

Salafi Politics During the Arab Uprisings: Methodological Insights from Game Theory

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Jacob Olidort, a 2016-2017 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the history and ideology of Salafi movements and Islamist groups in the Middle East.



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Understanding how Salafi leaders balance ideological robustness and personal risk as they are validated or threatened by local circumstances might be a good place to start in assessing their future approach to political engagement.

The tectonic shifts in Middle East Islamist politics over the last five years include trends within the region's Salafi movement that can only be described as inexplicable. In 2011, Salafis in Egypt formed political parties, despite the doctrinal prohibition on engaging with modern institutions and, in 2015, the Salafi Nour Party competed in elections. In April 2013, Lebanese Salafi Ahmad al-Assir -- who despite his harsh condemnations of Iran and Hezbollah had previously avoided calls to violence -- called on his followers to join Sunni fighters in Syria and himself took up arms and led a battalion into al-Qusayr in Syria. The Jordanian jihadist ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi seemingly reneged on his ideological posture by offering to mediate on behalf of the Jordanian monarchy in negotiating the release of Mu'adh al-Kasasibeh, the Jordanian pilot captured and eventually burned by the Islamic State in February 2015. And then there is perhaps the biggest irony -- that the Islamic State, a group known for its exclusive and uncompromising commitment to early Islamic doctrines, has gained followers and fighters through the modern channel of social media.

Here lies the fundamental analytical problem when we try to explain the actions of Salafis: How do we account for clear contradictions of ideological principles coming from a group whose entire reputation centers on its commitment to its ideology? Certainly, those who have studied Salafi communities in the Middle East during the previous century know that much of the credit for their rise to political and social prominence over the course of the twentieth century goes to modern institutions and media: publishing houses, western-styled universities, cassette tapes and CD-ROMs, television shows -- all institutions that, by their nature, qualify as *bid'a* (reprehensible innovation), which Salafis would otherwise forbid on the grounds that these appeared after the lifetime of the

Prophet Muhammad and his early followers and which he did not explicitly condone. However, it was these media through which Salafi scholars earned an income and which they justified as mechanisms for disseminating the Salafi methodology (*manhaj*) and creed...

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