

Salafis and Democracy: Doctrine and Context

Ovamir Anjum¹

University of Toledo

Introduction

Salafis are widely believed to be opponents of political modernity in general and democracy in particular. Since the terrorist attacks of 11 Sept. 2001, Salafism, often in conjunction with Wahhabism, has risen to prominence as a singular threat in Western analyses and security studies. In addition, the long-standing debate on democracy in the Arab world has assumed renewed importance in the wake of the prodemocracy Arab uprisings of 2011. The ongoing unfolding of events has also shown the deep hold of Islam and particularly of groups characterized as “Salafi” in both democratic and militant trajectories. The complex attitude of the Salafi groups toward democracy, in particular their pragmatic embrace of the democratic transition in Egypt and Kuwait, highlights the need to better understand the relationship between Salafism and democracy, a subject which, despite many new studies on Salafism, has not been directly addressed.² What are the chief objections to democracy in Salafi thought, and what specifically is “Salafi” about them? In this essay, I investigate Salafi discourses on democracy, produced nearly always

¹I thank my colleagues and friends, Alexandre Caeiro, S. Junaid Quadri, Nermeen Mouftah, and Rezart Beka for many valuable comments and suggestions.

As a rule, italicization and diacritics for well-known Arabic terms are omitted, and diacritics are dropped from subsequent mentions of proper names. Hence, “Salafi” and not “*salafi*,” “al-Qaraḍāwī” upon first mention, “Qaradawi” subsequently. For Arabic book titles, only English translation is mentioned in-text, the actual Arabic title is mentioned in the footnotes.

²F. Griffel, “What Do We Mean By ‘Salafi’? Connecting Muḥammad ‘Abduh with Egypt’s Nūr Party in Islam’s Contemporary Intellectual History,” *Die Welt des Islams* 55 (2015) 186–220; J. A. C. Brown, “The Salafi Transformation from Quietism to Parliamentary Giant: Salafism in Egypt and the Nour Party of Alexandria,” an unpublished paper based on a talk delivered at a conference, *Islam in the New Middle East*, March 29–30, 2012, University of Michigan–Ann Arbor; J. Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jibadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); S. Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. G. Holoch (Harvard University Press, 2011); H. Lauzière, “The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History,” *Int. J. Middle East Stud.* 42 (2010), 369–389; R. Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism* (London: Hurst, 2009); D. Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006); in addition to scores of other studies in both English and Arabic.

in opposition to the prodemocracy Islamic reformists, to explore these questions, specifically addressing the doctrinal and contextual conditions that govern this discourse.

What is Salafism? Precisely because the problem of this essay is to investigate the attitude of “Salafism” toward democracy in theory, rather than the posture of some specific contemporary Salafi groups, it requires defining Salafism, if at all possible, independently of how particular groups labeled as such do. A few recent studies have attempted to identify the “nature of Salafi thought” in the form of a list of its essential attributes. One mentions six specific theological views of the “Salafiyya” that are central: (i) a return to the authentic practices and beliefs of the pious predecessors, the *salaf*; (ii) monotheism (*tawhīd*); (iii) fighting unbelief actively; (iv) the Qur’an and Sunna as the only valid sources of religious authority, (v) ridding Islam of heretical innovations, and (vi) a belief that specific answers to all questions are found in the Quran and the Sunnah.³ Loosely interpreted, these views would include every Islamic group in their ambit, but even if defined in the specific ways the contemporary Salafis do, this can at best be seen as a heuristic laundry list, rather than a unanimous manifesto of the Salafi movements past and present. To rework Nietzsche’s contention that anything that has a history cannot be defined: things with history can only be historically defined. Defining Salafism historically poses challenges, because even though all Sunni Muslims by definition follow and revere the heritage of the pious predecessors, ways of appropriating it vary, including among contemporary Salafis. Consider, for instance, the spectrum of Salafism in the 20th century: the reformists influenced by the Egyptian Anglophile modernist Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), on the one hand, and the likes of the puritanical Wahhabi cleric, Shaykh ‘Abdullāh b. Bāz (d. 1999), on the other. On the question of democracy and reconciliation with modernity, a sharp line is drawn accordingly between the “enlightened” or modernist Salafism of the likes of ‘Abduh prevalent in the early 20th-century on the one hand and contemporary Salafism that is deemed uniquely indebted to Ibn Taymiyya style “anti-rationalist and literalist theological teachings” on the other.⁴ This dichotomy has the convenience of explaining (away) prodemocracy reformist-Islamists, such as the Egyptian-Qatari jurist Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī and the Moroccan jurist Aḥmad al-Raysūnī, to name the two important jurists whose defense of democracy we shall consider below, as heirs to modernist Salafism, something entirely different from contemporary Salafism whose intransigence can be attributed to Ibn Taymiyya’s

³ Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” (in Meijr (ed.), *Global Salafism*). According to Haykel, “The focus on theological differences, as opposed to legal ones, is important because theology in Islam does not entertain a tolerance for a multiplicity of equally valid, but obviously different, beliefs—only one view is correct, and on this basis it becomes possible to exclude and excommunicate the adherents of other views” (p. 41–2).

⁴ The distinction is reproduced by B. Haykel, “On the Nature,” citing an author whom he describes as “a determined opponent of the Ibn Taymiyya inspired Salafis” (45).

premodern anti-rationalism.⁵ Much recent scholarship calls into question these stereotypes, as I shall demonstrate presently.

A number of recent studies have made valuable contributions toward our understanding of the nature and history of Salafism. Henri Lauzière has argued that “Salafism” as the label for a movement with a self-contained method is of rather recent birth. Even the so-called “Salafism” of ‘Abduh was a figment of French Orientalist Louis Massignon’s imagination, and that the Egyptian modernist did not use the term to characterize his own views.⁶ Nor did the medieval ulama such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and his followers – whose legacy is claimed and revered, albeit variously, by all who claim to be Salafis – employ this term in the same way. The first to self-identify as “Salafiyya” were a number of interconnected intellectuals, many of them influenced by ‘Abduh but notably more conservative than him, across the Muslim world in the opening decades of the 20th century. These pioneers of the reformist Salafi trend (*al-salafiyya al-iṣlāḥiyya*) included the Syrians⁷ Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimi (d. 1914), Ṭāhir al-Jazā’irī (d. 1920), the Iraqi Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī (d. 1924), and others across North Africa, Middle East, and South Asia.⁸ A fuller conceptual history of this trend being beyond the scope of this essay, I limit myself to identifying the burgeoning scholarly debate on the issue. The literature identifies three common nodes in the proposed genealogies of Salafism: the medieval heritage culminating in Ibn Taymiyya and his followers and tapering off soon thereafter; the early-20th-century liberal-reformist or modernist “Salafism” of ‘Abduh or, more precisely, of his cohort; and the ultraconservative, Wahhabized Salafism that has been on the rise since 1970’s if not earlier. Based on a history of the term “salafiyya,” Lauzière, as noted earlier, urges us to delink these three nodes.⁹ Bernard

⁵ On Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī (1926–) see Bettina Gräf & Jakob Skovgaard-Peterson (eds.) *Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2008), 1, where the editors describe al-Qaradawī as “easily one of the most admired and best-known representatives of Sunni Islam today. Indeed, it is difficult to identify any other Muslim scholar or activist who could be said to rival his status and authority, at least in the [Arabic]-speaking world.” Aḥmad al-Raysuni (1953–) is a Moroccan reformist Islamist jurist. He is a leader in the Moroccan Islamist party, PJD, and was elected as its leader but declined, citing his responsibilities in scholarship and research. Curiously, Qaradawī was similarly presented the office of the leadership of the Brotherhood and declined for similar reasons. One strand in Raysuni’s intellectual lineage can be traced to Moroccan “reformist Salafis” like the scholar and politician, ‘Allāl al-Fāsi (d. 1974); both attended the Qarawīyyin University in Fez. His writings and my personal conversations with him suggest that Raysuni’s other important influences include the Tunisian Mālikī Ṭāhir ibn ‘Ashūr (1879–1973), a giant of traditional Sunni scholarship, and the contemporary Mauritanian jurist Abdullāh bin Bayya (1935–). Thus, Raysuni’s thought draws on both North African Mālikī tradition as well as reformist Salafism in important ways.

⁶ Lauzière, “The Construction,” 380.

⁷ For an account of the emergence of a number of proto-Salafi figures and their interest in Ibn Taymiyya in a highly Sufi environment of late Ottoman Damascus, in sharp contrast with how his legacy was invoked by the Wahhabis in Najd, see I. Weismann, *The Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Brill, 2001).

⁸ Griffel, “What Do We Mean,” 203.

⁹ Lauzière, 380.

Haykel, in contrast, based on what he claims to be a doctrinal overlap, argues for continuity between the medieval Taymiyyan node and the late-20th-century purist Salafism, excluding the middle node of 'Abduh's modernist Salafism. Jonathan Brown has similarly emphasized the contemporary Salafism's commitment to the premodern tradition going back not only to Ibn Taymiyya but to 9th-century ḥadīth tradition: "Although the moniker 'Salafi' would not appear until the modern period, its medieval forerunner so clearly merits the same description that referring to it anachronistically as Salafi is both accurate and immensely useful."¹⁰ Frank Griffel has recently called Haykel's as well as Lauzière's assertions of a "gap between modernist and purist Salafism" into question, declaring Salafism to be a modern (but not necessarily modernist) movement.¹¹ Following Reinhard Schulze's narrative of modern Muslim history, Griffel contends that Salafiyya is that set of conceptually connected movements that attributed the series of Muslim defeats by the Europeans to a corruption of prevailing Islamic doctrines and sought to reverse it (214). In Griffel's view, what unites the modernist Salafism of 'Abduh with the purist Salafism of today, as well as with the heritage of Ibn Taymiyya, the 19th-century Yemeni Zaydi-traditionist Shawkani's (d. 1834) rejection of *taqlid* in law, and the Najdi Wahhabi movement of puritanical, militant theological reform, is the aim to revive "assumed earlier expressions of Islam" against "the reigning theology of the *madrasa* education [seen] as being responsible for the widely perceived decline of Islamic culture and power and contrasted it with an ideal of the *salaf*" (215). Griffel's identification of the distinct trends making up 20th-century Salafism is helpful. His definition, however, is either too general, given that the criticism of *taqlid*, the thesis of post-Rashidun decline, and desire to return to the golden age of Islam have been fairly universal in both contemporary and premodern Muslim cultures.¹² Alternatively, if Salafism is understood

¹⁰ Brown, "The Salafi Transformation," 2.

