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The Inverse Trajectories of the Salafists in Tunisia and Egypt

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The post-revolutionary transitions in Tunisia and Egypt have been marked by the emergence of Salafist movements whose real strength few observers have truly comprehended. The irruption of the Salafist phenomenon was accompanied by two highly contrasting situations. In Tunisia, the Salafist current progressively assumed an increasingly aggressive, anti-system posture; whereas in Egypt, the main Salafist party not only played the electoral game, but even provided its support to the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood by a military junta.

This complex process once again reveals the futility of attempts to interpret Arab societies according to a single "Islamism," for it is clearly Islamisms that are competing in their plurality, at times highly contradictory. For Salafist movements, the challenge is twofold, for their aim is at once:

- To take on politicisation, although the "literalist" conception of Salafism (sometimes paradoxically qualified as "scientific") rejects all forms of social activism as contrary to Islam, in particular any recognition of human institutions of an elected type;
- And to distance themselves from Jihadi groups, whose verbal and violent escalation could appeal to Salafist militants radicalised by the anathema placed on the entire transition, denounced as "impious."

It is in Egypt that this twofold challenge has been undertaken with the greatest relative success for local Salafists, while their Tunisian counterparts, carried away by their anti-system logic, have been unable to stem the drift towards Jihadism. This is why we shall discuss the case of Egypt first, followed by Tunisia, the latter as an illustration of problematic reciprocal exclusion, whereas the former is, to date, the best example of "successful" integration.

The Relative Success of the Egyptian Salafists

The first free elections in contemporary Egypt were the legislative elections of December 2011 - January 2012. The victory of the Muslim Brotherhood, which obtained 37% of the votes, was anticipated by all the political forces, whether they considered it a positive or negative factor. On the other hand, the performance of the Salafist party, Al-Nour (The Light) was astonishing, nearly a quarter of the votes going to a party that had been established only a few months earlier. In contrast to the highly hierarchical apparatus of the Muslim Brotherhood, the politically novice Al-Nour party broadly opened nominations to their party, attracting part of the young post-revolutionary generation.

The Salafist parliamentarians' results are quite meagre, however, despite certain symbolic, short-lived provocations. It is true that the Egyptian Assembly, despite its democratic character, does not have any real power, for the executive power continues to lie with the military junta that overthrew Hosni Mubarak, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

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In the May-June 2012 presidential elections, Al-Nour decided at first to support Abdul Moneim Aboul Foutouh, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, who rallied a heteroclite coalition of Islamists and liberals. The elimination of Aboul Foutouh, who came in a meagre fourth position in the first electoral round, was a cruel disavowal for the Salafist leadership, forced to fall back on Mohammed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate.

During Morsi's year as President (June 2012 - June 2013), the Salafists struggled to find their place in the face of the Muslim Brotherhood's aspiration to hegemony over the entire Islamist sphere, if not beyond. They joined in the storm of protest denouncing the liberticidal tendencies of Morsi's followers. But they actively supported the "Islamic" nature of the new constitution, adopted in December 2012.

The Armed Forces over the Brotherhood

The rising tension between the Muslim Brotherhood and the armed forces at the start of summer 2013 led the Salafists to primarily choose to take the side of the latter over the former. Al-Nour even enjoined the Muslim Brotherhood to conduct public self-criticism, thus de facto supporting the overthrow of Morsi by General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. This position elicited heated internal debate within the Salafist movement:

- The willingness displayed by Al-Nour to occupy the terrain left empty by the prohibition of the Muslim Brotherhood disconcerted many of their members.
- This willingness has encouraged the establishment of competing, more protest-oriented Salafist parties.

Al-Nour has nonetheless managed to keep a large part of the Salafist base, thus also neutralising the temptation towards Jihadi tendencies. The Egyptian armed forces are not mistaken in focussing the bulk of their accusations of "terrorism" solely against the Muslim Brotherhood. Insofar as Jihadi groups, they are operating from the Sinai (including the Ansar Beit al-Maqdes group, responsible for the Mansoura attack in December 2013), among other places, and they claim full autonomy with regard to both the Brotherhood and the Salafists.

Tunisia's Specificities as Compared to Egypt

In contrast to Egypt, Tunisia emerged from President Ben Ali's 23 years in power without a structured organisation in the local Islamist field comparable to that of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Ennahda party, which was established in March 2011, is the result, insofar as its leadership, of a combination of exiled leaders, foremost among them being Rached Ghannouchi, and former political prisoners, notably Hamadi Jebali and Ali Laarayedh.

