor participating in institutional politics.

It is clear, therefore, that the state looms large in the divisions within the Salafi sphere that have crystallised in recent decades. What happens, then, when state institutions collapse, when there is no state authority or when state authority is highly contested between different groups, none of which are able to definitively

1 See, for example, Meijer, Roel (2013) 'Introduction' in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, Oxford University Press (p. 8). Meijer later argues (p. 18) that these categories should be seen as more of a spectrum.

2 Hegghammer (2013) argues that the term Salafism is a theological category and gives little information about the political preferences of Salafis. However, the academic categories used to describe different Salafis clearly refer to political behaviour.

assert themselves over the others? In a context of political upheaval and armed conflict, how do Salafis relate to the state and to 'politics'?

Developments in Libya between 2011 and 2019, and the important role played by actors belonging to the Salafi trend in the various stages of conflict and political transformation have provided a major opportunity to try and answer these questions. While they borrow from a common ideological matrix, Libya's Salafi currents have reacted to political transformations in a way that often seemed to blur the lines conventionally drawn between them on the basis of their relationships with politics, the state and political authority, and their use of violence.

Focusing on two currents, 'political' Salafism, represented by leading figures in the former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), a Salafi jihadi organisation active in Libya in the 1990s which renounced the use of violence to achieve political change in the late 2000s (Benotman 2013), and 'quietist' Salafism, represented by the so-called 'Madkhali' Salafis, who gained prominence more recently in Libya's religious and security spheres (International Crisis Group 2019), this paper attempts to make sense of the two currents' relationships with 'politics' and state institutions in times of turmoil. It analyses the strategies that they have pursued since 2011 and during the various phases of the conflict – which were characterised by regime and state collapse (2011), competition for the reconstruction of political authority (2011-2014) and a division between state institutions and political authority (2014-2019) – with a view to better understanding the relationship of the two currents with political authority.

The start of the 2011 uprising radically altered the context in which the two currents had evolved under the Qadhafi regime. In February 2011, they first had to make decisions regarding their stance and behaviour during the uprising. After the collapse of the regime in October, the political transition and the intensifying conflict over the construction and control of new state institutions required them to clarify their stances towards politics and political action – in the sense of both institutional politics and their relationship with the nascent state institutions and also towards the use of violence. This was in some respects an ideological decision. However, developments between 2011 and 2019 also showed that the way 'political' and 'Madkhali' Salafis interpreted the evolving context and assessed the resources available to them played a major role in the shaping of their respective strategies. Countering the idea of a fault line between so-called 'political' and 'apolitical' Salafis, analysis of the way the two currents related to political authority sheds light on the political nature of the strategies implemented by the two groups and on the profound differences between them.

The 'political' and 'quietist' Salafi currents studied here do not correspond to clear institutional groupings and are to some extent ill-defined. Their 'members' themselves do not necessarily identify as 'political Salafis' or 'Madkhali Salafis,' let alone use the term 'Salafi' to refer to themselves. However, the existence of the two currents is evident in shared member trajectories, common references and shared group behaviour. Each of the two currents also includes key figures who represent them internally and externally and exert influence over followers and sympathisers. In this paper, particular attention is paid to a small number of key figures from the two currents who seem to have contributed significantly to shaping ideas and behaviours.

The research for this paper was principally conducted between 2018 and 2020. It was based on desk study of existing literature on Salafism in Libya and beyond together with continual monitoring and analysis of political, social and security developments in Libya since 2011, including regular trips to the western part of the country between 2012 and 2018. Because of the renewed and intensified conflict since the end of 2018 and the Covid-19 crisis in 2020, the author could only conduct one field trip to Tripoli during the period of the project, in spring 2018. In addition, the research for this paper also involved numerous written and oral interviews conducted remotely by phone and through social media platforms with Libyan civil society activists, religious scholars, former government officials and academics from across the country or established abroad. While the followers and leaders of the two Salafi currents could

not be interviewed remotely, the analysis presented here also stems from regular monitoring of a variety of social media platforms associated with different Libyan Salafi groups. These constitute an important source of information as many of these groups privilege this way of communicating with their followers.

Libya's Salafis at the crossroads (2011). Resistance and loyalty in times of state collapse

Salafi trajectories under Qadhafi

Numerous Libyan testimonies³ date the emergence of a Salafi phenomenon in Libya to the late 1970s-early 1980s, highlighting the role then played by Saudi sponsorship and the struggle for regional influence between Libya and Saudi Arabia. Wahhabi-influenced Salafism started spreading in Libya with written and audio material entering the country and young Libyans travelling to Saudi Arabia to perform the *hajj* and *'umra* (Wehrey 2020; Hadeed, unpublished). Many would stay in the country and attend religious institutions for a few months before returning home.⁴ On their return, the Libyan authorities would be wary of the security threat that they could pose and would use repression to contain the diffusion of ideas considered extremist. The Salafi ideology that spread during this period would constitute the shared matrix on which Libya's main Salafi currents would develop in the following decades, although taking different directions, especially in terms of relationships with political authority and politics in general.

Contrary to assumptions regarding the 'political' albeit violent nature of some Salafi currents and the purportedly 'apolitical' nature of others, Libya's pre-2011 Salafi sphere tended to contradict the reality of this divide. Salafism in pre-2011 Libya essentially developed around the jihadist and quietist trends. There was no space for political Salafism to develop as a result of Qadhafi's policies to restrict political participation and to promote his own interpretation of Islam (Pargeter 2008). However, even the groups that were satisfied with limiting their activities to the religious sphere were by so doing at least implicitly recognising the legitimacy of the political authority allowing them to do so, which could be considered a political stance.⁵ The divide that ran through Libya's Salafi sphere was therefore not so much between *political* and *apolitical* groups but rather between groups that demonstrated *resistance* or *loyalty* to the regime and, by extension and because of the intrinsic relationship between the two under Qadhafi, to the state.

Like many countries in the MENA region, Libya had a history of groups mobilising religious principles to contest political authorities (Ryan 2018, Ashour 2011, Fitzgerald 2015), sometimes violently. In Libya Islamist resistance to Qadhafi's regime was essentially led by the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and the more militant Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), a group formed primarily of Libyans who had fought in Afghanistan and which engaged in violent action against the Qadhafi regime in the 1990s (Ashour 2011; Fitzgerald 2015). The group constituted at the same time a component of the global jihadist sphere and part of the opposition to the regime. Throughout the 1990s it attempted to use violence to spur regime change in Libya, attempting several times to assassinate Qadhafi (Benotman 2013: 201). The response of the regime was severe repression, resulting in significant losses to the group and hundreds being imprisoned.

3 Author interviews and informal discussions with Libyans, 2017-2019.

4 Author interviews with Libyan scholars who lived in Libya in this period, February 2019.

5 Similarly, on Salafis in Yemen, see Bonnefoy 2008.

In the early 2000s, however, Qadhafi seemed to perceive the 9/11 attacks and the increased Western focus on counterterrorism as a *rapprochement* opportunity. The activities of former LIFG members in the west had become more difficult (Benotman 2013). In parallel, the emergence of Qadhafi's younger son Saif al-Islam as the possible heir to his father was accompanied by the introduction of a series of reforms which focused on the economy but also included an attempt at accommodating part of the Islamist sphere as a way to prepare for the succession.⁶ In the mid-2000s, this reform process had a direct impact on Libya's two main Salafi currents.

