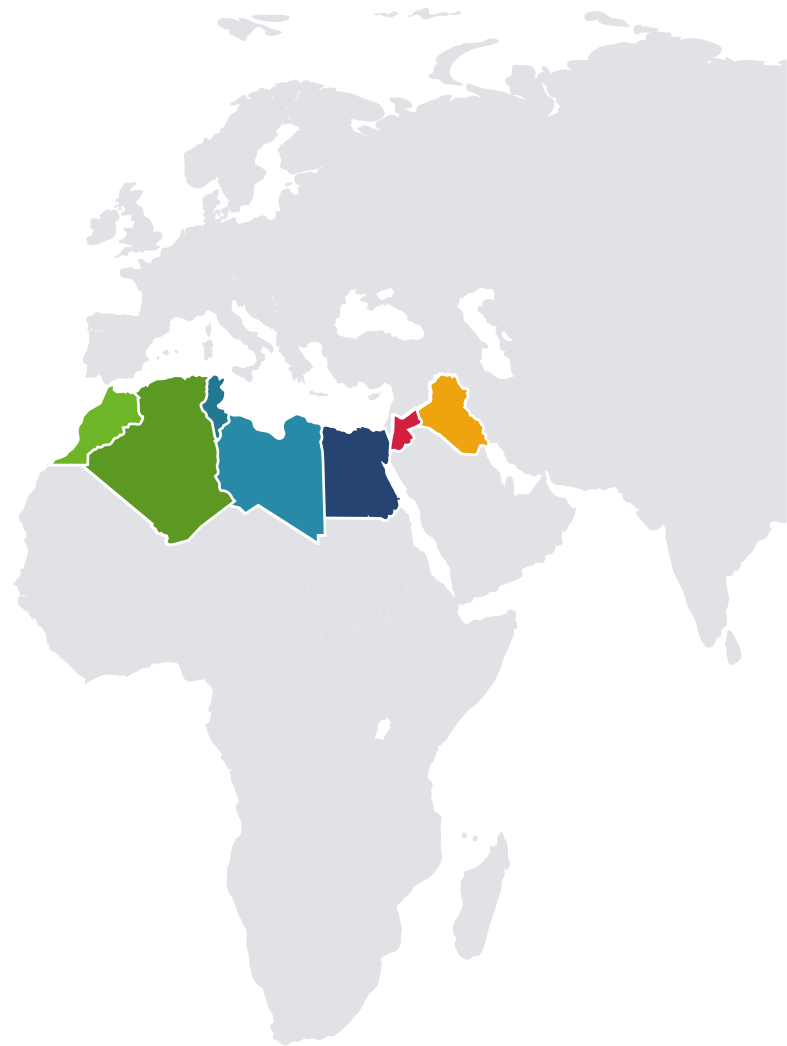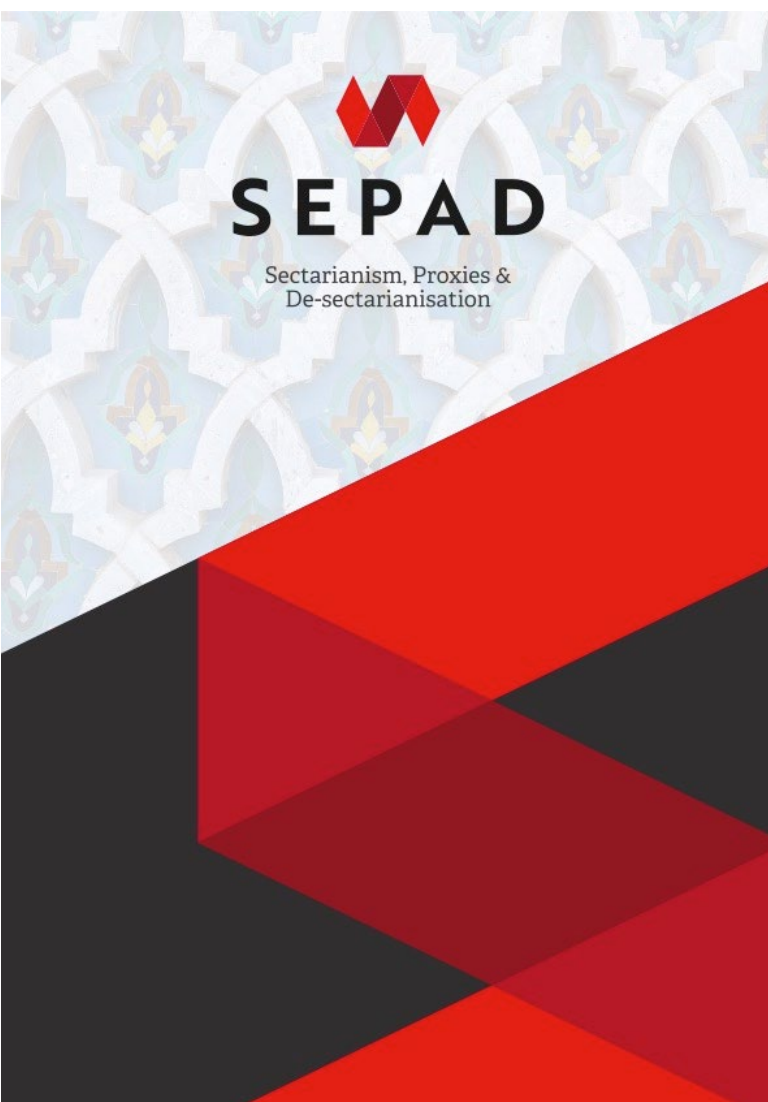# The Arab Transformations
WORKING PAPER SERIES