¹¹ Griffel, "What Do We Mean." In his reply to Griffel published in *Die Welt Des Islams* 56 (2016) 89–96, Lauzière contends persuasively the Griffel's critique of his thesis and defense of Massignon's error are invalid; the Arabic word "*salafiyya*" was never used as an abstract noun to refer to a widespread reformist movement prior to the 1920s, and did not "serve as a reformist slogan in the late 19th century" (90). He further argues that "Salafism" is a moniker that should not be applied to just anyone drawing on the heritage of the early predecessors (*salaf*) but to those ultraconservatives who revived the Hanbali opposition to Ash'ari theology (92). However, those who labelled themselves "*al-salafiyya al-iṣlāḥiyya*" were not primarily concerned with rejecting Ash'ari creed *per se* but rather certain aspects of the late medieval Sunni synthesis that acquired the aura of being the "Sunni orthodoxy." Without rejecting Ash'arism, reformist Salafis opposed many of its associations and implications: *taqlid* in law, fatalism, ethical voluntarism, and popular religious syncretism associated with Sufism. There is no reason why their adoption of the moniker "*salafiyya*" should be considered less valid. Contemporary reformists like al-Qaradawi and al-Raysuni, discussed below, continue to draw on this heritage without rejecting Ash'arism entirely.

¹² On the memory of the golden age of the "salaf," see O. Anjum, "Cultural Memory of the Pious Ancestors (*Salaf*) in al-Ghazālī," *Numen* 58 (2011), 344–374; on medieval critique of *taqlid*, A. Mustafa, *On Taqlid: Ibn al Qayyim's Critique of Authority in Islamic Law* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

primarily in terms of reaction to the unique Muslim defeat vis-à-vis Europe, such an account is Eurocentric and unhelpful in terms of the internal dynamics of Islamic history.¹³

Be that as it may, we shall proceed with the assumption that meaningful *thematic*, but not necessarily historical or material, continuities can be traced between all the three nodes identified above, determining whose precise nature is beyond the scope of this essay. Griffel is right to stress the link between reformist and ultraconservative Salafis, but their deeper doctrinal similarities despite differing interests and positions suggest that Brown's insight about its rootedness in a long-standing trend in Islamic tradition cannot be ignored. Due to the increasing predominance of the ultraconservative trend since 1970's, the contemporary heirs of reformist Salafism, such as Qaradawi and Raysuni, have generally dropped the label "Salafi," although they remain committed to certain key hermeneutic and methodological "Salafi" contentions of the premier medieval authority, Ibn Taymiyya. It is these distinctively Salafi contentions that must be highlighted before the question of democracy can be addressed.

Salafism and Wahhabism

Unlike "Salafiyya," Wahhabiyya is a precise designation, used approvingly by the followers of the puritanical Najdi reformer, Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–1792), and by others pejoratively. As early as 1920's, with the rise of the reformist Salafiyya in the broader Muslim world, and given the generally laudatory attitude of the religious Arab reformists toward the only capable Islamic Arab ruler at the time, the Saudi king may have wished to expand his influence and shed off the bad press or parochialism associated with Wahhabism. For this and possibly other reasons, the Saudis supported the Salafi Press in Cairo and in 1929 King 'Abd al-'Azīz prohibited the official use of "wahhābiyya," preferring "*salafiyya*" instead.¹⁴ The Saudi power at this point was rather limited to the inspiration that its model provided to the anti-colonial reformists, but became enormously multiplied by the influx of oil wealth and Cold War politics. This led to wahhabization of Salafism in the mid-20th century, owing in particular to King Faisal's political backing of religious revival against Nasser's socialist and nationalist politics in a rivalry that has been dubbed the "Arab Cold War."¹⁵ In the 18th and 19th centuries, Ibn

¹³ For a related critique of Schulze's account, see T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 218–22. For an extensive critique of such accounts, see S. Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2011). Lauzière's reply to Griffel (see fn. 11) also calls Griffel out for privileging a Western perspective in a way that distorts the subject matter (Lauzière's reply, 95).

¹⁴ N. Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*, trans. E. S. Rundell (Yale University Press, 2014), 9; Lauzière, 383; Griffel, 219.

¹⁵ Lacroix, 10, 42, 162. Faisal b. Abdulaziz Al Saud (1906–1975) was crown prince, but effective in charge, under King Saud 1953–64, and ruler 1964–75. For an account of his courting of non-Saudi Islamist influences, see Lacroix, 38ff.

Taymiyya and his disciples' teachings had been appreciated and employed in many different ways: by Shāh Walī Allāh (1703–1762) in India; Shawkānī (1759–1834) in Yemen and through him Ahl-e-hadis in India; the aforementioned reformist ulama in Damascus. The deployment of his vast and profound legacy by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb was comparatively limited and superficial, but far more potent and fateful. The founder of Wahhabism adopted Ibn Taymiyya's rejection of pilgrimage to graves, but dropped his caution against excommunication of deviant Muslims. When his brother, Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb refuted his excommunication of errant Muslims primarily by citing Ibn Taymiyya and his followers' copious urgings against such a conclusion, Muḥammad stuck to his interpretation of the reformers, further insisting that it did not matter; after all, he was not their blind follower.¹⁶ Like Sulaymān, a certain Dāwūd b. Jirjs al-Naqshbandi (d. 1882) a century later, and many other opponents of Wahhabism who invoked Ibn Taymiyya far more copiously and coherently, lost to Wahhabisms' political success.¹⁷ The reformist Islamists continue to claim, as noted above, that they have a greater claim to Ibn Taymiyya's teachings than either the Wahhabis or the contemporary ultraconservative Salafism. It is only with the editing and publishing of Ibn Taymiyya's works during the second quarter of the 20th century that a significant section of younger Saudi ulama, by no means all, has silently but significantly transformed its positions on issues such as excommunication. The point is not to essentialize true "Salafism" as being more in line with Ibn Taymiyya's intellectualism than Wahhabi anti-intellectual puritanism, but simply to suggest that the reformists' claim to his teachings is no less credible.

Does Salafism have a Democratic Core?

Reflecting on "how easy it is to become an authority figure among the [contemporary] Salafis," one scholar has noted that "Salafis are, in contrast to other Muslim traditions of learning, relatively open, even democratic."¹⁸ Another study qualifies this notion of the seeming Salafi "democracy" of authority by recasting it as a rhetorical strategy against the taqlidī ulama rather than a free for all interpretive populism.¹⁹

The participative, community-centered core of Salafi thought, I have argued elsewhere, lies not so much in easy access to authority, but in its anti-elitist intellectual foundations.²⁰ The significance of the fourteenth-century reformers for subsequent Salafi reformism at large lies in that they furnished the anti-kalam or athari Sunnis with a most formidable intellectual defense and a set of concrete theological and legal doctrines as well as methodological contentions concerning scriptural hermeneutics, all of which

¹⁶ Commins, *Wahhabi*, 23–4.

¹⁷ Commins, *Wahhabi*, 59.

¹⁸ Haykel, "On the Nature," 36.

¹⁹ J. A. C. Brown, "Is Islam Easy to Understand or Not?: Salafis, the Democratization of Interpretation and the Need for the Ulema," *J. of Islamic Studies* 26.2 (2015) 117–144.

²⁰ O. Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

were formulated in response to the problems they perceived in the classical heritage, the way of the *kbalaf*. Two key contentions formed the core of their corpus: first, reason and revelation both being divine endowments cannot and do not contradict, and second, the Muslims of the first three (or four) generations, the *salaf*, possessed the best understanding and practice of Islam.²¹ Together, these two contentions seem to require of qualified Muslims of every generation to reason with revelation, i.e., perform *ijtihād*, trying to emulate the *salaf*, rather than blindly follow their immediate ancestors or succumb to foreign influences. Following reformists like Ibn Taymiyya, therefore, poses a paradox: since he questioned certain classical authorities with his own *ijtihād* to arrive at what he found to be closer to scriptural teachings, following him could mean following his conclusions without question, or adopting his method, which may lead to different conclusions. Both approaches could be seen as equally “salafi,” especially if certain key contentions as formulated by Ibn Taymiyya are granted, despite having very different conclusions with respect to newfangled issues. Furthermore, just as democracy has long been recognized to carry the inextricable possibilities of the tyranny of majority and mob-rule, the Salafi hermeneutic optimism, while liberating and creative, is ever prone, on the one hand, to interpretive chaos of free-for-all *ijtihād*, and, on the other, to the rejection of accumulated wisdom in the name of emulating one’s possibly impoverished notion of “way of the *salaf*” to the point of unrelenting nostalgia. This latter tendency is evident in the approach of the *atharis*, known also as the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, reinvigorated in latter part of the 20th-century by the charismatic, self-taught *ḥadīth*-scholar Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914–1999), a trend that has significantly overlapped but also occasionally clashed with the *Wahhabis*. Rather than Ibn Taymiyya, they more closely resemble his hesitant *ahl al-ḥadīth* and conservative friends in his own time, who, his biographer writes, “did not like his delving deep into the [heretical disciplines] of *kalam* theology and philosophy.”²²

Historically, Salafi reformism has often been anti-establishment, populist, egalitarian, and in this sense, democratic. Ibn Taymiyya is crucial precisely for providing the most coherent foundations for such an attitude. His vision, I have argued, was decidedly community-centered and anti-elitist in both religious and socio-political senses.²³ This was part of its quintessentially “Salafi” quality: it sought to reject the elitism of the classical age in favor of early Islam’s egalitarianism, activism, and vitality. Against the highly ruler-centered, and by his time, merely bookish, understanding of Islamic political order, according to which the caliph was a larger-than-life figure necessary to safeguard Islam, Ibn Taymiyya forcefully argued that it was the Muslim community, the *umma*, not the caliph that had been invested by God with the charge to uphold Islam. Arguing against

²¹ It should be noted that Ibn Taymiyya’s magnum opus was entitled *Dar’ Ta’arūf bayn al-‘Aql wa’l-Naql* (Refutation of Contradiction between Reason and Revelation).

