


BOOK REVIEWS

On Salafism. Concepts and Contexts

By Azmi Bishara. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022. vii +228 pp. \$60.00 hardcover.

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One of the most interesting outcomes of the 2011 Arab uprisings has been the rise of Salafism on the social and, surprisingly, on the political institutional scene with several Salafi parties and candidates competing in elections. Prior to 2011, Salafism was associated, in Western policy-making circles and public opinion, with terrorism, although some studies had already exploded the myth of the natural connection between Salafism and violence. The appearance of other forms of Salafism after the uprisings led scholars to examine this phenomenon in much greater detail, rediscovering its complexity, its theological and doctrinal references, and its relationship to politics. Azmi Bishara's book is a most welcome contribution to this growing literature, and it follows in the wake of other volumes and articles attempting to make sense of this complex tradition.

In line with the discussions and findings from other studies, Bishara makes a compelling case for thinking about Salafisms, in the plural, rather one single, unitary Salafism. In tracing the history of the concept and how it was employed by several Arab thinkers and activists over centuries, Bishara provides substance to the claim that Salafism is both varied and contradictory. Also in line with previous understandings of the phenomenon, Bishara distinguishes between a modern, reformist Salafism and a regressive, contemporary one, which includes a violent jihadi component that the author illustrates through the actions and doctrinal justifications of the Islamic State. Bishara indirectly employs the categories Witkorowicz set forth in his seminal 2006 work to understand the relationship between Salafism and politics while exploring its shortcomings. The parts of the book where this distinction is discussed in detail are the most interesting and convincing because they are part of a growing literature attempting to go beyond Wiktorowicz, situating Salafisms across time and space, and moving away from simple categorizations. In doing so, Bishara illustrates three fundamental points about Salafism, which can also apply to any other form of self-described pure doctrine and ideology. First of all, Bishara insists on the fact that interpretation and reinterpretation of texts is context dependent. The social, political, and economic conditions under which the interpretation of religious texts takes place are crucial to understanding how religion is mobilized for specific purposes. Scholars like Lacroix, Merone, and Bonnefoy in their respective studies on Egypt, Tunisia, and

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Yemen also emphasized this point. In looking at how Islamic thinkers have explored and looked at texts over centuries, Bishara also clearly demonstrates that they are influenced by their own circumstances. Second, the author clearly argues that there is no straight line or clear connection between past thinkers and movements and current ones. There is always a reimagining of the past and re-reading of texts that is made by contemporary Islamist movements that has very little to do with the actual reality of the past itself. As the author clearly states (p.148): “political religious movements are not texts generated by other texts, but socio-political phenomena.” Denoux had already come to a similar conclusion when looking at movements linked to the Muslim Brothers. Finally, Bishara clarifies once more that the link between violence and religious purity within regressive Salafism should not be found in the texts because they are read very selectively and miss out on the what the author considers the “spirit” of the religion. Several sections of the book are dedicated to reaffirming that Salafism should not be equated with the Islamic State and its ideology. This is understandable on the part of the author because public discourse has been indeed rife with such claims, paradoxically coming from opposite sides of the spectrum. On the one hand, Islamophobes have seen in the rise, deeds, and ideology of the Islamic State the proof they were looking for of the inherent violent nature of “true” Islam. On the other hand, the Islamic State itself promoted the idea that only its members were “real” Muslims. Through a detailed analysis of both texts and contexts, the author contributes to countering such discourse, particularly when it comes to the crucial and divisive question of *takfir*.

In line also with previous work, the book provides a much clearer understanding of where Wahhabism stands in the Salafi galaxy. Although the financial and political muscle of Saudi Arabia should not be dismissed when it comes to the promotion of regressive, inflexible Salafism, this does not tell the whole story of the diverging trajectories of Salafism, which is not the monopoly of the Saudis.

While the findings are not really novel, the manner in which the author arrived at them is. Rather than relying on the growing contemporary literature on Salafism—several well-known contemporary works by western scholars are not cited—Bishara prefers to rely on writings in Arabic, going “back in time” to read Arab thinkers and contextualize their work and how they spoke to each other through the ages. This renders the volume more interesting and certainly refreshing because it allows the reader to revisit biased assumptions about the near absence of scholarly production in the Arab world. Furthermore, the author argues that some of the works of Orientalists is particularly useful and should not be easily dismissed.

Although the literature on Salafism has grown significantly over the last 15 years and we now have a much better grasp of the complexity of the phenomenon, Azmi Bishara adds a much-needed voice in clarifying the history, the concepts, and the environment of an important religious tradition.

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