Sovereignty and its Discontents

Editors:

Simon Mabon, University of Lancaster & Andrea Teti, University of Salerno

Abstract

This report brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to critically reflect on ideas of sovereignty and the state. This report draws on a workshop held at Lancaster University in the spring of 2023. We would like to thank all the participants in that workshop for their insightful engagement.

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Salafism and the state in Morocco: political quietism, *da'wah*, and the politics of purity

Guy Eyre

Salafism is one of the most influential contemporary Islamic ideologies (Bano, 2021: 3). It can be described as a scripturalist, literalist, fundamentalist, transnational Sunni Islamic movement centred on a particular conception of *tawhid*, or God's oneness, and thus complete submission to God. It stresses a return to the authentic beliefs and practices of the first three generations of Muslims – *al-salaf al-salih* ('pious ancestors'). Salafis also reject the canonical Sunni Islamic schools of law (a position known as anti-Madhhabism), and instead urge a strict interpretation of the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* (the path or example of the Prophet). They argue that in rigorously abiding by the guidance and rules in the Qur'an and the Sunna on their understanding of the *hadith*s, they eliminate the biases of human subjectivity and self-interest to identify the singular truth of God's commands. In this way, they underscore a particular mode of textual interpretation stressing an 'unmediated' interface with the principal texts of Islam. This means that, unlike traditional and pre-modern Muslims, Salafis reject a developed and 'more layered scholastic tradition of religious interpretation, which otherwise constrains and regulates, in rigorous fashion, the output of opinions' (Haykel, 2009). Their call for a strict 'constructionist' reading of *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* results in a rejection of the possibility of doctrinal difference (with the exception of a few limited circumstances). Along these lines, Salafism therefore encompasses a wide range of additional practices, including the rejection of both *shirk* (or polytheism) and *bida'h* (association of God with other beings or things) in keeping with other sectarian and sub-sectarian dogmatists. The denunciation of Shi'a for their purported infidelity is also common amongst Salafis, who rail against Sufis too, criticising their practices of grave visitation and various rituals they consider contrary to Islam's creed.

Arguably the central dilemma of Salafis is their relationship to modern institutional politics and state institutions (Meijer, 2012). Can they still adhere to the 'pure' fundaments of God's injunctions and thus pursue a rigorous doctrine of *tawhid*, or complete submission to God, *and* simultaneously (i) acquiesce to the 'secular' political power of the modern state where rulers do not impose (strict) Islamic law (*shari'ah*) and (ii) participate in institutional and contentious politics by competing and compromising with political adversaries they consider to 'deviate' (*inharif*) from 'pure' Islam? Should they focus solely on *da'wah* (spreading the faith) and *tarbiyya* (education) to form a purified, 'authentic' Muslim community? Or should they criticise incumbent rulers for failing to implement 'true' *shari'ah* and so undertake oppositional modes of politics? Or should they revolt (Meijer, 2012: 28)?