²² Ibn Rajab, *Dbayl Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-‘Uthaymīn (al-Riyāḍ: Maktaba al-‘Ubaykān, 2005) iv:505; Anjum, *Politics*, ch. 5.

²³ Anjum, *Politics*.

the necessity of an infallible leader, he writes: “We do not concede that the imam must be the guardian of the Sharia, but indeed, it is the community that must be the guardian of the Sharia.”²⁴ Theologically, although the very foundation of *Ahl al-Sunna wa 'l-Jama'a* had been the “protectedness from error” (*iṣma*) of the community of Islam, Ibn Taymiyya had been more forceful than others in operationalizing this belief: “the protectedness [from error] of the community [as a whole] leaves us in no need of the protectedness of the imam,” he declared.²⁵ In his political treatises, this belief had appeared in the form of an unprecedented emphasis on consultation (*shura*), that the ruler, who in his view needed to be no more than an ordinary upright and competent Muslim, was now obliged to seek. Furthermore, even the non-ulama members of the community could figure out the right answer (i.e., perform *ijtihād*) in their field of knowledge and expertise, so long as they possessed the requisite aspect of Islamic learning.²⁶ Establishing one imam, or the caliph, true, was an obligation upon all Muslims, but it was a rational obligation, not merely a ritual one; if the so-called caliph had no power (as was the case in the Mamluk world when he wrote), he was no caliph at all. He pushed back against the elitist visions of theology, spiritual attainment, law, and politics that had come to dominate the classical period. This is the closest to participative vision of society and politics that we encounter in premodern Islam, and crucial to the pro-democracy arguments of the reformist Islamists.²⁷ Arguably, this was the reason that even though Ibn Taymiyya’s vision did not become the mainstream in his own time, would-be reformers wishing to challenge established hierarchy and orthodoxy continually found inspiration in it.

Today, Ibn Taymiyya’s influence on the reformists, particularly in their defense of democracy and political innovation in general, cannot be underestimated. His quotes invariably punctuate the writings of the most vocal defenders of democracy among the reformist Sunni ulama. Ibn Taymiyya and his disciple Ibn al-Qayyim are the most frequently cited authorities in the writings of Qaradawi, who declares these two his most beloved scholars of Islam. He calls to the school of “revivalist Salafis,” which he considers the school of Ibn Taymiyya, while also declaring his independence on certain issues.²⁸ The Moroccan jurist and Islamist leader Raysuni has the following to say when asked about Ibn Taymiyya,

²⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Minbāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya fī naqḍ kalām al-Shī'a wa 'l-Qadariyya*, 4 vol., ed. Muḥammad A. al-Shabrāwī (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Hadith, 1425/2004), 3:270; Anjum, *Politics*, 231.

²⁵ Ibn Taymiyya, *Minbāj*, 3:272–3.

²⁶ *Majmū' fatāwā shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad b. Taymiyya*, 37 vol. (Cairo: Dār al-Rahma, n.d.), 20:93, (henceforth: MF), where Ibn Taymiyya writes, “Similarly, if it is possible for a commoner to do *ijtihād* in some matters, it is permissible for him to do so, for *ijtihād* is a qualification (*manṣīb*) that accepts division (*inqisām*) and compartmentalization (*tajazzī*); what matters is the ability.”

²⁷ For Ibn Taymiyya’s vision, see Anjum, *Politics*, ch. 6; for the reformists’ use of these arguments, see al-Qaradawi and Raysuni’s works discussed below.

²⁸ Y. al-Qaradāwī, *al-Thaqāfa al-'Arabiyya al-Islāmiyya* (Doha: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, 2010; originally authored in 1993), 69–73.

We in the Islamic West [North Africa] are Mālikīs where the school of Ash'arism is the most widespread. . . yet, I must say that Ibn Taymiyya is one of the greatest scholars of Islam and Muslims. I do not hesitate to place him next to Imams Malik, Abu Hanifa, Ahmad, and al-Shafi'i, [who were] the highest authorities of Islam . . . with respect to his deep, encyclopedic knowledge of the sciences of the Sharia, in both types of sciences, those pertaining to revelation as well as reason, such as in logic, the philosophy of the ancients, the sciences of languages, and so on. . . . Without contention and without doubt, Ibn Taymiyya was the revivalist of the eighth century. . . . No one has surpassed him in his knowledge and profundity, and in particular in his revivalist efforts. In fact, I put forth another claim, which is that he is the revivalist of this modern era as well. I say this after extensive, direct experience with the discipline of Islamic tradition, having seen contemporary books, researches, and theses in the universities across the world, as well as with Islamic movements. I say with confidence that Ibn Taymiyya is the most cited scholar in all of the Islamic world, and in the Arab world in particular. He is invoked more frequently than Imams Malik, Abu Hanifa, and has greater influence than Imam Ahmad, Imam al-Shatibi, Ibn Arabi, and al-Ghazzali. This is why I posit that Ibn Taymiyya is a great authority and revivalist among the authorities and revivalists of this modern era.²⁹

This exceptional tribute bears out in the writings of these prodemocracy ulama who, arguably, mobilize the reformist spirit of Ibn Taymiyya far more frequently and holistically than do the Wahhabized Salafis.

None of this is to argue that the reformists' advocacy of democracy should be considered a purely theological conviction, or that Salafi Islam is inherently democratic. It should not be forgotten that in advocating democracy, reformist Islamists have an interest: they are out of power, suffering from prolonged, systematic persecution and exclusion. In arguing for an Islamic democracy, furthermore, they draw on both the aspirations of the majority of Muslims and the only oppositional language easily available to them in the autocratic secular states where religion, modernism, and democratic institutions have been creatively combined into fairly stable dictatorships backed by effective nationalist mythologies and blessed by the establishment ulama and, most crucially of all, Western powers.³⁰ Nor does this mean that the reformists' embrace of democracy is merely instrumental, lacking "sincerity." In part because, as Talal Asad has alluded, conceptual and discursive transformations or importations cannot be merely instrumental, as they alter the very subjects who employ or oppose them, and the discourse that is thus generated carries its own significance.³¹ Furthermore, the reformist Islamists from Middle

²⁹ Raysūnī, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5997TtcwG5I> (accessed 29 Feb 2016)

³⁰ The most comprehensive survey of Muslim societies by Gallup concludes that 80% Muslims worldwide want democracy, and about the same number want Sharia, as part of their government. See J. Esposito and D. Mogahed, *Who Speaks For Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (Gallop Press, 2008); also: <http://media.gallup.com/MuslimWestFacts/PDF/GALLUPMUSLIMSTUDIESIslamandDemocracy030607rev.pdf> (Accessed 14 March 2016)

³¹ Asad, *Formations*, 222.

East to South Asia have for nearly a century consistently advocated democracy, and have developed a more or less sophisticated theological and legal set of justifications and practical behaviors. For the majority of lay Islamists, the compatibility of Islam and democracy is a deeply entrenched belief, so much so that the frequent claim that Islam in fact originated democracy goes without saying.

In a 1993 fatwa, Qaradawi expressed dismay that there are still some among Muslims who question democracy. It is merely a tool, Qaradawi contended, that can be put to good or bad use, labeling all those who disagree as ignorant, narrow-minded, or idealistic. Democracy is necessary “for realizing justice and consultation, respect for human rights, and obstructing tyranny of arrogant rulers”, and that “the essence of democracy is part of the core of Islam itself;” it is little more than the right of the umma to elect its rulers, majority rule, plurality of parties (which is comparable to the plurality of legal schools in Islam), the right of the minority in opposition, and independence of the judiciary.³² In Qaradawi’s view, democracy is a principle of government opposed to monarchy and dictatorship of one man or elite, not to the rule of God.

Raysūnī has argued in greater depth for various fundamentals of democracy from the perspective of Islamic legal theory in a series of books (all in Arabic): *[The Role of] Consultation in the Battle for Development* (2007), *The Community is the Foundation* (2012), *Majority Rule from a Sharia Perspective* (2012), and others.³³

Qaradawi and Raysuni’s many intellectual allies, including the left-leaning Islamist intellectuals, labelled by one scholars as “the new Islamists,” such as Muḥammad ‘Imāra, Sayf ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ, Muḥammad Salīm al-‘Awwā, Ṭāriq al-Bishrī, to name a few, have ventured much further toward liberal and secular themes since the 1980’s.³⁴ As far as the conservative Salafis are concerned, the intellectuals and secular academics can be easily dismissed as pawns of secularism or the West; due to his authority as a scholar and global influence, Qaradawi is often the prime target of this criticism, and, if online refutations are any indication, Raysuni is fast catching up.