Qadhafi seemed to have perceived the benefits he could get from promoting the quietist Salafi current: by rewarding their loyalty he could use them to counter his Islamist opponents. A number of preachers started to emerge who had trained with local scholars in Saudi Arabia and Yemen and were then empowered by the regime despite some reluctance on the part of the general population. The Ministry for Endowments and Religious Affairs, which was responsible for the organisation of mosques, zawiyas, Quranic schools, and the *hajj*, started appointing a few Salafi imams in 2007-2008 and some mosques were handed over to them.⁷ However, as a result of their continuing dependence on Saudi religious authorities and the absence of strong national religious institutions in Libya, the quietist Salafi movement before 2011 remained largely non-institutionalised, and any different ideological tendencies in its midst ill-defined.

At the other end of the Salafi spectrum, in 2005 a dialogue was initiated between Saif al-Islam Qadhafi and the imprisoned LIFG leadership through the mediation of Qatari-based Islamic scholar Ali Sallabi, himself a former prisoner in Libya (Fitzgerald 2015). While some LIFG leaders had already started to rethink the group's strategy, for the regime and for Saif al-Islam in particular this 'reconciliation' process could help turn 'pardoned Islamists' into strategic allies (Benotman 2015). Some of the imprisoned LIFG leadership⁸ showed a level of ideological flexibility, their reflections focusing on demonstrating that violent jihad contradicted orthodox Islamic theology. In the recantation document produced by six members of the LIFG's Consultative Council (*shura*) and published under the name *Corrective Studies in Understanding Jihad, Accountability and the Judgement of People* in 2009,⁹ the authors publicly renounced the use of violence to drive political change without forbidding engagement in politics¹⁰ or insisting on obedience to the ruler in all things. This recantation enabled many leading figures in the movement to be released from prison, many of whom travelled abroad. However, others in the broader LIFG and jihadi networks (mostly among the younger generation) opposed this recantation and continued to promote armed action, albeit generally outside Libya (Fitzgerald 2016; Fitzgerald and Badi 2020).

At the beginning of 2011, Libya's Salafi sphere had started to transform and diversify, in part as a result of the policy changes implemented by the regime in the previous years. The quietist trend confirmed its loyalty to the regime, to some extent being rewarded for it in the form of positions in state religious institutions. In parallel, the resistance potential of the jihadi current had been reduced as a result of part of the movement renouncing the use of political violence. However, this ideological and methodological shift could hardly translate into a new strategy for the 'pardoned' jihadis as the political game remained fully controlled by the regime and hence did not offer opportunities for

6 Author interview with a Libyan academic, 9 February 2019. Also see Wehrey and Boukhars (2020: 112-116) and Fitzgerald and Badi (2020).

7 Author interview with a Libyan scholar expert in religious movements, Tunis, November 2018.

8 Some of these were not imprisoned during the crackdown in the 1990s but escaped abroad and were later returned to Libya.

9 "A Selected Translation of the LIFG Recantation Document," translated by Mohamed Ali Musawi, Quilliam Foundation (2009), http://theirwords.org/media/transfer/doc/ut_ly_lifg_2009_08-6f059dd85f8975cc341169bc35baff9f.pdf.

10 Although Sami al-Saadi, the group's ideologue, had previously denounced democracy as a Western concept.

participation. This was one of the paradoxes of the recantation: violence against the regime was not an option any longer, yet institutional politics was not an option either.

The turning point

The uprising that started in February 2011 radically altered the political context in Libya, forcing both the former jihadis who had reconciled with the regime and the quietist Salafis loyal to it to reconsider their relationships with the political authorities in place. Former jihadis now had an opportunity to act for political change. Loyalist Salafis were challenged over whether to stick to their supportive stance or to anticipate political change and switch allegiance.

While they had renounced the use of violence to achieve political change, when the 2011 uprising started former LIFG members, whether in prison or under surveillance in Libya or abroad, had to make a decision regarding their participation. Early on, several members of the former LIFG *shura* council were summoned by the regime out of concern that they could lend their support to protestors. Some were pre-emptively detained in the infamous Abu Slim prison, like Sami al-Saadi and Khalid al-Sharif. Others, such as Abdulhakim Belhaj, managed to escape and join other LIFG members fighting with the revolutionaries (Fitzgerald 2015).¹¹

The former LIFG leaders who chose to participate in the uprising were now back in direct violent opposition to the regime as the protest movement rapidly became militarised and provided an opportunity for political change. They gradually established their own command and control structure, establishing a military base in the western Nafusa Mountains and using their international connections, notably with Qatar, to obtain funds and weapons and facilitate travel for fighters from abroad (Cole and Khan 2015). While their military experience played a role in increasing their profile and influence on the ground, they also took advantage of extensive media coverage (Benotman 2013). Their role was, for instance, presented as pivotal in the fall of Tripoli in August 2011, which contributed to them gaining influence over the new structures created to administer the liberated city (Cole and Khan 2015) and later the country.

By joining the military uprising, the former LIFG leaders went against their earlier decision to renounce the use of violence to achieve political change. In doing so, they signalled that transforming the political order remained their key objective, and that they considered this could not be achieved without violence. Success also essentially depended on the availability of a favourable context and proper resources. In 2011-2012, these conditions were apparently met. At the end of the war, the former LIFG leaders therefore attempted to control Libya's new institutions from the top with a view to shaping and influencing the new state from within.

In contrast to them, part of the Salafi quietist current initially stood up against the 2011 protests, gaining for itself the nickname the 'stay-at-home' (*ilzam baytak*) movement.¹² In so doing, to a large extent they fulfilled the regime's calculations when it supported the emergence of the movement in the 2000s.

From Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Rabi' al-Madkhali, a professor of *hadith* at the Islamic University of Medina and a key figure in the movement advocating 'apolitical' Salafism and unconditional loyalty to the royal family (Lacroix 2013: 76-77), issued a fatwa condemning the uprising and the divisions (*fitna*) it created within the community of believers.¹³ He was followed by Libyan Salafi figures – some

11 Al-Saadi, al-Sharif and Belhaj were all among the key figures that had led the LIFG recantation process.

12 See, for instance, Salafi preachers condemning the uprising in TV appearances, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=34&v=fNl7BzflWOU&feature=emb_title.

13 <http://www.rabee.net/ar/articles.php?cat=11&id=285>.

of them now part of the official religious establishment – who appeared publicly in mosques and on television to denounce the threat to national unity and security posed by protesters and calling for such behaviour to be criminalised.¹⁴ Among them was a young sheikh from the city of Yefren in the Nafusa mountains, Majdi Haffala, who would end up playing a key role in the growing influence of the movement in western Libya after 2011.

However, the position of the so-called Madkhali Salafis remained ambiguous, especially as events unfolded on the ground and the situation seemed to evolve in favour of the anti-Qadhafi camp. Saudi sheikhs issued conflicting fatwas (Benotman 2013: 220), which resulted in some within the movement in Libya participating in the uprising, albeit at a late stage or in minor roles. They also rapidly took advantage of the collapse of the regime’s authority to engage in proselytism and the imposition of moral order at the neighbourhood level (Sawani 2013). In this regard, their choice to focus on society and the grassroots level was in accordance with the ideology they professed (being ‘apolitical’ and prioritising *da’wa*). However, it was also a direct consequence of the lack of opportunities and resources available to them in a context dominated by the ‘revolutionary’ narrative.

Failed institution-building (2012-2014). Libya’s Salafis in the competition to reconstruct authority

Libya’s transition after 2011 has been characterised by different phases. The first one, which started in August 2011 with the publication of a Constitutional Declaration by the interim National Transitional Council (NTC),¹⁵ set on track a process of electoral politics and institution-building, which rapidly became stalled as a result of the different political factions’ incapacity to discuss and agree on any key issue in the transition (Collombier 2017b).