There is considerable intra-Salafi disagreement over how to best respond to this conundrum. One Salafi sub-group, known as Salafi-jihadis, support the use of violence with the specific goal of unseating incumbent regimes (via 'revolutionary' and/or 'global' jihad (Wagemakers, 2016). Elsewhere, political Salafis reject Salafi-jihadis' use of violence against regimes and

Western targets. Instead, politicos participate in parliamentary politics or, where they do not or indeed are prevented from doing so, they instead undertake 'contentious political debate, activism, and set out their views on how the country should be run through letters, organizations, and petitions' (Ibid.).

My research in Morocco, however, focuses on a third mode of Salafism, known as quietism. By far the largest sub-type of Salafism worldwide and in many ways the true heart and ideal-type of the movement, quietists avow obedience to incumbent regimes and stay aloof from, or refrain from, actively participating in institutional and oppositional politics (Wagemakers, 2016: 30). They focus instead on religious education and preaching. In Morocco, this quietist mode of Salafism emerged in the 1970s, as a result of the activism of Muhammad Taqi al-Din Abd al-Qader al-Hilali (d. 1987) and his protégé, al-Maghraoui. In 1976, Maghraoui founded what would become the largest and most prominent Salafi group in Morocco, the quietist Dor al-Qur'an association in Marrakech.

What, then, is the relationship between these Salafi quietists and sovereign state power in Morocco? Prima facie, given these Salafis' rejection of institutional and oppositional politics and, more broadly, their claim to 'not do politics', we might consider them pre-political, even apolitical, actors. However, as scholars acknowledge, they still do politics: they act within political contexts (Meijer, 2016: 436) and proffer advice and obedience to regimes (Wagemakers, 2016). In this way, their strict loyalism vis-à-vis the Moroccan monarchy means that they constitute (potential) political – albeit highly unequal – partners of state power. After all, they typically urge Moroccans to abide by Islamic rulings, such as *Wali al-Amr* (the Legal Guardian), that enjoin Muslims to safeguard national security by remaining entirely loyal to the political ruler. Such injunctions, quietist Salafis argue, forbid Moroccans from engaging in any practices – including violence and protests – that might undermine security in the country and, in doing so, arguably reinforce the state's own political authority (Tozy, 2009; Wehrey and Boukhars, 2019). Furthermore, these Salafis are typically characterized by their claim to a monopoly over Islamic 'authenticity', which they contend is the key to salvation. Accordingly, they typically distinguish themselves as 'purer' and 'more authentic' than other Islamic groups, such as the Moroccan Islamist 'Party of Justice and Development'. In doing so, they inveigh against these competitors for the fact that these groups have been side-tracked into focusing on a wrong-headed conception of power consists in countering and grappling with the state. As a result, whilst the Moroccan state has repressed quietist Salafis – particularly since the 2003 Casablanca bombings, perpetrated by jihadi-Salafis – and attempted to limit their religious activism, it largely tolerates them and permits their religious activism, albeit within strict limits, because it broadly considers them a pro-status quo trend useful in confronting new domestic challenges from the Islamist (and, in the 1980s, Leftist) sectors (Aboullouz, 2009).

Nonetheless, quietist Salafis in Morocco would also appear to pose a challenge to sovereign state power. After all, their ideas and practice are focused on establishing a 'pure', 'authentic' moral Islamic community that transcends Morocco's national borders. As such, they can be seen as propounding notions of communal belonging and Muslim identity focused on the global *umma* and rooted in religious purity. This approach therefore diverges from, and indeed opposes, the legitimacy of the territorial national community promulgated by the Moroccan

state. Put simply, quietist Salafis ultimately believe the regime erroneously seeks to tie the loyalty of citizens to the national, rather than global Muslim, community. Furthermore, through their exclusivist claims to represent 'authentic' Islam, quietist Salafis defy the claims of the Moroccan palace and its official Islamic institutions to hold ultimate religious authority within the kingdom. By spreading their approach to Islam through religious education and preaching in local Moroccan neighbourhoods, they therefore undercut the state's claims (and, arguably, its ability) to shape 'its' citizens in its own image. Additionally, their long-standing and iconoclastic rejection of the canonical schools of Islamic jurisprudence challenges the state's own attempt, particularly since 2003, to promulgate an official 'moderate', 'Maliki', notion of "Moroccan Islam" that explicitly seeks to undercut Salafi religiosity.

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