The Salafi Spectrum Today

In a recent article, arguing for the need to explore the relationship between Salafis and democracy, a prodemocracy Saudi intellectual and activist (residing in London), Sa’d al-Faqīh has provided an apt beginning by offering a classification of the various

³² Y. al-Qaradāwī, “Islam and Democracy,” in R. Euben and M. Q. Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton University Press, 2009); also quoted in Mufti, *Naqd*, 69.

³³ Aḥmad al-Raysūnī, *al-Shūrā fī Ma’rikati al-Binā’* (al-Rabāt: Manshūrāt al-Ma’had al-‘Alamī Li’l-Fikr al-Islāmī: 2007); *al-Umma Hiy al-Aṣl: Muqāraba Ta’šīliyya Li-Qaḍāya al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya* (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2012); *Qaḍiyya al-Aghlabiyya Min al-Wajb al-Shar’iyya* (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2012). All these books are available online at the author’s website: <http://www.raissouni.ma/> (Accessed 10 June 2015)

³⁴ R. W. Baker, *Islamism without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

Salafi trends and an overview of their attitudes toward democracy.³⁵ Unlike Muslim Brotherhood – which can be seen as the child of early reformist Salafi thought – contemporary Salafism is not an organization or a political party. Faqih, wisely, therefore, speaks of a “Salafi spectrum,” and offers a largely Saudi-centered classification of Salafi groups, leaving out the aforementioned reformist Salafis. This has some justification, for although Muslim regions from Morocco to India have contributed to the contemporary Salafi trend, Saudi Arabia has been its veritable center.

Arranged from the least to most political, Salafi groups are classified by Faqih as follows: (i) The die-hard quietist-loyalists who forbid any criticism of the Saudi or any Muslim government, known as Jāmis or Madkhalis, so-called after their leaders. In religious orientation, quietists range from Wahhabi (aligned with the traditional Wahhabi orthodoxy) to ahl al-ḥadīth or *atharī*.³⁶ These group expresses no political ideals other than total loyalty to the Saudi regime, although the same corpus of teachings has been taken in other directions, such as total loyalty to any regime, or excommunication and rejection, as by the jihadi-Salafi discussed below. (ii) The grand Wahhabi shaykhs atop the hierarchy in the religious *field* in Saudi Arabia, who while in practice accepting and underpinning the monarchy's political legitimacy pragmatically, have sometimes intimated a more idealistic vision in their writings, as betrayed by their cautious support of the Ṣaḥwī. ³⁷ These first two trends are quietist, ultraconservative, and Saudi-centered. (iii) The third trend, which may be labeled as the intellectual (*ilmīyya*) Salafis, is primarily non-Saudi, and traces its lineage to the early twentieth-century reformists, who are most responsible for reviving the Taymiyyan legacy. Among their number can be included independent Salafis, like the Egyptian-Kuwaiti Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Abd al-Khālīq and Egyptian-American Ṣalāḥ al-Ṣāwī. Perhaps the best instance of this trend is *Anṣār al-Sunna* societies in Egypt, Sudan, and elsewhere.³⁸ (iv) There are notable figures who are Salafi in religious orientation (i.e., creed and practice) but part of the Muslim Brotherhood with respect to political

³⁵ Sa’d al-Faqih, “al-Salafiyyūn wa’l-Dīmuqraṭiyya: Dirāsa lā budda minhā,” https://www.gulfpolicies.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=602:2012-01-04-19-45-49&catid=147:2011-04-09-07-47-31 (accessed 27 May 2015). On al-Faqih (b. 1957), a professor of surgery at King Sa’ud University who once identified as a Ṣaḥwī intellectual, see Lacroix, 174.

³⁶ For al-Albani and his students’ critique of the Wahhabis’ adherence to Hanbali madhhab and their consequent falling out, see Lacroix, *Awakening*, 81ff.

³⁷ Lacroix, *Awakening*, 183; see pp. 6–7 for his deployment of Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “field.”

³⁸ *Anṣār al-Sunnab al-Muḥammadiyya* is to be distinguished from the recent militant groups in Iraq by similar names. It was established in Cairo by the Azharī Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥamid al-Fiḳī, who was critical of Muslim Brotherhood for their political activism from the beginning, thus founding a tradition of rivalry that has lasted until today. One scholar notes, “Together with a Shariah court judge, Aḥmad Shākīr (d. 1958), and the publisher Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1969), Fiḳī (d. 1959) and the Anṣār al-Sunna would be the base of Salafism in Egypt, laying out its main features.” Brown, “Salafi Transformation,” 5. Strongest in Egypt, this group has offshoots in Sudan and other, mostly African, countries. It has entertained increasingly strong ties with the Saudi religious establishment. Others of Egypt’s Salafi organizations such as *al-Da’wa al-Salafiyya* would fall into this category.

activism.³⁹ (v) Perhaps the most relevant and numerous group of Salafis are those known as the “*Ṣaḥwīs*,” indicating their identification with the *Ṣaḥwā*—the awakening—a general trend of the rise of interest in Islam.⁴⁰ They comprise scholars and intellectuals who have been mobilizing for wide-scale reforms in Saudi Arabia, and were responsible for protests against the Saudi regime’s decision in 1990 to invite the American troop against the threat posed by Saddam after his occupation of Kuwait. The regime successfully deflated the movement by imprisoning for several years its leaders, Salmān al-‘Awda and Safar al-Ḥawwālī, and cultivating anti-*Ṣaḥwa* groups, such as the quietist-loyalist *Jāmīs* and *Madkhalīs*.⁴¹ The *Ṣaḥwīs* remain, however, the most intellectually vibrant group, who are distinguished from the establishment Wahhabis (the first two groups) by their engagement with the wider Muslim world and the West. They share the Wahhabi concern with creedal purity, the intellectual Salafis’ concern with the Taymiyyan legacy, but also the Brotherhood’s concern with the challenge posed by modern ideologies. The Wahhabi fear and dislike of *ḥizbiyya*, factionalism, that could create a loyalty other than that based on sound creed and faith, has successfully deterred *Ṣaḥwīs* from forming a Brotherhood like organization. Precisely because of this perhaps, these shaykhs act as a non-corporate group of like-minded preachers and writers, with little that is particularly Saudi about their preaching. Limiting their power to politically mobilize perhaps, this *modus operandi* gives them a world-wide influence among the Arabic-speaking communities. Members of these last three groups tend to be the more engaged thinkers, and range from cautious advocates of democracy to anti-democratic. (vii) Lastly, there are the jihādī-Salafis, who constitute a few distinct trends, depending on their varying attitudes toward “near” and “far” enemies.⁴² Whether al-Qaeda, ISIS, or other jihadis, they generally reject the modern state system as well as democracy.

The Case against Democracy

What follows is a presentation of critiques of democracy leveled by contemporary Islamic figures, Salafi as well as others. The most extensive such critique I have come across is authored by Abū Baṣīr ‘Abd Al-Mun‘im Muṣṭafā Ḥalīma al-Ṭarṭūsī [Abu Baseer], a Syrian jihādī-atharī Salafī and a disciple of al-Albānī. Abu Baseer’s sprawling 500-page

³⁹ Al-Faqīh’s examples of these include the Yemeni ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī (1942–) and Palestinian ‘Umar Sulaymān al-Ashqar (1940–2012).

⁴⁰ These are concentrated in Saudi Arabia, and this lack of precise affiliation is in keeping with the Saudi religious dislike for forming organization or parties that are seen as divisive. By their detractors, they are known as *Surūrīs*, so named after the Syrian former Brotherhood member of Qutbist line, Muḥammad Surūr Zayn al-‘Ābidīn; see Lacroix, *Awakening*, 45, 69. For more, see his website: <http://www.surour.net/> (Accessed 10 June 2015)

⁴¹ Lacroix, *Awakening*, 193, 211. For more, see Rabī‘ al-Madkhalī’s website: <http://www.rabee.net/ar/> (Accessed 10 June 2015)

⁴² Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

treatise, *The Ruling of Islam on Democracy and Party Pluralism* (1999),⁴³ was published first in 1990 and updated a decade later. It is divided into a dozen or so points of attack against democracy. His jihadist commitment does not fit into easy stereotypes; he rejects democracy and the modern state system altogether to the point of excommunicating scholars such as Qaradawi who endorse democracy, but prohibits violence against non-combatants as well as suicide bombing.⁴⁴ He has gained renown as the mufti of the Syrian opposition against the regime of Bashar al-Assad regime. Having fled Syria as a result of Hafez al-Assad's crackdown against Islamist uprisings in the 1980's, he has sympathies vested with the Syrian fighters rather than the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), whom he declares to be Kharijites,⁴⁵ or al-Qaeda's militia, Jabhat al-Nuṣra, which he severely criticizes for exploiting the conflict for its own ends.⁴⁶ Other Salafi critiques of democracy considered here include those by a Saudi Ṣahwī academic, Muḥammad Aḥmad Muftī⁴⁷ and an Egyptian Salafi preacher, Muḥammad b. Shākīr al-Sharīf.⁴⁸

Rejection of democracy is far from the preserve of the Salafis alone, and some of the most strident opposition comes from those diametrically opposed to the various Salafi trends in terms of hermeneutic methodology and attitude toward tradition. Such establishment ulama adhere to what in the late-medieval period came to be understood as the "Sunni orthodoxy" in the Mamluk lands (Syria and Egypt), and it entailed being Ash'arī in theology, madhhab-bound (*taqlidī*) in law, and often adherence to some Shari'a-bound Sufi order. Such critics of the Wahhabi as well as reformist Salafi trends included the Syrian scholar Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (1929–2013), and, in a more political vein, the Palestinian scholar Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabhānī (1909–77). An Ash'arī and grandson of the eminent Sufi, Ash'arī, Ottoman loyalist, Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (1849–1932), Taqī al-Dīn founded and led Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr al-Islāmī (Islamic Liberation Party), the only modern Islamist movement single-mindedly dedicated to resurrecting the caliphate and against

⁴³ Abū Baṣīr al-Ṭarsūsī, *Hukm al-Islām fī al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya wa Ta'addudiyya al-Ḥizbiyya* (n.p., 1999; originally published in 1990).