Libya’s former LIFG leaders and the quietist Salafi current addressed this phase in very different ways. Several former leading LIFG figures confirmed the ideological shift initiated with the 2009 recantation, expressing their support for democracy and deciding in favour of direct participation in institutional and electoral politics. In contrast, the quietist current remained strongly opposed to political participation and continued to focus on spreading the faith (and ensuring respect for the faith) at the grassroots level. However, while they refused to get involved in the political game, prioritising instead the imposition of moral order, quietist Salafis did not seem to aim to maintain their autonomy *vis-à-vis* the state. On the contrary, they started engaging directly with the nascent state institutions at the local level, not only in the field of religion but also that of security.

‘Political’ Salafis: controlling the nascent institutions from the top to shape the state

The first phase in the transition rapidly saw the emergence of a new explicitly political brand of Salafism embodied by some former leaders of the LIFG. The new opportunities offered by the political transition provided them with the space they needed to move away from jihad against the regime and engage in institutional politics as a way to achieve political change.

In 2011 the new political Salafis also had credentials to put forward that constituted important resources in the transition phase. The key role that figures like Abdulhakim Belhaj was considered to

14 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ExH9vbUIH8> (24 February 2011).

15 See Democracy Reporting International (2011) “Libya’s Transition. The Constitutional Declaration: A Basis for Democracy?” Briefing Paper 12, December, https://democracy-reporting.org/de/dri_publications/briefing-paper-22-libyas-constitutional-declaration-a-basis-for-democracy/.

have played in the armed uprising, together with their long past as opponents of Qadhafi and their military experience abroad, provided them with significant revolutionary and military legitimacy. However, their credentials had more to do with their personal experiences, reputations and social connections as individuals than with their previously belonging to the LIFG (Fitzgerald 2015: 198).

For instance, Sami al-Saadi, also known as Abu Mundher al-Saadi, could mobilise his past as a foreign fighter in Afghanistan and a long-time opponent of Qadhafi.¹⁶ Unlike Belhaj, however, he also enjoyed significant credit in Libya because of his religious credentials and his role as the main ideologue of the LIFG. Information shared on al-Saadi's personal website clearly illustrates the three main sources from which he derives his authority: recognised qualifications in Islam and the Arabic language from higher education institutions in Libya and Pakistan; experience in religious and political positions; and the authority and approbation of Islamic scholars inside and outside Libya with whom he had studied.¹⁷ As a result, al-Saadi benefitted from a solid reputation and credibility, not only as a fighter but also as someone between a scholar (*'alim*, religious authority) and an ideologue (political Salafi thinker).

Taking advantage of the authority and legitimacy they enjoyed in 2011, the former LIFG leaders immediately attempted to translate it into influence in the new state institutions, exemplifying a form of political Salafism that sought to shape the state from within. This was also a top-down approach based on engaging politically at the national level.

With elections scheduled as early as June 2012, former leading members of the LIFG had to make a decision regarding their willingness to engage in party politics. A large congress of the former organisation was organised in Tripoli in November 2011 which aimed to address the issue of political participation, understood both as taking positions in the nascent institutions and competing in elections. No clear strategy emerged from the meeting but there was a shift in favour of democracy (Fitzgerald 2015: 199). Individually deciding in favour of political participation, both Belhaj and al-Saadi formed their own political parties. The platforms and memberships of the two parties highlighted the different political views and priorities of their leaders. While Belhaj's Homeland party (*Al-Watan*) described itself as a "political party based on Islamic references," it also favoured an inclusive approach, opening its ranks to non-Islamist figures and putting forward a nationalist agenda focusing on development, justice and cooperation.¹⁸ In contrast, al-Saadi's Moderate Nation (*Al-Umma Al-Wasat*), which described itself as a proponent of moderate (*'wasati'*) Islam,¹⁹ was more explicitly Islamic and put implementing *sharia'* at the top of its national pact. In July 2012, both Belhaj and al-Saadi stood as candidates in the election for the first transitional legislature, the General National Congress (GNC).

Although these parties performed very poorly in the election,²⁰ several figures from the political Salafism spectrum were elected as independent candidates in 2012. Hence, by forging alliances

16 After leaving Libya in the 1980s to fight in Afghanistan, al-Saadi left the country at the end of the war and spent several years in exile in the United Kingdom before traveling back to Afghanistan with other LIFG members in 1997. On the run after 9/11, he was arrested in China in 2004 and extradited to Libya, where he was imprisoned. Al-Saadi played a major role in the revision of the movement's ideology following negotiations with Saif al-Islam Qadhafi and was subsequently released from prison in March 2010, alongside several hundred other prisoners. He was arrested again shortly after the beginning of the 2011 uprising and detained until his release by the rebel forces entering Tripoli in August. See <https://www.therenditionproject.org.uk/prisoners/saadi.html>.

17 His curriculum also includes testimonies from Mauritanian Sheikh Muhammad al-Hassan Walid al-Dido al-Shanqiti, Pakistani Abu Taher Zubayr Ali Za'i, Pakistani Nizam Uddin Shamzai and Libyan Abdullatif Shwerif. See <http://samiassaadi.ly/cv>.

18 <http://wattan.ly/about>.

19 <https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12279&article=685881#.XXp5QWzYqzw>.

20 On al-Saadi's performance, see Al-Shafai, Mohammad (2012) "The founder of Libyan party al-Umma to al-Sharq al-Awsat: we did not expect the Islamists to retreat in such a way." in Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 11 July, <https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12279&article=685881#.XujD2sZS8kg>. Belhaj also failed to gain a single party list seat.

with parliamentarians in the GNC from Islamist backgrounds and from revolutionary strongholds, former LIFG leaders managed to gain influence over the new parliament and over the first transition governments. Some of them took key ministerial security positions (Lacher 2020: 29; Fitzgerald 2015: 197-8).²¹ They also started pressuring the assembly to adopt laws that fitted their political agendas, such as the Political Isolation Law to exclude from political office figures who had held positions under Qadhafi (Lacher 2016). The Martyrs bloc (*Kutlat al-Wafa' li-Dima' al-Shuhada'*), which was formed to promote the law, was supported by Libya's Grand Mufti, who called for demonstrations, and armed groups which were using violence to push for adoption of the law. Al-Saadi himself played a key role in the campaign as the head of the Coordination for Political Isolation (Lacher 2020: 31).

The religious authority enjoyed by several figures among the political Salafi movement, combined with the legitimacy they earned from having fought and defeated Qadhafi militarily, was also instrumental in helping political Salafis gain influence over the new state religious institutions. This was done through an alliance with the broader sphere of political Islam supporters.

When the National Transitional Council (NTC) re-established Dar al-Ifta', the institution responsible for interpreting Islamic law in 2012,²² Sheikh Sadeq al-Gharyani was appointed as its head. A university professor and influential religious figure, Sheikh al-Gharyani was already well known to the Libyan public before 2011. Close to Saif al-Islam Qadhafi, he had played an important role in the negotiations between the regime and the LIFG leadership, leading to the movement's recantation, but he had also opposed the regime on some occasions.²³ In February 2011, Sheikh al-Gharyani had called for an uprising in Tajoura, the eastern Tripoli neighbourhood where he had his roots, providing religious justifications for opposing Qadhafi and his regime. His appointment as Libya's mufti in 2012 appeared a natural consequence of his religious credentials and the respect he inspired among the revolutionary forces and the political Islam current. In return, the position conferred on him the power to decide on all key issues of religious doctrine and to access resources, especially through the *zakat* fund.