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Ennahda's overwhelming popularity stems from its capacity to attract votes of highly different natures: pious votes, security votes (in favour of the party expected to dominate the Tunisian political arena) and protest votes (in favour of the party that supposedly embodies rupture with the previous regime). Ennahda thus managed to obtain 36% of the votes at the October 2011 elections to Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly (NCA).

The other major difference to the situation in Egypt is that its electoral success allowed Ennahda immediate access to government administration (whereas Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood had to wait until the June 2012 presidential elections, six months after their triumph in the parliamentary elections). Part of the Salafist movement was thus absorbed by Ennahda's rising momentum.

The Salafist party that emerged in protest to Ennahda would thus quickly become radical, with an anti-system posture that could not but encourage Jihadi escalation. The main figure behind this process was Seif Allah Ibn Hussein, nicknamed Abu lyadh al-Tunisi (the Tunisian). He was formerly in charge of Tunisian "volunteers" to Afghanistan and as such, had had dealings with Osama Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda hierarchy.

The Salafist Mortgage on the Tunisian Transition

Extradited in 2003 from Turkey to Tunisia, Ibn Hussein was sentenced to 63 years of prison for terrorist activities. He was released, however, in the general amnesty of January 2011, following the overthrow of the dictator. He did not take long to organise his supporters and form the “Partisans of Sharia” (Ansar al-Sharia) group. The Salafist “congress,” held in Kairouan in May 2012, saw thousands of militants chanting “Obama, Obama, we are all Osama.”

The Ennahda leadership nonetheless believed it could neutralise the Salafist risk through dialogue and cooptation. This tactic, which corresponds to the Salafist sensibility of a sector of Ennahda's members, ended in the disastrous management of the September 2012 attacks against the US Embassy. Instead of immediately repressing these anti-American protests, the Islamist government allowed them to develop before dispersing them with bloodshed. It was then that Abu lyadh/Ibn Hussein went into hiding.

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Ansar al-Sharia's switchover to Jihadi subversion has contributed to aggravating the crisis in Tunisia by polarising the “secular” and “Islamist” camps, in particular after the assassinations of progressive figures, first in February, then in July of 2013. Ali Laarayedh, who succeeded Hamadi Jebali as Prime Minister in March 2013, has finally taken an uncompromising line against Ansar al-Sharia, which is prohibited from holding another “congress.”

The Jihadi tendencies of the main Salafist group are fostered in Tunisia by the activity of commandos associated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

(AQIM) along the Algerian border, as well as through the various forms of traffic with neighbouring Libya. There have been successive clashes in the Mount Chambi (Jebel ech Chambi) area, with unprecedented losses for the Tunisian armed forces, in turn challenging the legitimacy of the democratic government.

The Persistent Unpredictability of the Salafist Factor

It is thus not so much the Jihadi threat in and of itself that is hanging over Tunisia as its impact on a political arena as vulnerable as it is volatile. The terrorist attacks marking the second anniversary of elections to the National Constituent Assembly did not manage to compromise Ennahda's devolution of power in December 2013 to a technocratic government mandated to conduct the last stage of the transition. In Egypt, the Salafists seem relatively immune to Jihadi escalation, as they so deeply dream of establishing a lasting relationship with the military hierarchy that would allow them to consolidate themselves in an apparatus that is still young. They thus hope to supplant the formidable machine of the now illegal Muslim Brotherhood in the social sphere as well. This venture is closely linked to the vagaries of an Egyptian process that seems more like it is closing rather than opening spaces for freedom.

In Tunisia as in Egypt, the Salafists have long taken advantage of the errors of their Islamist rivals, i.e. the indulgence of the Ennahda leadership up until the spring of 2013, and the Morsi team's blindness until the moment he was ousted in July 2013. They have not, on the other hand, demonstrated a capacity to establish themselves in a deep, lasting manner in the post-revolutionary landscape, at least not at this stage.

The complex (and indulgent) game played by the Egyptian Salafists with the military junta entails serious risks. On the exact opposite scale to such accommodation, Ansar al-Sharia's Jihadi escalation may well result in a bloody impasse. Taken by surprise by the fall of the despots, the Salafists are thus far from having decided on their ultimate relationship with the political and institutional camp.