⁴⁴ His personal website: <http://www.abubaseer.bizland.com/> (Accessed 4 June 2015). Given his jihadi stance, so he claims, his books are often unable to find a publisher in Arab countries, and the internet is the way they are circulated. For his personal life, a series of interviews are available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7zvagCHHOU> (Accessed 4 June 2015).

⁴⁵ For an interesting recent work on the various contemporary readings of the Kharijites, see H. Timani, *Modern Intellectual Readings of the Kharijites* (Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2007).

⁴⁶ His sparring with other jihadists is available on his website where these judgments are frequently repeated, see for instance: "Ballighū Abā Jihād al-Shishānī annahu qad abṭala jihādahu," <http://www.abubaseer.bizland.com/refutation.htm> (accessed 4 March 2016).

⁴⁷ Muḥammad Aḥmad Muftī, *Naqd al-Judbūr al-Fikriyya li'l-Dīmuqrāṭiyya al-Gharbiyya* [A Critique of the Intellectual Foundations of Western Democracy] (al-Riyāḍ: Maktaba al-Malik Fahd al-Waṭaniyya, Majalla al-Bayān, 1423/2002). The author is a professor of political science at King Saud University in Riyadh, who obtained his PhD from University of California, Riverside in 1983. That he may be sympathetic to the Ṣahwa, apart from his writings, is suggested by his writings in *al-Bayān*, the Ṣahwa's main-stream journal.

⁴⁸ Muḥammad b. Shākīr al-Sharīf, *Aslama al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya: Ḥaqīqa am Wahm—Dirāsa Naqdiyya* [Islamization of Democracy: Fact or Fiction?] (Riyadh: Dār Ṭaiba, 2007).

any democratic interpretation of that ancient institution.⁴⁹ Hence the not-so-subtly titled monograph, *Democracy is a system of Kufr* (1995) by Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr's leader Abdalqadim Zalloom (1924–2003).⁵⁰ An intellectual-spiritual critique of democracy in favor of Islamically authentic *shūra* (consultation) is put forth by the late scholar, Sufi leader, and founder of the popular Moroccan Islamic movement, Justice and Benevolence Party, 'Abd al-Salām Yāsīn (1928–2012).⁵¹

Democracy as a Western Imposition

The antidemocrats, the Salafi Abu Baseer and the non-Salafi, Ash'arīs such as Zalloom and Buti, share the curious contention that democracy is a system that the West promotes in, if not imposes on, the Muslims. To Abu Baseer, it is the “the crusading states” or “world's forces of disbelief” that “impose the religion of democracy upon the oppressed and subjugated peoples [of the Muslim world]” whereas for Zalloom, it is the “West” that promotes democracy in “Muslim countries.” The charge is the same in essence, but it is noteworthy that Abu Baseer is careful to eschew the modern, self-designation of “the West” that Zalloom accepts, in favor of the medieval Muslim designation of the enemy in the wake of the crusades.⁵² Ironically, in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011, Islamists, secularists, as well as many Western academics, have made the exact opposite claim: that Western powers have singled out the Middle East to obstruct democracy due to interests such as access to oil and the safety of Israel. This discrepancy can perhaps in part be attributed to the changing policies of different American administrations toward exporting democracy to the Middle East, but is better explained by the different meanings of “the West” and its agency. If “the West” is understood as a continuity stretching back to the beginning of colonialism, if not all the way to the crusades, and deemed responsible for the large-scale changes in Muslim societies that have transpired since, democracy can be seen as a Western imposition. Western institutions are, thus, seductions brought in to “dilute the concern for Islam” and retain the secular systems that are already in place.⁵³

⁴⁹ E.g., M. S. Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, *al-Salafiyya: Marḥala Zamaniyya Mubarakā la Madhhab Islami*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1998); R. Pankhurst, *The Inevitable Caliphate?: A History of the Struggle for Global Islamic Union, 1924 to the Present* (Hurst & Company, 2013).

⁵⁰ Abdul Qadeem Zalloom, *Democracy is a System of Kufr* (London: Al-Khilafa Publications, 1995) shares essential critiques with those of Abu Baseer, but his point of reference is the critiques of democracy formulated by the founder of the party, Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabhānī in 1950's: *Nizām al-Islām* (Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr, 1953), and *al-Shakhsīyya al-Islāmiyya*, translated as *The Islamic Personality*, p. 138–154.

⁵¹ 'Abd al-Salām Yāsīn, *al-Shūra wa'l-Dimuqrāṭiyya* (authored in 1416/1995 and published in book form shortly thereafter, the text is available on his website: <http://www.yassine.net/ar/document/835.shtml> (accessed 18 June 2015)).

⁵² Zalloom, 5; Abu Baseer, *Ḥukm al-Islām*, 6, 12; note the pagination is as it appears in the Microsoft Word document that is available on Abu Baseer's aforementioned website.

⁵³ Abu Baseer, *Ḥukm al-Islām*, 12.

In contrast, the reformists generally accept a secular self-representation of the modern West and wish to selectively embrace aspects of modernity, and prefer complex political, economic and historically contingent explanations of motives. Thus, the West to them is not the great crusading continuity, but a conglomerate of power and wealth, accumulated in a few political and economic institutions, separable in terms of their interests even from most denizens of the West. Incidentally, an intimate knowledge of Western societies seems to play no role in deciding on which side one falls: the anti-democracy Abu Baseer had for a time resided in London, whereas pro-democracy Qaradawi and Raysuni, for instance, have no first-hand experience of Western democracies. It is also notable that other Salafi authorities in the West, while sharing many of Abu Baseer's criticisms, do not maintain such sweeping views of the West, and even permit participating in Western democracies.⁵⁴ Nor is a sweeping view of the West the necessary cause of anti-democratic stance. The Saudi academic Mufti and Moroccan leader and intellectual Yasin, both critics of democracy, display a more fine-grained knowledge of Western political philosophy and culture than either Qaradawi or Raysuni. It is precisely Yasin's greater concern with philosophical and spiritual attachments of democracy that reflects in his critique of democracy and argument for Islamic consultation as an authentic alternative. Those who fundamentally reject all business with modernity, range from the jihadi-Salafis and most Wahhabi authorities, to their arch opponents such as the pro-Asad Syrian scholar Buti. Buti not only rejected democracy, but prohibited Muslims from even accepting the citizenship of non-Muslim countries.⁵⁵ Such a sweeping view of the West as an eternally crusading power, nevertheless, does add vehemence and intransigence to one's rejection of democracy and projects an absolute incommensurability of the West with Islam in a way that mirrors the civilizational clash of a Samuel Huntington or a Bernard Lewis and right-wing politicians and pundits at large. This binary view of the world, needless to say, is not necessarily attached to any particular religious methodology or school, even if it appears with particular vehemence in jihadi-athari writings.

Defining Democracy

All Muslim critics of democracy mentioned here are insistent that liberalism, secularism, individualism, and even a kind of libertinism (i.e., moral relativism), are a *necessary* ingredient of democracy. While their prodemocracy interlocutors generally agree that the West is the source of these ills, they dispute that these ills are *necessary* accompaniments of democracy. Since secularism, individualism, and moral laxity have spread in

⁵⁴ See Ṣalāḥ al-Ṣāwī's qualified acceptance of participation in democratic institutions in Egypt, and on plurality of parties within an Islamic framework: <http://el-wasat.com/assawy/?p=9380#more-9380> (accessed 17 June 2015); while more conservative than Qaradawi, his views are not very different.

⁵⁵ M. Yusri Ibrāhīm, "*Ḥukm al-tajannus bi-jinsiyyati dawla gbayr muslima*," <http://www.salmajed.com/node/175> (accessed 18 June 2015)

contemporary Muslim societies without their being any worthwhile democracies, they argue, a causal relationship is hard to establish. If anything, an Islamic democracy may be the only bulwark against nefarious ideas and ideologies. The precise nature of democracy, therefore, is an important intellectual battleground, to which we now turn.

Against those who claim, by offering a stripped-down, proceduralist, if not instrumentalist, conception of democracy, that democracy could be Islamized, the antidemocrats insist on a maximalist and culturally and ideologically loaded definition of democracy. In this, they are largely in agreement with Arab secular and liberal writers.⁵⁶ Democracy has requisites and foundations without which it is inconceivable according to its Western “founders.”

Notwithstanding its many versions and interpretations, Abu Baseer insists, democracy in any form necessarily requires first and foremost the notion of the people’s *sovereignty*, such that they are the source of all political and legislative authority in the land. Echoing Sayyid Qutb, he insists that democracy is the lordship of man over man, rather than the rule of the one true God. Second, freedom of religion, speech and expression are necessary conditions for democracy, and they utterly contradict Islamic legal limits to blasphemy and punishment for apostasy, promiscuity, and other crimes against God and the community, that would be permitted in a liberal democracy since they appear not to harm individuals. Third, the institutions of democracy such as the plurality of parties (which opens up the possibility of non-Islamic parties coming to power), and majoritarianism (since God, not majority’s opinion, is the final judge of what is right), all contradict submission to God.