Control over the state's religious institutions was exploited by political Salafis and their allies in the political Islam sphere to influence politics. Ahead of the first parliamentary election in July 2012, Sheikh al-Gharyani had publicly declared that voting for parties in favour of limiting *sharia'* would be 'un-Islamic.' Tensions rapidly rose after the appointment of the first transitional government in late 2012 as Sheikh al-Gharyani started acting as intermediary between government officials and some armed groups with a view to facilitating their access to government funding.²⁴ In spring 2013, he also made public speeches in favour of the Political Isolation Law,²⁵ taking a strong stand with the Martyrs bloc in the GNC and therefore contributing to deepening polarisation in the political sphere.

21 Prominent former LIFG figures Khaled al-Sharif and Abdelbaset Buhliqa held the positions of deputy defence minister and deputy interior minister, respectively.

22 The institution of Dar al-Ifta' had been gradually marginalised and abandoned by Qadhafi after the death of Sheikh Taher al-Zawi, whom he had appointed as Libya's Grand Mufti in 1969. See NTC decision No. 15/2012, available at <https://ssf.gov.ly/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85-15-%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-2012-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A1-1.pdf>.

23 Author interview with a Libyan scholar expert on religious movements, Tunis, November 2018.

24 Idem.

25 See, for instance, Sheikh al-Gharyani's public speech, 9 March 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMc7aAVHNGE>.

'Madkhali' Salafis: building influence and support at the grassroots level

Unlike the political Salafis, Libya's quietist Salafis lacked religious figures with appropriate credentials, and therefore could not aim to obtain high-level positions in the state's new religious institutions.

While Sheikh Rabi' al-Madkhali seemingly did not constitute a key reference for Libya's quietist movement when it started to develop in the country in the 1980s, the Saudi cleric gradually came to prominence in Libyan and foreign commentaries after 2011, to the point that Libya's quietist Salafis became essentially identified as 'Madkhalis'.²⁶ However, descriptions of the Madkhalis tended to be relatively limited. They were described as following Sheikh Rabi' al-Madkhali, believing in unquestioning loyalty to the sitting (political) ruler and refusing any engagement in politics.

The identification of Libya's quietist Salafis with al-Madkhali was partly linked to the influence gained by the Saudi sheikh in the Islamic University of Medina after 1990²⁷ and the key role subsequently played by the University in exporting the 'apolitical' Salafism trend outside the Kingdom (Meijer 2013: 19). Rabi' al-Madkhali did not hold any position in the highest Saudi religious authorities but instead derived his authority from recommendations ('*tazkiya*') from the most highly regarded Saudi *ulema*' such as Abdelaziz Bin Baz, Saleh al-Fawzan, Muhammad Ibn al-Uthaymin, Naser al-Din al-Albani and Yemeni Muqbil bin Wadi'i. Building on these clerics' networks, al-Madkhali attracted many students from abroad, including from Libya.

Madkhali preachers therefore followed the teachings of a range of key Saudi *ulema*' who did not necessarily agree on all issues. However, they represented a particular trend in Saudi establishment Islam, refuting those scholars they accused of publicly criticising rulers or deviating from true Islam, particularly those engaged in political Islam (Meijer 2011).²⁸ In the post-2011 context characterised by political instability and growing tensions between supporters and opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East and North Africa, the latter element ended up playing a major role. The Madkhali trend came to represent the main adversary of political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood (International Crisis Group 2019). This was to a large extent the result of a Saudi-backed endeavour to ensure stability against the backdrop of revolutionary change and to counter Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood across the region.

In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, however, Libya's quietist Salafis were much weaker than the political Salafis in terms of religious authority. The figure of Majdi Haffala, a Tripoli-based preacher also known as Abu Musab, epitomised the movement and its development. In contrast to former LIFG Sami al-Saadi, who enjoyed the status of Islamic scholar ('*alim*'), Majdi Haffala, despite being one of the foremost preachers in Libya, had not reached this level.²⁹ Instead, his authority was much more strongly based on other figures, in particular non-Libyan Islamic scholars with whom he had personal links. Although he has no official biography like al-Saadi, biographies on Salafi fora highlight his embeddedness in certain networks linked to Saudi Arabia and Yemen as the main source of his authority as a preacher. Hence, his identity as a teacher seemed to prevail over the qualifications he

26 See, for example, Ali, Ahmed Salah (2017) "Libya's warring parties play a dangerous game working with Madkhali Salafists," Atlantic Council, 3 November, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/libya-s-warring-parties-play-a-dangerous-game-working-with-madkhali-salafists/>; Luck, Taylor (2018) "Libya crisis as opportunity: Who are the Madkhalis?" The Christian Science Monitor, 17 January, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2018/0117/Libya-crisis-as-opportunity-Who-are-the-Madkhalis>.

27 As a result of developments in Saudi Arabia's religious sphere after the Gulf War.

28 Also, author phone conversation with Stéphane Lacroix, February 2019.

29 Several interlocutors noted that 'Madkhali' preachers in Libya were not very well qualified and that Majdi Haffala himself should be considered an Islamic student (*talib al-'ilm*) rather than an Islamic scholar ('*alim*).

had obtained and, as such, Majdi Haffala remained reliant on transnational networks in matters of interpretation of high doctrine.

This is in some respects characteristic of the Salafi trend, which to a large extent is based on the informal relationship between the teacher and the student (Wiktorowicz 2001: 133-44). Libya's Madkhali Salafis appear to use the *hajj* and *'umra* as opportunities to connect with Saudi *ulema*, from whom they request advice on specific issues. Saudi preachers also give sermons to their Libyan followers via telephone. Overall, Libya's Madkhali Salafis have remained to a large extent dependent on Saudi Arabia to construct their religious authority.

Without the human resources that would have allowed them to compete for positions in the highest echelons of the new religious institutions, Libya's Madkhali Salafis focused instead on consolidating their influence starting from the grassroots level. They managed to gradually increase their influence in the Ministry for Endowments and Religious Affairs, first by obtaining positions in the administration.³⁰ This allowed them to secure the appointment of preachers at the local level, with a focus on cities of special religious significance such as Zliten, home to one of Libya's most renowned Islamic universities, *Al-Jamaa Al-Asmariya*, and al-Zawiya, a symbolic centre for most religious movements in Libya (Sufism, Salafism and political Islam) and the birthplace of Sheikh Al-Taher Al-Zawi, a well-known *mujahid* during the Italian occupation and an Azharite cleric initially appointed by Qadhafi as the grand Mufti of Libya.³¹

At the political level, the association of the quietist trend with preachers who had exhorted their followers not to join the uprising also made it difficult for them to engage directly with the nascent state institutions and obtain high-level positions in an environment which primarily rewarded revolutionary credentials.

Libya's Madkhalis, like an important part of Libya's Salafi sphere, opposed the decision by former LIFG leaders and political Salafis to directly engage in politics by participating in the 2012 parliamentary election. This was essentially an ideological stance, as they strongly rejected democracy and elections on the grounds that legislation belongs to God and that party politics is *fitna*, a source of division among the community of believers. After preaching against involvement in the uprising, Majdi Haffala took strong positions against democracy and involvement in electoral politics.³² In his 'Advice to young Salafis,' he exhorted them not to get involved in political life, parties or elections but instead to focus on studying and teaching people the right path.³³

However, while the Madkhali Salafists opposed electoral and institutional politics, they did not seem to prioritise autonomy from the new state and its institutions, especially at the local level. On the contrary, some Salafis who had been involved to some degree in the uprising took advantage of the competition over the nascent security institutions and managed to position themselves in their midst. This was particularly evident in areas where a prevalence of specific religious trends facilitated their expansion and strengthening.

30 Author phone interview with a Libyan scholar expert on religious issues, Tunis, November 2018.

31 Hadeed, Abdallah, "*Al-Wahâbiyya wa'l-Salafiyya wa'l-Jihâdiyya fî Libîa*" ("Wahhabism, Salafism and Jihadism in Libya" (unpublished article).

