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The Salafist challenge Coming out of the Arab woodwork

Extreme Islamists are growing more confident in the wake of the upheavals

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VITTORIO ARRIGONI did not live like a good Islamist. The 36-year-old Italian idealist who was strangled in a Gaza flat on April 15th had tattoos on his body, which Sunni Islam forbids, including the name of God in Arabic, a double profanity. And he was a bit Bohemian; he and his colleagues from the International Solidarity Movement, a pro-Palestinian group which has sometimes provided human shields against Israeli attacks, were said to be friendly with local women.

Hamas, the Islamist movement that rules Gaza, overlooked such lapses and offered him a state funeral for services rendered to Palestine. It has condemned his killers, radical Muslims who call themselves Salafist-Jihadists, as outcasts, and used his murder to put their own Islamist brand in a softer light.

The struggle between Hamas's Muslim Brotherhood strain and the Salafists, whose name derives from the Arabic for "forefather", denoting their wish to emulate the behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad's companions, is decades old. The Brothers' movement was born in Egypt, the Salafist one in Saudi Arabia, and the duel has long reflected the way their motherlands vie for regional influence. Brotherhood preachers are pragmatic and have less bushy beards. The Brotherhood's mentor, Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, is said to enjoy listening to recordings of Egypt's matronly diva, Um Kalthoum, which send Salafists into paroxysms of puritanical anger. Across the region, the Muslim Brotherhood challenge rulers much like a civil-rights movement. Salafists, by contrast, accept their governments, unless they deem them non-Muslim, which the more activist jihadist types tend to do with remarkable ease. Then they try to blow them up.



The ancestral way of swotting

But the lines separating the two schools are increasingly blurred. Across the region many share similar experiences. When Egypt suppressed the Brothers in the 1950s, many found refuge in Saudi Arabia, where the movements cross-fertilised. Repressive Arab regimes have dumped both lots in the same prison cells, where they study and pray together. Under Salafist influence, the Brothers have adopted more classical jargon; and the recent Arab uprisings have helped the Brothers sway fellow Salafis into pondering whether civil opposition might not be better at changing regimes than setting off bombs.

In Gaza the rival schools have sometimes clashed. In August 2009 Hamas men stormed a southern Salafist mosque, after its preacher declared his own Islamic emirate. Over two dozen were killed in the ensuing shoot-out. But Gaza's peculiarities are particularly attuned to the Salafist message, and the movement there continues to grow. Its world view of non-Muslims pitted against Islam seems to match the reality of Gaza: a trading crossroads that enemies of Islam have turned into a territory under siege. The flight of many foreign aid workers after Mr Arrigoni's killing only compounds that Manichean view. Israel's dismemberment of Palestine fits

the rejection by Salafists of the nation state and their long-term aim of a global Islamic Utopia. And the Salafists' derision of Hamas for seeking periodic ceasefires with Israel and for shrinking from applying full-scale Islamic law in Gaza has begun to strike a popular chord. Why did Hamas bother to overthrow their secular rival in Fatah, some Gazans ask, if it ends up acting in much the same way?

Some of Hamas's rank and file are susceptible to the Salafist message. Video-clips of Salafist preachers circulate among them. In the welcome note on his website, the head of the Hamas-run interior ministry's "commission for political and moral guidance" calls for a global caliphate. Hamas prison guards have helped captured Salafist leaders to escape. And Hamas has refrained, for fear of a backlash, from its past practice of dragnet detentions. One of the four men Hamas says it is seeking in connection with Mr Arrigoni's kidnapping may be one of its own Gaza policemen. For Hamas, which wants to be both a government and a "resistance" movement, purging Gaza's Salafists increasingly means purging itself.

With civil dissent quashed by Hamas, Salafists are seeking violent outlets for expression. Two Salafists suspected of Mr Arrigoni's murder were killed in a shoot-out after a Hamas raid on their hideout in central Gaza on April 18th. One group has waved a letter from Osama bin Laden as proof of its clout. And after Hamas recently captured the Salafists' guiding figure, Abu Walid al-Maqqisi, another group of Salafists declared that foreigners in Gaza were fair game for kidnapping.

Where Salafists have greater latitude, they are trying out new methods. In Jordan, where they blew up three hotels a few years ago, they are now protesting openly in the streets, albeit separately from other Jordanians, for fear of *ikhtilat*—rubbing shoulders with women. One lot held a press conference to call for the release of their leader, Muhammad al-Maqqisi, who was once a mentor of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

In eastern Libya Salafist groups have given their allegiance to the fragile rebels' National Council, though it is not applying *sharia* law. And though elections remain an anathema to them, on the grounds that God, not man, should dictate how his realm is governed, acolytes on websites are asking increasingly awkward questions about political participation. After Egypt's recent referendum on a new constitution, a Salafist preacher in Cairo celebrated the yes vote as a "raid via ballot boxes".

Most Salafist jihadists still want to have their *felafel* and eat it. A few of their brethren—for instance, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and Egypt's Gama'a Islamiya—seem for the moment to have disavowed violence, as other more moderate Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, now do. But most Salafists still want to bomb and fight. Recent clashes between puritans armed with baseball bats and Jordanian police in Zarqa, a largely Palestinian shanty town north of the capital, left 90 hurt.

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