What enables all these possibilities, both Abu Baseer and Zalloom argue, is nothing but secularism, the elimination of religion’s role from public life, requiring the transference of authority from God to the people and the construction of a political community on the basis of territorial belonging rather than belief. Rendering unto Caesar his due and to God his, democracy is a Christian form of misguidance that is tantamount to disbelief according to Islam. Reformist Islamists consider secularism an anathema, but by embracing democracy they are embracing secularism in disguise.⁵⁷ So adamant is Abu Baseer on positing these elements as inalienable to democracy that to the common response of pro-democracy ulama that “We shall limit [our democracy] according to what God has revealed, and not permit blasphemy, libertinism or sexual promiscuity, etc.”—he responds, “Then it will no longer be democracy, it will become Islam.”⁵⁸

Suggesting perhaps that the democratic ideal is never in fact a reality, antidemocrats all point to the ubiquitous Western self-criticism for failing to live up to its democratic

⁵⁶ Mufti, for instance, invokes secularists’ contention to make his point: ‘Abd al-Razzāq ‘Id and Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya bayn al-‘Almāniyya wa’l-Islām* (Dimashq: Dār al-Fikr, 1999), 78. This book records a debate between an Islamist and a secularist; Mufti’s book can be seen as a response to points made by the Islamist participant, ‘Abd al-Jabbār.

⁵⁷ Abu Baseer, *Hukm al-Islām*, in particular expositions of points 5, 10, and 11; Zalloom, 10.

⁵⁸ Abu Baseer, *Hukm al-Islām*, 63.

values, the de facto limitation of rule to the few rich and powerful rather than the people at large.⁵⁹ One may retort, of course, that nor is the Islamic ideal ever fully a reality, but that is precisely the antidemocrats' point: if Muslims must try to live up to an unattainable ideal, it must be Islam, not democracy.⁶⁰ To turn democracy into the asymptotic ideal of one's life is to worship it.

Intellectual Salafi Critique of Democracy

If Abu Baseer represents the rightmost end of the Salafi spectrum, arguing through a barrage of Qur'an and hadith texts (open, reformists would argue, to multiple interpretations) not afraid to anathematize and excommunicate even senior reformist ulama for endorsing democrats, other authors offer a more nuanced perspective. Perhaps the most sophisticated of the critiques is offered by the Saudi academic, Aḥmad Mufti, in his *Critique of the Foundations of Western Democracy*.⁶¹ He begins with a thorough survey of Western definitions of democracy. Tracing the history of attempts at defining democracy, he notes that its "standard classical definition" as the people's self-rule relied on the concepts of the "public good" and the "general will" and the assumption of rational action on the part of the individuals, all of which idealizations were found to be untenable, as subsequent Western critics have shown. Procedural definitions attempt to overcome these difficulties by distancing democracy from any philosophical foundation and focusing on a number of procedural conditions such as regular, competitive elections, political pluralism, and participation. The effectiveness of democracy in such a scheme is measured by the presence of competitive parties, political decision-making through interaction and compromise between various parties, majoritarianism, political equality as expressed in universal suffrage, separation of powers, rule of law, and a written constitution.⁶² Proceduralist definitions have been criticized for neglecting values and practices of democracy that ensure meaningful participation, in addition to reinforcing elitism, and the status quo in states with established procedures which, nonetheless, have failed to avert the rise of plutocracy in the oldest established democratic systems like the United States. Such definitions fail because, Mufti notes, they also make the untenable assumptions of universal availability of information and rational choice. Furthermore, in their efforts to universalize democracy, proceduralists lose sight of "the factors and conditions connected to the rise

⁵⁹ Abu Baseer, *Ḥukm al-Islām*, 19; Zalloom, 10–11. Curiously, those jihadis who legitimate killing civilians on the grounds that in a democracy, all people are responsible for a government's decision, are not attuned to this insight. For this argument as al-Qaeda's justification, see Lecroix, 252.

⁶⁰ Abu Baseer, *Ḥukm al-Islām*, 19

⁶¹ Mufti, *Naqd*.

⁶² Mufti quotes a number of Western authorities: David Ingersoll, *Communism, Fascism, and Democracy* (1971); Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1959); Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991); Zevedei Barbu, *Democracy and Dictatorship: Their Psychology and Patterns of Life* (1956); Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (1982); in addition to a number of Arab authors, pp. 15–22.

and persistence of democracy in Western societies.”⁶³ The proponents of an “ideological definition” correctly recognize that democracy is based on a “certain view of the universe, life, and man, and possesses a creedal dimension . . . which has its underpinning in liberalism, whose most prominent theorists are John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith, and David Hume. Despite their mutual differences, these theorists share the individualist concept of man.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, Mufti notes, man in this philosophy possesses inalienable “natural” rights, given not by God but present by virtue of being human; what has not been given by God, cannot be taken away by God. In addition, liberal philosophy denies the authority of shared, social values; individuals choose their own moral values, limited only by the principle of no harm (21).

There are other psychological traits that accompany democratic life, such as a constant desire for and openness to change, which is based on the liberal notion that societies are not based on stable principles or beliefs, but the result of individual choices and agreements (22). There is an ineluctable propensity in the democratic mind to see truth, justice, and right as dependent on social trends; with no stable foundations, social statistics become the standard for most. The democratic way of life requires a “sportive spirit” of experimentation with and acceptance of different beliefs in everything, religion included. The presence of “a single moral vision for values in the society contradicts the idea of pluralism; those who possess such a vision of a system of belief and morality inevitably end up at odds with this pluralism” (22). People inevitably disagree in their values and commitments; in such cases, he points out, democracy requires compromise (23). How on earth could Islam, he asks, require that its authority be challenged, relativized, and put up for vote? No single moral and religious vision, let alone Islam, can be compatible with such a society.

These are the reasons that democracy is *in essence* a secular political system. It thrives on the so-called autonomy and maturity of individual conscience, which are codes for secular individualism made available by the separation of religion from public life. Some Western theorists even hold, Mufti notes approvingly, that it is Christianity in particular that has an inherent propensity toward democracy due to its compatibility with secularism (24).

Having argued for the inextricability of liberalism and secularism from democracy as a total lifestyle, Mufti seeks to establish that democracy, as a political system and philosophy, is founded on the premise that the nation (*umma*) is the source of political authority (*sulṭa siyāsīyya*) as well as sovereignty (*siyāda*), which makes it essentially a non-religious political system (31–2). In practice, since there is no such thing as “general will” per se, this boils down to the rule of the majority; that majority, too, is so only in theory, for it is only the politically active citizens, a minority in most cases, who cast votes. The most crucial challenge this rule of majority presents is that it is incompatible with the

⁶³ Mufti, 20.

⁶⁴ Mufti, 21.

rule of a God-given law. Turning for the first time to Qur'anic verses and quotes from religious authorities (Ibn Taymiyya features in particular), Mufti too concludes that rejecting the Sharia, which he contends is necessary in order to adopt Western democracy in any of its forms, is tantamount to disbelief by the agreement of Muslims (40).

Mufti turns next to what he considers, based again on primarily Western sources, to be the spirit and ethics of democracy. Crucial in this respect is the ethic of compromise. Such compromise is a violation of religious ethics in matters whose authority is beyond human opinion and evaluation. Muslims are commanded to turn to God and his Prophet's teachings, rather than compromise, in case of disagreement (50). This ethic of compromise has, Mufti contends, already damaged Muslim societies, as evident in the promulgation of man-made laws and suspension of Sharia in most Muslim countries and its limitation to personal status courts, and the adoption of capitalism through superficially Islamizing it, creating the so-called "Islamic banks" (51). The same ethic today emboldens secularists to call themselves secularist Muslims, others adopt a socialist Islam, yet others a democratic Islam; the teachings and laws of Islam, in the process, have all but disappeared (51).

Given that Salafi Islam has a robust notion of community-centered political authority, it follows that the greatest sticking point for them in principle is the secular and secularizing notion that sovereignty (*siyāda*) belongs to the people (*sha'b*) or the nation (*umma*), rather than God. That sovereignty, understood as the highest source of all authorities and the ultimate authority to legislate, belongs to God alone, has been a matter of unanimous consensus in premodern Islam, and literally the battle cry of all Islamists from the onset of the twentieth century. Hundreds of treatises have been authored over the last century in defense of this thesis and its myriad implications have been explored by authors from all manner of Muslim viewpoints, including Sunnis and Shi'a, reformist Azharis and traditional taqlidis, Salafis, Brotherhood, and Jamaat-e-Islami (the South Asian equivalent of Brotherhood), and others. The well-known 1925 treatise of 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq, *al-Islām wa Usūl al-Ḥukm*, arguing for a secular interpretation of Islam inaugurated a storm of scholarly treatises and public condemnations, and turned into the exception that proves the rule. If there has ever been a modern Muslim consensus on any issue, this one must be it.⁶⁵

Abu Baseer insists, unsurprisingly, that since giving laws (*tashrī'* or *ḥukm*) is the right of God alone, by the overwhelming emphasis of Qur'anic and Sunna imperatives, and consensus of Muslims, to give that right to humans is tantamount to disbelief. He takes the notion of authority for granted, without separating political, religious, and legal

⁶⁵ Strictly speaking, 'Abd al-Rāziq questioned not the divine authority to give religious law, but whether that law translates into political authority in the modern sense. A profile of the whole affair is given by Muḥammad 'Imāra, *Ma'rika al-Islām wa Uṣūl al-Ḥukm* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Shurūq, 1989). A Ṣaḥwī scholar, F. al-'Ajlān, mentions over two dozen treatises by (Sunnī) authorities from various Muslim schools of thought establishing specifically the principle of the sovereignty of the Sharia: "Su'āl al-Siyāda fī al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Mu'āṣir," <http://www.albayan.co.uk/MGZarticle2.aspx?ID=2247> (Accessed 9 June 2015).

elements, and reserves his rhetorical firepower for demonstrating through a barrage of scriptural proofs how emphatically any and all kind of command or judgment (*ḥukm*) in Islam belongs to God.