32 See some of his teachings available online, like https://ia802309.us.archive.org/16/items/mohamadabdlhagmail_20140820_1724/116.mp3.

33 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knimBlmycIo> (21 November 2012).

For instance, in the eastern Tripoli suburb of Souq al-Jouma, a neighbourhood where Salafists had a presence and enjoyed a good reputation before 2011,³⁴ their role rapidly grew. There, young Salafis began to form neighbourhood vigilante groups focused on imposing order in the local society. This was both in the sense of security and that of enforcing a particular moral and religious order. Efforts to combat drugs and alcohol helped them gain some legitimacy at the local level, even though their exclusionary views and intolerance of other religious trends, evidenced through practices such as the destruction of Sufi shrines, were more contentious. Religious figures also played an important role in linking up different local Madkhali-inspired armed groups across the country.³⁵ However, this trend largely remained local in character and less visible on the national scene as no well-known emblematic figure emerged to lead and embody the movement.

Souq al-Jouma also directly benefitted from the appointment of neighbourhood native Hashem Bishr, an educated religiously conservative revolutionary who had participated in the liberation of Tripoli,³⁶ to a leadership role in Tripoli's Supreme Security Committee (SSC). This institution was set up in 2011 as an attempt to bring the multitude of military councils created during the war under the umbrella of the new authorities (Lacher and Cole 2014). Through Bishr, Salafis from Souq al-Jouma benefitted from access to the new state institutions and to resources.

Among the group from Souq al-Jouma was also Abdulraouf Kara, a former metalworker and Salafi (Wehrey 2020: 121) who was from an important family in the neighbourhood.³⁷ Known for his piety, he took charge of the local 'support branches' of the Tripoli SCC (Lacher and Cole 2014: 33). Like Bishr, he benefitted from being able to work in the social environment of Tripoli's residential neighbourhoods. When the SSC was dissolved as part of security sector reform efforts, some Salafis from Souq al-Jouma coalesced around one of the new groups set up in its place in 2013, the Special Deterrence Force (SDF, *Quwat al-Radaa al-Khassa*, commonly known as '*Radaa*' in Tripoli). Abdulraouf Kara became the new force's commander.

The SDF's activities were broadly defined,³⁸ and it continued to privilege working on imposing order in society. As he had done with the SSC, Bishr encouraged a bottom-up approach in the SDF, working with municipalities and neighborhood *shuyukh*, providing the SSC and later the SDF with reputations for being the armed actors best able to work in the populated areas of Tripoli. This force was officially directly supervised by the Ministry of the Interior. However, the religious character of many of its members frustrated attempts to impose a more regular hierarchy.

34 Certain areas in Libya were known for the prevalence of particular religious trends. For instance, the Madkhali character of Souq al-Jouma could be contrasted with neighboring Tajoura, the suburb from which Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani and his family hails. Dar al-Ifta', despite having some limited influence in Souq al-Jouma, is much more influential in Tajoura. This is also mirrored in fewer mosques being used by quietist preachers in Tajoura compared with other districts in Tripoli. Author WhatsApp conversation with a former Interior Ministry employee, November 2018.

35 Author interview with a Libyan judge from Benghazi, Tunisia, November 2018. This has also been mentioned by Sheikh Majdi Haffala himself in some of his sermons.

36 Telephone interviews with a Libyan reconciliation activist, December 2018 and February 2019. While some researchers have referred to Bishr's 'Salafist' or 'Islamist' background, the activist stated that Bishr was a charismatic individual who emphasised his revolutionary credentials more than his religious background. On Bishr foregrounding his revolutionary credentials, see

<https://www.facebook.com/QwtAlradaAlhaast/photos/1015838112377107223/>

In this post he denies being part of the '*ilzim baytak*' group, that is Salafis that followed fatwas to stay home and not join the armed uprising.

37 The social composition of Souq al-Jouma is primarily extended family units (*'a'ilat*), among which several families including Kara's are known for their size and prominence.

38 See Decision No. 38/2013, https://security-legislation.ly/sites/default/files/lois/554-Decree%20No.%20%28308%29%20of%202013_ORG.pdf.

At the time, religious figures gained social capital through their involvement in dispute resolution, with some becoming important figures in armed groups.³⁹ Emblematic of this development, Majdi Haffala's following greatly increased after 2011, notably among members of local armed groups, including the influential SDF (International Crisis Group 2019: 15-20; Wehrey 2020: 126-127). His Friday sermons in Tripoli mosques⁴⁰ progressively attracted hundreds of followers and his convoy moving across the city protected by armed elements regularly drew attention.⁴¹

At the doctrinal level, Libya's political and Madkhali Salafis fundamentally diverged on the liceity of engaging in political activities. During the first attempts to build new state institutions between 2012 and 2014, this directly translated into the former attempting to gain influence in the new state through participation in elections and appointments to top institutional positions and, conversely, in the latter focusing on spreading faith and ensuring moral order, mostly at the grassroots level.

Beyond doctrine, the two approaches also had the particularity of being compatible with the opportunities offered by a political transition born out of violent conflict and regime collapse. In this context, the two currents did not have the same resources to mobilise, which to some extent also conditioned the top-down approach of the political Salafis and the grassroots focus of the Madkhalis. This was, for instance, visible in Libya's new religious institutions. While the Madhali current should have seen them as central to their *da'wa* efforts, they did not constitute a major ground of competition between the two groups during the first years of the transition. This was probably in part because of a lack of highly qualified religious figures among local Madkhali Salafis.

The use of violence also constituted another issue where the relationship between doctrine and practice could potentially come under stress. A new trend of political Salafism in 2011, embodied in part by some former LIFG leaders, emerged after 'reformed' jihadis took up arms against Qadhafi's regime and contributed to its collapse. Although they now prioritised political activities, political Salafis potentially remained a major military force in the post-uprising context. Similarly, the Madkhali current's efforts to ensure moral order and security at the local level were increasingly reliant on close links between religious figures and armed groups, raising questions about their view of the potential use of violence to spread faith and enforce the moral order they claimed to defend.

State division (2014-2019). What happens when state authority is contested and institutions are divided?

In 2013-2014, Libya's transition entered a new phase. Conflict intensified between the two main coalitions competing to gain control over the new state institutions. In the elected parliament, the GNC's lack of capacity to dialogue and build consensus resulted in complete deadlock. Security also dramatically deteriorated in the east of the country, where violence picked up as a result of jihadist attacks and dozens of assassinations of former security officials, activists and journalists motivated by ideology, and also acts revenging the regime's repression in the 1990s (Wehrey 2014).

In May 2014, Khalifa Haftar, a retired general, took the lead of a group of disaffected army units and local eastern tribes and launched a military operation designed to restore security and eliminate the Islamist militias which those under him believed were responsible for the surge in insecurity

39 Author WhatsApp conversation with a former Interior Ministry employee, November 2018.

40 In particular, mosques located in the eastern part of Tripoli, like the Bin Jaber mosque in the neighbourhood of Souq al-Jouma.

41 Author phone and direct conversations with a Libyan civil society activist from Tripoli in 2018 and 2019.

in Benghazi. Dubbed Operation 'Dignity,' this operation marked the beginning of a major military confrontation between the two camps that had been competing for power at the national level since 2012. In July 2014, to prevent Haftar from extending his military operations to Tripoli, revolutionary and Islamist factions from the capital and other western cities launched Operation 'Libya Dawn,' attacking Tripoli's international airport and areas controlled by armed groups considered close to Haftar (Lacher 2020: 37-39).

For the first time since 2011, Libya went through a major military confrontation which reverberated across the country. In parallel, attempts to end the parliamentary crisis through a new legislative election organised in June 2014 resulted in an institutional split and the *de facto* division of the country into two sets of rival legislative and executive authorities, each supported by heterogenous coalitions of political, military and social forces.

The continuing institutional divisions and the deterioration of the security situation across the country in 2014-2015 led the international community to intervene under the auspices of the United Nations and attempt to mediate. Despite the signing of the Libyan Political Accord (LPA) in December 2015, between 2016 and 2019 the country remained split between two rival power centres. The first, established in Tripoli, was organised around the newly created Presidential Council (PC) of the Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fa' ez al-Seraj. The other had its base in eastern Libya and revolved around the House of Representatives (HoR) elected in July 2014 and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) under the command of Khalifa Haftar.

The intensifying conflict between Libya's rival political and military factions meant that both 'political' and 'Madkhali' Salafis were faced with choices with regard to their relation to political authority in a context of institutional divisions, and with regard to the use of violence in a context of violent polarisation.

Political Salafis: more 'politics' to control the state, and the return to political violence

While between 2011 and 2014 political Salafis benefitted from their engagement with state institutions at the national level and rapidly gained influence over the new power structures, developments in spring/summer 2014 dramatically changed the political and military landscape and threatened to affect their position.

After Haftar launched Operation Dignity in May 2014,⁴² Libya's revolutionary and Islamist constituencies feared that a counter-revolution might be in the making. In July, they attacked the positions in Tripoli of armed groups allied with Haftar, sparking violent armed confrontations that would last for weeks and cause major damage in western Libya. Former LIFG leaders played an important role in the network that planned and led Operation Libya Dawn, alongside Islamist hardliners from several western cities, and also forces defined more by their local affiliation with revolutionary strongholds than by an Islamist orientation (Lacher 2020: 39). In doing so, they also became *de facto* allies of the jihadist and revolutionary armed groups fighting Haftar in Benghazi.

The coalition they belonged to initially managed to maintain its military control over Tripoli and key assets in the capital. As the newly elected House of Representatives (HoR) was split between two rival camps, transferring its seat to the eastern city of Tobruq with only some of its members accepting the move, the former GNC refused to dissolve and formed its own 'Salvation' government, led by a figure close to the armed groups fighting Haftar (Lacher 2020: 37-39).

42 Haftar had already called for the dissolution of the elected GNC in February.

The direct involvement of the former LIFG leaders in Operation Libya Dawn marked a return to the use of political violence. This practical shift was presented as aiming to prevent authoritarian restoration by Haftar and his allies,⁴³ and therefore to protect their vision of a certain type of political authority. However, it was also combined with a poor performance by the candidates affiliated with the Islamist and revolutionary camp in the parliamentary election of June 2014, in which less than a fifth of the electorate participated. Libya Dawn – and the use of violence – were therefore also perceived as a way for ‘political’ Salafis and their Islamist allies, including from the Muslim Brotherhood, to preserve the privileged access and control over state institutions that they had gained since 2011.

This would have a negative impact on their image and popular legitimacy in the following months and years. There was an increasingly mounting perception that the participation in Libya Dawn by political Salafis was a self-serving endeavour to exclude competitors and it ultimately derailed the political transition. The appointment of several LIFG-linked figures in the Salvation government solidified the perception that the operation had divided the country (causing *‘fitna’*), leading to insecurity and economic collapse.

Operation Libya Dawn also had a direct impact on the religious sphere, as the military operation demonstrated that the new religious institutions, which to a large extent were controlled by political Salafis and their Islamist allies, had become directly involved in the conflict between the two rival political and military coalitions. Under the leadership of Sheikh al-Gharyani, Dar al-Ifta’ was transformed from a state *religious* institution into a major *political* actor. The mufti openly supported ‘Libya Dawn’ against ‘Dignity’⁴⁴ and was part of the network coordinating the military operation. The politicisation of Dar al-Ifta’ even increased after Libya Dawn, with Al-Gharyani exerting direct influence over the Salvation Government and encouraging the appointment of political Salafis in Dar al-Ifta’.⁴⁵ As a result, tensions started to emerge with other currents in the institution, particularly with the ‘quietist’ Salafi trend, which supported Haftar and his Operation Dignity in the east.

Similarly, the Ministry for Endowments and Religious Affairs, which had traditionally been an institution intended to somewhat reflect the balance of power between Libya’s different religious schools and currents,⁴⁶ ended up being drawn into the conflict. For the first time, the Salvation Government appointed as its head Mbarak Aftamani, a figure close to the Islamist and revolutionary currents in Misrata who had fought in the 2011 war and was considered close to Al-Qaeda but had no religious credentials. This contributed to fuelling tensions between the various Islamic currents in the institution, particularly between the political and ‘quietist’ Salafi currents. In the following years, contested nominations such as Aftamani’s offered a major opportunity for Madkhali Salafis to start opposing the top religious establishment, underlining the political nature of the nominations to key positions.

The return of LIFG figures and political Salafis to using violence and the way they attempted to turn state institutions into instruments of power to protect what were perceived by many Libyans as personal interests dealt a major blow to their popular legitimacy. During the 2014 war and in the following years, political Salafis seemed to view ‘politics’ essentially as securing their positions within now divided state institutions with a view to maintaining control over them and continuing to benefit from the resources they allowed access to. They did not seem to push for any specific political agenda as they remained in power, focusing instead on confrontation with the rival political authority established in the east, and competition for legitimacy domestically and internationally.

43 See, for instance, the interview with Khaled al-Sharif (then Deputy Minister of Defense) on Al-Nabaa TV, 25 August 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJvZz7_XIwU.

44 See, for instance, Sheikh al-Gharyani’s TV allocutions on 5 August 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMg0RfkjaX4> and 24 August 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYSFfoMsWeo>.

45 Author interview with a Libyan research expert on religious movements, Tunis, November 2018.

46 Idem.

'Madkhali' Salafis: using violence to provide 'security and order' in support of political authorities

Things differed quite significantly at the other end of the Salafi spectrum, as the trajectory of Madkhali Salafis was directly influenced by the different courses of events in western and eastern Libya. As they held no key positions in the top state institutions but had invested instead in providing security and enforcing a certain moral order at the grassroots level, Madkhali Salafis did not need to protect their political positions and therefore to take sides as the conflict intensified.

In contrast to former LIFG figures, Madkhali Salafis did not play a prominent role in the fighting in Tripoli during the summer of 2014. Instead, they essentially maintained their primary focus on the provision of order and security at the local neighbourhood level. They publicised their efforts in combatting smugglers of drugs and alcohol, and fighting organised crime, kidnap-for-ransom gangs and members of the Islamic State organisation by publishing photographs and videos of their operations on social media.⁴⁷ These were issues linked to their conception of morality and correct Islam, but also issues of popular concern for local residents in Tripoli and other major cities, which earned them in some quarters a reputation for morality and efficiency. This was especially the case in the general atmosphere of insecurity that followed the Libya Dawn operation.

Even though the attacks by Madkhali Salafis against other religious currents and their attempts to impose a particularly conservative moral order raised concerns among various segments of society, two factors benefitted them. The first was that they still did not openly attempt to seize control of the top state institutions, including in the religious sphere. The second factor was the lack of transparency regarding the relationship between quietist preachers and the armed groups,⁴⁸ which made it difficult to point at the Madkhali Salafis' use of violence to achieve any specific political objectives.

Rather than presenting themselves as a party to the struggle to control the state taking place in Tripoli, Madkhali Salafis in the western part of Libya continued to use violence in a targeted way, with armed groups and religious figures cooperating on the ground to provide security and order for ordinary Libyans. While to a large extent they focused on the local level, they did not act in complete autonomy from the state. The specific services they provided at the local level were instrumental in building interactions with the state institutions. At the same time they were gradually getting better organised and reinforcing their presence in the security structures without seeking high-level positions.