All critics of democracy similarly find the idea of political equality of all citizens regardless of their religion an obvious violation of the Islamic character of the polity. For the equality of Muslims with non-Muslims, scholars of Islam with laymen, and the pious with the impious, would lead to a lower and lower common denominator, such that even a presumably Islamic democracy, by the very territorial, nationalist, and liberal logic that it imposes, would lead to secularism.

The reformists could grant most of the critics' arguments, except that they exhibit greater optimism and openness toward the possibility of adapting and selecting. If democracy is understood, for instance, in accordance with Charles Tilly's definition as a process of *increasing broad, protected, egalitarian, mutually binding consultation*,⁶⁶ then the Islamic emphasis of the *sultān* (authority, rather than sovereignty) of "the umma" to elect the ruler and hold him accountable is a promising point of departure for an Islamic democracy. Such a definition accepts limitations to each of the cornerstones of democracy: breadth and equality are qualified in some ways since the umma is primarily understood as the Muslim community with a fair, broad, and broadening, but not equal, measure of protections afforded to non-Muslims.⁶⁷ Protection of the opposition, so long as such opposition is on Islamic grounds, and the mutually binding nature of consultation are two critical features that, as shown below, are granted by many of the intellectual Salafis.

What is "Salafi" about Antidemocrats?

The critiques of democracy presented so far including the question of sovereignty, the potential undermining of the Sharia, and the ethic of individualism and libertinism, are hardly unique to the Salafis. There are a few subsidiary themes, however, that, although not exclusive to Salafism, are often identified as characteristic of Wahhabi and athari doctrines that contradict not just the full-fledge theory but what are often taken to be the basic procedures of democracy.

One among them is the doctrine of *al-walā' wa'l-barā'*—loyalty to the believers and disavowal of allegiance to others. This doctrine owes itself primarily to the Wahhabi influence, which they have excessively emphasized at the expense of the counterbalancing Islamic doctrines, such as benevolence and charity to non-hostile non-Muslims, and

the need for peaceful coexistence in order, if nothing else, to call them to Islam.⁶⁸ More

⁶⁶ Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 14ff.

⁶⁷ For the reformists' notion of non-Muslim rights in an Islamic state, see F. Huwaydi, *Muwāṭinūn lā dbimmiyyūn* [Citizens, not Protected Subjects] (Beirut and Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1985).

⁶⁸ Huwaydi, *Muwāṭinūn*.

devastating for any prospect of democracy is the Wahhabi expansion of this doctrine's purview to include other Muslims with whom they disagreed.⁶⁹ Muslim scholars unanimously agree, contends Abu Baseer, that anyone who is pleased with disbelief is a disbeliever.⁷⁰ Muslim democrats, therefore, by merely acquiescing to a system in which a political party may uphold doctrines of disbelief or advocate ruling by laws other than God's would be obliged to guaranteeing the rights of such parties and such individuals, especially if the Islamists are themselves in power. Quoting hadiths that warn of general ruin unless the righteous command what is right and prohibit what is wrong, Abu Baseer draws sharp contrast with the rules of liberal democracy.⁷¹

Even more immediate than the rights of non-Muslims is the issue of tolerating disagreements within the Muslim community. The view shared by most Islamist democrats that disagreements and differences in opinion are a natural part of life, as evident by the multiplicity of legal schools in Islam universally considered by all Muslims to be equally legitimate, and that political disagreements could be therefore treated in the same way, is rejected by the antidemocrats. Pluralism of parties, Abu Baseer maintains, is tantamount to factionalism and sectarianism, which have been most clearly prohibited in the Quran and Sunna, as they violate the most emphatic imperative of the unity of the faithful.⁷² Once again, these ideas are shared by all critics of democracy such as Zalloom and Buti, but most inflexibly upheld by the Salafis today.⁷³

Finally, the principle of majoritarianism, essential to a democracy, comes under special attack by the Salafis. Abu Baseer contends that there is much in the Quran and Sunna to suggest that the majority is often in error. Most people's faith is tainted with polytheism (Qur'an, 12:106), following the majority of the people of the earth is sure to lead to error (6:116), nearly always the prophets were rejected by the majority, and a hadith teaches that Islam began as a stranger and will become one once again, and so on.⁷⁴ Confronted with traditions that recommend staying with the congregation (*jamā'a*) or the great majority of Muslims (*al-sawād al-a'zam*), Abu Baseer quotes the sayings of the salaf figures who reinterpreted the congregation to mean not the majority, but the righteous ones, even if there are only one or two such persons in the entire community (53). These objections, while not unique to contemporary Salafis, are raised with such vehemence and intransigence that, it appears, are unique to the Wahhabi and athari Salafis.

⁶⁹ Commins, *Wahhabi Mission*; Wagemakers, 184.

⁷⁰ Abu Baseer, *Hukm al-Islām*, 48.

⁷¹ Abu Baseer, *Hukm al-Islām*, 49.

⁷² Abu Baseer, *Hukm al-Islām*, 51.

⁷³ Buti frequently berated democracy and, as he lauded the Syrian presidents-for-life; in his 2000 speech at the passing of Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, he noted the deceased leader was not only divinely supported but enjoyed untainted and unfailing love and loyalty of his subjects that cannot be imagined in these "confused, fabricated democracies." Al-Būṭī, *Hādibā mā qultubu amām ba'd al-mulūk wa 'l-ru'asā'* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2010).

⁷⁴ Abu Baseer, *Hukm al-Islām*, 52.

Other Salafis, in contrast, do not see these issues as deal-breakers. The Brotherhood-Salafi scholar, ‘Umar Sulaymān al-Ashqar (d. 2012), pragmatically permits and advocates participating in democratic institutions, in order to gain political leadership skills and political acumen. The intellectual Salafi scholars like the Egyptian-Kuwaiti ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Abd al-Khālīq and Egyptian-American Ṣalāḥ al-Ṣawī, hold the same opinion. Both of these influential Salafi authorities excoriated the Egyptian Salafi Ḥizb al-Nūr for betraying President Morsi; ‘Abd al-Khālīq’s strongly worded commendation even compared Ḥizb al-Nūr to the Kharijites for agreeing to violate the term of a legitimately elected ruler, al-Ṣawī’s more technically worded response calls their act “*baghy*”—the word for rebellion against a legitimate ruler in Islamic jurisprudence.⁷⁵ The intellectual Salafis even embrace party pluralism *within an Islamic framework*, and endorse democratic institutions while stridently rejecting liberal, secular aspects of democracy, positions that are identical to those taken by the conservative end of the reformist spectrum.⁷⁶

When the Rubber Hits the Road: Democracy and the New Islamists

These theoretical nuances, however, are severely tested in the real world of brutal Neomamluk politics of the Arab autocrats backed by a nervous Western elite, proving the purists’ point about the unbridled and unethical nature of democratic politics. So long as sovereignty remains a theoretical debate, reformists do quite well pointing out the possibility of an Islamic democracy. When democracy is encountered in practice, and when democratic institutions seem to offer the only hope (however futile, as the unfolding of events since 2013 suggests) to avert direct persecution by the “fierce” Arab states, theoretical nuances are quickly forgotten.⁷⁷

This pattern of the divorce of theory from practice is not new. Ḥasan al-Huḍaybī (Muslim Brotherhood’s leader from 1951 to 1973) is reported to have had no objection to socialist parties.⁷⁸ This openness reflects not only the tremendous persecution by Nasser’s regime, but perhaps also the era before Brotherhood began benefitting from Saudi largesse in the “Arab Cold War.” Still, despite the increasing religious challenges to such compromises posed by Wahhabi-inspired Salafism, Brotherhood remained open to

⁷⁵ ‘Abd al-Khālīq’s comments were reported on Kuwaiti Islamists’ online portal ‘*Alāmāt*, <http://www.alamatonline.net/l3.php?id=80965> (Accessed 17 June 2015); al-Ṣawī’s on his website: <http://el-wasat.com/assawy/?p=5750> (Accessed 17 June 2015).

⁷⁶ Perhaps the most authoritative intellectual Salafi treatment of party pluralism is Ṣalāḥ al-Ṣawī, *al-Ta’addudiyya al-Siyāsiyya fī al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya* (Dār al-‘Ilām al-Duwalī, n.d.).

⁷⁷ For an analysis of the Arab military autocrats’ ability to survive at any cost and their resemblance to the medieval Mamluks, see J. Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jibadi Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2015). For an analysis that argues that the Arab states compensate for their shallow roots by using excessive violence, and hence are “fierce,” see N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995).