The situation in eastern Libya differed quite substantially as a result of the different security and political developments after 2013. Tensions grew rapidly between the Madkhali Salafi current and other Islamist and jihadi actors as violence and insecurity picked up in Benghazi. In late 2013, the assassination, purportedly by Ansar al-Sharia, of several Madkhali figures, including the head of the Islamic Affairs Department in the Benghazi Security Directorate, Colonel Kamel Bazaza, constituted a turning point (Wehrey 2019: 125⁴⁹) and resulted in the militarisation of the Madkhali current in eastern Libya. The confrontation with Ansar al-Sharia played a key role in the decision by the Madkhalis, after a doctrinal debate among them, to join forces with Khalifa Haftar and his Operation Dignity.

47 This was notably done on the official Facebook page of the Special Deterrence Force: <https://www.facebook.com/QwtAlradaAlhaast>.

48 Although a Libyan researcher and religious scholar interviewed in Tunis in November 2018 gave an example of the way in which a religious hierarchy linked to preachers in mosques seemed to prevail over the more formal organisational authority, the majority of observers interviewed could not provide precise information on the links between religious and military figures.

49 See 'Assassination campaign blights eastern Libya,' Financial Times, 12 December 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/0e406cee-61ab-11e3-aa02-00144feabdc0>. See also Col. Kamel Bazaza's sermon in Benghazi before his assassination, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjSSWY8GgJM>.

The Madkhali Salafis and Haftar and his supporters shared the same hostility to political Islam and jihadism. Convergence was also facilitated by the establishment of the HoR in Tobruk, its nomination of a government and its endorsement of Operation Dignity. This meant that new political authorities rivalling those in Tripoli had emerged in eastern Libya, which made the Madkhali current's support for Haftar and the HoR licit from a doctrinal point of view. They could frame their involvement with Haftar and the LNA as supporting the ruler (*wali al-amr*).

This facilitated the participation of Madkhali Salafis in Haftar's military campaign. Because of their social work at the community level, they enjoyed a form of grassroots legitimacy that made them useful partners for Haftar, who needed to mobilise additional forces in support of his LNA. While exclusively Salafi fighting units such as the Tawhid Battalion were formed, integrated within the LNA and armed, Salafi elements were also spread across the LNA's forces. Salafi figures like Ashraf al-Mayar, a famous revolutionary brigade commander in 2011, joined the elite 'Saiqa' Brigade of the LNA. Salafi groups also fought with various neighbourhood 'protection forces' or LNA 'support forces' in Benghazi.⁵⁰

As a result of Operation Dignity, Madkhali Salafis started to play a more visible role on the ground, both in the fighting on Haftar's side and at the neighbourhood level. As in Tripoli, they framed their engagement as support for the authorities in place, essentially through the provision of order and security to residents. Because Haftar's military intervention was welcomed by important sectors of the population in the east of the country, this would contribute to increasing their legitimacy.

However, the participation by Madkhali armed groups and figures in Operation Dignity meant that they were directly involved in the violent competition that opposed Haftar and his LNA to the broad sphere of Islamist and revolutionary groups. Despite the fact that Dignity was presented as an operation aimed at restoring order, it was also a conflict which was political in nature. Their participation in this conflict therefore clearly contradicted the Madkhali Salafis' 'apolitical' claim.

As a matter of fact, the changing political context between 2014 and 2019 required both political and Madkhali Salafis to translate doctrine into practice on important issues such as the question of political engagement and the use of violence. Both currents demonstrated a capacity to adapt to new circumstances, which highlighted their political nature. However, in a context of intensifying violence and division of state institutions, this had a major impact on the public perception of the two currents, and on their popular legitimacy.

The political context from 2016 onwards proved more favourable for 'Madkhali' Salafis than for 'political' Salafis. Despite the signing of the Libyan Political Accord (LPA) under international sponsorship in December 2015, Libya's institutions were not reunified and the conflict between the two rival coalitions led by Seraj and the Presidential Council of the GNA (PC-GNA) on the one hand and Haftar and his LNA on the other did not end. Instead, the rival power centres that had emerged over the previous two years in western and eastern Libya were consolidated, and alliances were partly reconfigured on both sides. This was particularly the case in Tripoli, where the PC-GNA taking up residence in the capital in March 2016 required some arrangements with local armed groups to provide the new political authorities with security.

The Madkhali-leaning SDF led by Abdulraouf Kara was one of a small number of groups that chose to back the PC-GNA. Their affiliation with the PC-GNA meant that their actions could be framed as supporting the new internationally recognised government. However, the decision was clearly political in nature: many constituencies in western Libya opposed the LPA and the PC-GNA, including some of the key armed groups based in Tripoli, many of which still supported the Salvation government.

⁵⁰ Author phone interview with a Libyan academic from Benghazi, February 2019; author interview with a Libyan judge from Benghazi, Tunis, November 2018.

The arrival of the PC-GNA in the capital in March 2016 caused military confrontations between rival factions, eventually triggering major transformations in the political and military landscape in Tripoli (Lacher and al-Idrissi 2018). Support from the Madkhali Salafi-influenced SDF proved determinant in allowing the PC-GNA to start working in the capital. By March 2017, the SDF and the other armed groups supporting the new government had gradually pushed their rivals out of the capital. These included the armed groups linked to former LIFG leaders (Lacher and al-Idrissi 2018), which were forced to leave the city and in many cases the country out of fear for their security.

Despite the key role they played in allowing the PC-GNA to prevail over its local opponents, Madkhali Salafis continued to present themselves as ‘apolitical’ and emphasised the aspects of their activities that were aimed at maintaining or restoring order at the local level. In this way, they gradually reinforced their image as key partners of a political authority seeking to exert control on the ground. In so doing, they also expanded their access to state institutions, yet still without seeking prominent political positions. They focused instead on the fields of security and justice. In particular, they continued to work on ensuring security and order for residents at the local level, using their interventions to further build links with state institutions, particularly the Ministry of the Interior. Their work on organised crime helped them increase their links with the prosecutor general’s office in the Ministry of Justice. They also intervened on issues related to bank supervision and cash distribution, the issuing of passports and logistics related to the *hajj* pilgrimage.⁵¹

In contrast to their past behaviour, however, Madkhali Salafis started translating their growing influence on the state religious institutions, this time with a focus on the top positions rather than only the grassroots. As a result, tensions increased between the Madkhali current and Dar al-Ifta’, which was still under the leadership of Sheikh al-Gharyani and strongly influenced by the political Salafi current. Madkhali-influenced armed groups such as the SDF started using force to arrest preachers and religious figures linked to Dar al-Ifta’. Things escalated in late 2016 with the disappearance and killing of Sheikh Nader al-Omrani, a prominent figure in Dar al-Ifta’ who had publicly criticised Salafi Madkhalis (International Crisis Group 2019: 17-18).

The head of the General Authority for Endowments and Islamic Affairs (*awqaf*), Abbas al-Gadi, also became the object of violent criticism and mounting pressure from the Madkhali current (International Crisis Group 2019).⁵² Considered a close ally of Grand Mufti al-Gharyani, al-Gadi was accused of not owing his position to his religious credentials but to his acquaintances in the political Islam current. Conflict ultimately escalated around his management of the *hajj* pilgrimage⁵³ and the Madkhali Salafis managed to have him removed from his position by the PC-GNA. His replacement, Sheikh Muhammad al-Abbani, was a well-known figure in the Madkhali sphere (Pargeter 2020).

This signalled a major departure from the way Madkhali Salafis in western Libya had so far dealt with state religious institutions, and despite the popularity of some of these moves the perceived increasing influence of the SDF on the political authorities in Tripoli started to meet some pushback, as it pointed

51 For instance, the SDF was responsible for providing protection for the staff of the Central Bank of Libya (author telephone interview with a former Interior Ministry employee, November 2018). Observations on the SDF’s Facebook during that period indicated growing links with the Prosecutor General’s Office.

52 Also see, for instance, “Kidnapping of the head of the GNA Awqaf in Tripoli,” Al Jazeera Arabic, 4 August 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2018/8/4/%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82>.

53 Al-Harathy, Safa, “Head of Awqaf authority arrested in Tripoli,” Libya Observer, 4 August 2018, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/head-awqaf-authority-arrested-tripoli>.

to the limits of the Madkhali Salafis' 'apolitical' discourse.⁵⁴

Things had evolved in a similar direction, although earlier, in eastern Libya, as a result of the key role played by Madkhali Salafis and the armed groups under their influence in support of Haftar. As in western Libya, Madkhali Salafis in the east of the country framed their actions as support for the authorities in place in the field of security and order, but refrained from seeking official political positions.

Things significantly differed in the religious sphere, where they had exerted direct and extensive influence on state institutions at the top and local levels since 2014. Their participation in Operation Dignity since 2014 had provided them with opportunities to access resources and become more organised. When the Interim Government established in the eastern city of al-Bayda created a General Authority of Endowments and Islamic Affairs parallel to the Tripoli-based one in 2014, Madkhali Salafis were granted key positions in the new institution.⁵⁵ This allowed them to directly confront their competitors in the religious field and therefore to acquire a degree of power in shaping policies. This was particularly the case in the field of piety and morality, where their influence started to become more visible in 2015-2016, leading to regular incidents in which intellectuals, women and civil society in general were targeted (International Crisis Group 2019).

Madkhali Salafi brigades and elements also remained important in the LNA fighting force and continued to be used in major military operations. This was notably the case of the Tareq Ibn Ziyad Brigade, which was successively involved in the offensive against the eastern city of Derna in May 2018 (Macé 2018), in the military deployment in the south-west in January-February 2019 and in the central city of Sirte in 2020 (Al-Hawari 2020), often raising strong criticism as to how their members behaved on the ground in the face of the civilian population (Al-Hawari 2020).

As in western Libya, the growing influence of Madkhali Salafis in the public sphere and on society gradually met some popular resistance. For instance, controversial LNA decisions influenced by the Madkhali Salafi current, such as restrictions on women travelling without a male relative, were reversed in 2017 as a result of broad opposition in society.⁵⁶ Tensions also arose with the Prime Minister of the Interim Government himself in December 2018, as he accused the General Authority for Endowments and Islamic Affairs of creating divisions in society and importing foreign ideologies into Libya.⁵⁷

Conclusions

Political and security developments in Libya between 2011 and 2019 forced 'political' and 'Madkhali' Salafis to clarify their stances and behaviours regarding how to relate to 'politics,' political authority and the state in a context of crisis.

Countering the idea of a fault line between supposedly 'political' and 'apolitical' Salafis, analysis of how the two currents related to political authority during that period has shed light on the fact that

54 For example, a May 2018 decision by the PC-GNA to rename the SDF and give it broader power was widely criticised. See, for example, Reporters without Borders, "Decree gives blank cheque to Libyan militiamen to persecute journalists," 15 May 2018, <https://rsf.org/en/news/decree-gives-blank-cheque-libyan-militiamen-who-persecute-journalists>.

55 Author interview with a Libyan judge from Benghazi, Tunis, November 2018.

56 See, for instance, BBC News, "Libya's eastern authority freezes women's travel ban," 22 February 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39053829>.

57 See, for instance, Libya Observer, "Al Thinni accuses the Authority for Endowments of subordination to foreign orders," January 2019, <https://ar.libyaobserver.ly/article/3335>.

both groups pursued objectives that can be described as ‘political,’ in the sense that they aimed to gain and increase their influence on state institutions. However, the strategies employed by the two groups between 2011-2019 differed profoundly, seemingly pointing at major differences in the very nature of the two currents’ political projects.

While both ‘political’ and ‘Madkhali’ Salafis aimed to increase their power and influence on state institutions after 2011, they did so by following different paths. One key distinguishing feature was the choice between a ‘*top-down*’ – in the case of former LIFG political Salafis – and a ‘*bottom-up*’ approach – in the case of Madkhali Salafis. This difference seems to a large extent to be grounded in an assessment made by the actors concerning the resources available to them and therefore of their capabilities at different points in Libya’s transition and conflict.

This difference in approach also stemmed from a different vision of politics and of the determinants of political influence. For former LIFG figures and political Salafis, engagement with state institutions essentially took the form of direct participation in institutional politics and in competition with other political groups over formal top-level political positions, while their interaction with society in general remained limited. Their objective appeared to be to gain control over what they conceived as the key levers of power and authority, while failing to devise strategies to influence the social order or social rules. This meant that the continuing political influence of political Salafis mostly depended on their capacity to maintain the balance of forces with rival political actors in their favour. When they failed to do so, as first happened partially in 2014 when Libya’s institutions became divided, and then in 2016-2017 when they lost control over Tripoli, they were rapidly excluded from the political game and lost most of their influence on Libya’s state institutions after 2011. Only in the case of a significant change in the balance of power among political groups and actors could they hope to regain their influence on Libya’s state institutions. This is precisely what happened after the resumption of large-scale military conflict in 2020 and Haftar’s attack on Tripoli.

In contrast, the Madkhali Salafi current rejected participation in institutional politics on ideological grounds, engaging instead with state institutions through direct interaction and cooperation at the grassroots level, with a particular focus on security, justice and the enforcement of a certain moral order. Beyond their ideological stance, this to some extent reflected a lack of adequate resources to engage in the competition for institutional positions. Only when the context became more favourable to them – which happened at different times in western and eastern Libya – did Libya’s Madkhali Salafis start to seek top-level positions in the state religious institutions. However, they never sought to control political institutions, privileging instead exerting influence from outside, even when the evolving contexts in both western and eastern Libya may have allowed them to do so.

Madkhali Salafis gave priority to providing security and enforcing ‘moral order’ as a way to gain legitimacy and consolidate their influence and control over political authorities and the state, but also society in general. The grassroots bottom-up approach they adopted, coupled with the moral and religious authority that they acquired through their control of state religious institutions, resulted in a much deeper entrenchment in society and reflected a direct attempt to transform the social order and social rules, including by using force when deemed necessary.

Analysis of the trajectories of Libya’s Salafis between 2011 and 2019 shows that the question of whether or not to use violence did not represent a key differentiating element between Salafi currents – political, quietist Madkhali or even jihadi. Instead, it was on the questions of *when* violence is to be considered legitimate or acceptable, and *against whom*, that Libyan Salafis seemed to divide. In a conflict environment like Libya, where the control and construction of the state is prevalently contested by armed actors, ‘political’ and ‘Madkhali’ Salafis alike demonstrated that they could use violence when

deemed necessary to achieve their political objectives. However, the two approaches had a different focus: while violence for political Salafis ended up being conceived as a tool against political rivals and to gain control over state institutions, violence by Madkhali Salafis not only targeted political rivals but also society in general.

This underlines the absence of major difference between political and Madkhali Salafis in terms of political pragmatism and means of action. It also raises important questions regarding the validity of the claim that support from Madkhali Salafis can be mobilised by Libya's political authorities and external actors alike without it having significant consequences for Libya's future political life and society.

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