⁷⁸ Mufti, 81, quoting Muṣṭafā al-Ṭaḥḥān writing in brotherhood journal *al-Mujtama’*, 1406/1985.

pragmatic concessions: “We believe that an Islamic government must allow freedom to create parties, so that it would be possible to oppose them with argument and reason. This would be better than if these currents turned into underground movements. So we have no objection to the creation of a socialist party in an Islamic state.”⁷⁹ Hamas leader Aḥmad Yāsīn declared in 1989, “I want a democratic state with multiple parties, and power belongs to whoever wins the elections.” When asked what if the socialist party won, he said, “Even if the socialist party won, I would respect the preference of the Palestinian people.”⁸⁰ After the break with the Saudis in the wake of the First Gulf War, a crucial step in the direction of normalizing democracy was taken in 1994, when Muslim Brotherhood published a declaration that stated that “The umma is the source of authorities” and called for “plurality of political parties and political pluralism.”⁸¹ A decade later, some Brotherhood leaders pulled no punches: ‘Abdul Mun’im Abu al-Futtūh, then a member of the Guidance Bureau of Brotherhood, declared in 2003, “We do not object to the election of a Christian as president of Egypt, for this is the right of any citizen without regard to his religion or political belief; even if he were a heretic, it is his right to be nominated. If that’s what the people have chosen, that is their choice . . . and we support it.” Similarly, he declared in 2005 that the Article 2, declaring the Sharia to be the source of law, is not binding on the people, and could be changed if people so wish. Other central Brotherhood figures have made similar statements.⁸²

These bold moves toward secularism are assimilated into theory not by the main reformist ulama like Qaradawi or Raysuni, who insist on a democracy within the limits of Islamic jurisprudence, but the aforementioned intellectuals dubbed the “new Islamists.” Fahmy Huwaidi, an Egyptian journalist, considers the matter of political pluralism in theory a little further: such parties may be permitted if “they have reservations about certain aspects of the Sharia” but if they “work outside the Islamic creed and against it” then it cannot be allowed.⁸³ These carefully chosen words could mean a range of things. If Muslim Brotherhood’s later political statements are any indication, what they mean is that only if a party declared itself actively against Islam – which seems unthinkable, given that even most ardent secularists have learned to argue in the name of Islam – would it be objectionable. The new Islamists have been arguing for accepting multiparty democracy as well as the legitimacy of non-Muslim, not only secular Muslim, candidates for presidency.⁸⁴ The intellectuals lag behind, as evident in ‘Imāra cautious statement in 1997:

⁷⁹ Mufti, 75, quoting *Majalla al-Mujtama’*, 1406/1985.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Mufti, 82.

⁸¹ Mufti, 75.

⁸² Quoted in Sharif, 72–3.

⁸³ Quoted in Mufti, 76.

⁸⁴ Others include: Aḥmad ‘Assāl, Zakī Aḥmad, Jalāl Amīn, Kamāl Abū Majd, Rashid al-Ghannūshī, Sayyid Dasūqī. See Hishām al-‘Iwādī (ed.), *al-Islāmiyyūn wa ‘l-Ḥiwār ma’a al-‘Almāniyya wa ‘l-Dawla wa ‘l-Gharb* (Bayrūt: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1418/1997).

The question of parties with non-Islamic frames of reference have no precedence in Islamic jurisprudence and in the premodern *ijtibād*, for before, plurality was restricted to within the Islamic frame of reference. But interaction with Western civilization in our times has created non-Islamic frames of reference within Islamic societies, be they secular or materialist. . . . they must be dealt with new *ijtibād* with this new situation. . . I incline toward giving freedom to parties with non-Islamic frames of reference, for these parties have frames of reference that are [still] Islamic in their system of values, but non-Islamic in what relates to politics and the relationship between religion and the state.⁸⁵

Does this amount to departing from the standard anti-secularist line of Islamic consensus that had been maintained over much of the twentieth century, if not since the beginning of Islam? The critics of democracy have certainly long argued so.

The Egyptian Salafi preacher Sharif empathizes with Brotherhood's expressed desire to seek democracy as a shelter against brutal repression by the regime, and a cover necessitated by the difficulty of presenting the "Islamic guidance in politics" directly.⁸⁶ To Sharif, however, Brotherhood leaders show no intention of upholding any Islamic limits to a secular democracy. Brotherhood's moves, Sharif writes empathetically, are calculated to signal the Americans not to fear Islamists' coming to power because they will not essentially disrupt their interests. That the West will never let any democracy survive unless those in power seem agreeable to their interests is the all-too-evident fact of Islamist discourse. However, he insists, "To add to Islam that which is not from it is more harmful than [withstanding] the way of oppression" because the oppression must end one day or the other by God's will, but presenting corrupt systems of government in the name of Islam, which people will then take to be part of it, is more hazardous (7).

Saudi Ṣaḥwī intellectuals like Mufti similarly feel vindicated about the secular, secularizing, and individualizing effects of democracy that have come true and have been embraced by the reformist-Islamists whose very *raison d'être* had once been to stem the tide of secularism. Mufti invokes secular Arab and Western critics, whom Brotherhood is presumably trying to please, against what he considers the oxymoronic idea of an "Islamic democracy." Both the Salafi and secular critics of the Islamic reformists agree that a democracy cannot limit itself by such a priori qualifications as Islamic law and ethics.⁸⁷

Conclusion

One scholar perceptively observed that what sets contemporary Egyptian Salafis apart from the establishment scholars and Brotherhood is not doctrine, but the Salafis' "slight regard for modern conventions of international law and governance." While in

⁸⁵ Al-'Iwaḍī, *al-Islāmiyyūn*, 40; quoted in Mufti, *Naqd*, 80

⁸⁶ Sharif, 6.

⁸⁷ Mufti, 86,91; he approvingly quotes the German scholar Gudrun Krämer leveling the charge of inconsistency at the reformists.

theory all religious parties uphold the Sharia, in practice only the Salafis insist: “Both the state Islamic establishment and the political operators in the Brotherhood had long ago accepted the overall legitimacy of the Egyptian state. For those who still looked to the ninth-century books of Sunni Hadith for the real architecture of the world, however, one could not accept anything other than the rule by God’s law.” In this essay, I have sought to nuance and augment this observation. The Salafis are not unanimously, definitively, or exclusively opposed to democracy, nor is their rejection of democracy based on ignorance or simpleminded rejectionism, with their eyes fixed on ancient hadith texts. The critiques produced by the intellectual Salafis are quite sophisticated and engaged with the democratic theory and experience, whereas those by the state-rejecting athari-jihadis, while more textualist and rigid, too pose serious challenge in that they exaggerate the contradictions between Islam’s fundamental commitments and modern democracy that the reformists must nonetheless address. Nor are Salafi critiques unique; other conservative Muslims as well as secularists who see Islam as incompatible with democracy do so for similar reasons. These reasons can be classified into three types.

First, the essential contradiction which the reformists have historically acknowledged, namely, the incompatibility of the notion of divine sovereignty with the sovereignty of the people or the legal sovereignty and actual powers of the modern state and its reigning institutions. This is the central contradiction Wael Hallaq has recently formulated in his important polemic *The Impossible State*.⁸⁸ To this contradiction, the reformists respond with a promise, an optimism toward the flexibility and adaptability of modern institutions, whereas the Salafis demand the proof upfront. To make matters worse, the reformist political outfits, operating under the uncertainties, brutalities and temptations of authoritarian Arab states, often fail to uphold their promises and principles.

Second, there are subsidiary reasons that conservative ulama generally and Salafis particularly hold up as additional obstacles to an Islamic democracy, such as party pluralism, sectarianism, the democratic spirit of skepticism and unbelief, the expansion of non-Muslim rights, and the notion of incompatibility and hostility between the West and the Islamic world. The reformists have produced extensive responses to this class of objections, but ultimately, the proof of this class of solutions must be in the pudding.

Finally, the third and perhaps the most effective class of reasons is contextual. The Salafi unwillingness to make concessions to modern political institutions is expressed through their preference for maximalist conceptions of democracy, but this preference is hardly theologically determined. Rather, it is the result of an unwillingness toward a foreign institution, which in turn is influenced by the commonsense fact that whereas the best democracies are irreligious, the states that most stably endorse socially conservative Islam are non-democratic. The most successful and credible of which has been the case of Saudi Arabia, which serves as a powerful model for and supporter of conservative Salafis globally. This suspicion of democracy is shared by the anti-salafi, pro-establishment conservatives, as in

⁸⁸ W. Hallaq, *The Impossible State* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

Mubarak and Sisi's Egypt, Bashshar's Syria, and elsewhere, who bask under the authoritarianism of states that are willing to ally with them in imposing their version of conservative Islam.

The influence of the Saudi state on Salafism, however, should not be overstated. Unlike Wahhabism whose rigidity on political issues is guaranteed by its situatedness, intellectual Salafism is a tradition based in multiple locations throughout the world, Wahhabi Saudi Arabia being one of them. This confers upon it peculiar features. Unlike the Wahhabis and the reformist organizations, local circumstances do not exclusively and decisively shape Salafism, except if a local Salafi network spawns a political group, as in Egypt's and Kuwait's Salafis.⁸⁹ In such cases, the Salafis may expediently accept democracy; but even then, as Jonathan Brown has shown, the tensions generated by both the substance and form of Salafism continue to pull on it. Precisely because Salafism is a global intellectual current, it is neither easily manipulable by an elite nor answerable exclusively to particular local politics. The Saudi influence on global Salafism is inspired less by the power, wealth, and religious prestige of the Saudi state, although these are not negligible factors, and more by the privilege and power of the Saudi "religious field," the ulama, the only Sunni state where one can speak of a relatively independent, powerful clergy.⁹⁰ If this is true, the decline of Saudi power or internal dissent within the ranks of the ulama, as already evident, may free global Salafism to move into different directions. In contrast, the reformists' (who, as I have argued, also fall within the Salafi spectrum) enthusiastic endorsement of democracy turns on a willingness to conscript democracy against their powerful authoritarian opponents, a goal that is achieved by stripping democracy down to a value-neutral instrument compatible with a community-centered view of Islam. The antidemocratic conservatives' pessimism is vindicated by the existing authoritarian regimes, turning this incompatibility into something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a result of this deadlock, all sides continue to lose; neither the benevolent premodern Sharia to which the Salafis aspire, nor the irenic, protective caliphate that other conservatives desire, nor the Islamic democracy that the reformists seek sees the light of day.

⁸⁹ For Egypt's Salafis, see Brown, "The Salafi Transformation;" for Kuwait's Salafis: Courtney Freer, "The rise of pragmatic Islamism in Kuwait's post-Arab Spring opposition movement," Project on U.S. Relations with the Muslim World at Brookings, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Kuwait_Freer-FINALE.pdf?la=en (Accessed 10 March 2016).

⁹⁰ Mouline, *The Clerics*.