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Pathology of the Performance of Iran in Response to Neo-Salafi Currents in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a government formed based on the ideology of political Islam and aiming to export the discourse of the Islamic Revolution to different countries worldwide, cannot disregard other political Islamist currents. Avoiding religious conflicts and the potential for defining discursive and strategic commonalities are fundamental stages of modern Islamic civilization. One of the notable currents in Islamic history is the "Salafi" movement. Neo-Salafism, although sharing similarities with traditional Salafism, also exhibits significant differences. While the distinctions between old and new Salafis may not be immediately apparent, it appears that the new Salafis lean more towards revolutionary actions.

The interactions between Iran and neo-Salafi movements have witnessed fluctu-

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ations. These interactions can be categorized into three historical periods and articulated as three levels of engagement: the first historical period was characterized by "movement-movement" dynamics before the Islamic Revolution's triumph. The second phase emerged post the Islamic Revolution victory, fostering "movement-state" relations. The final historical period aligns with the Arab events in 2011, where neo-Salafists actively influenced political and military spheres in the regional countries and engaged with Iran through "government-government" interactions.

This study employs an explanatory-explanatory research design with a developmental-applicative purpose. Understanding the current state and evolution of the neo-Salafi movement necessitates an explanatory approach. Additionally, for analyzing recent developments and exploring reasons behind the divergence between the Islamic Republic and neo-Salafi Islamist currents, an explanatory methodology is employed. The primary objective of this study is to dissect the nature of the relationship and the "pathology of Iran's response to the neo-Salafi movement in the Middle East region". By addressing these issues, the study aims to capitalize on the potential of neo-Salafi movements in advancing modern Islamic civilization.

Irrespective of global efforts to counter the influence of the Islamic Revolution's discourse and its impact in the Sunni world, particularly among Salafi and Neo-Salafi factions, the research findings shed light on factors contributing to Iran's divergence from neo-Salafi movements forty years post the Islamic Revolution. The study reveals that "the diminishing activism of the intellectual and instrumental elites within Iran's foreign policy apparatus, prioritizing national interests over movement policies", "a shift towards engagement with secular Islamist groups, Sufis, or Syrian Baathists (notably post-Syrian crisis) over political Islamists", "inadequate and superficial understanding of various Salafi currents, often generalized as Wahhabism", and "the absence of efforts to foster strategic dialogues and constructive engagement with neo-Salafi movements" have led to Iran's separation from neo-Salafi groups.

Scrutiny of the fundamentals and strategic attitudes of Salafis reveals that it is not a monolithic current. Within this broad movement, there exist sub-currents that hold diverse or conflicting views despite sharing common beliefs,

leading at times to excommunication, violence, and bloodshed. The Salafi movements can be broadly categorized into three common trends - "[Traditional] Salafiyyah, Jihadi Salafiyyah, and Neo-Salafiyyah."

While the New Salafi or Balanced Salafi movement maintains relative adherence to the foundational principles of Salafism, it critiques certain aspects of traditional Salafism and aims to moderate some of its extremist elements. Despite emphasizing monotheism, the revival of the Islamic caliphate, jihad, and similar principles like traditional Salafism, the New Salafi movement seeks to shift the focus of discussions "from abstract monotheism and takfir to practical monotheism and its manifestations in society." Additionally, it looks to redefine the Islamic government in contrast to non-Islamic governance through a nuanced interpretation of sovereign monotheism and emphasizes jihad against non-Muslim authorities rather than targeting fellow Muslims.

Neo-Salafis, on the other hand, emphasize emulation and revitalization of the moral conduct of the Salaf, rather than solely focusing on replicating the exact teachings and interpretations of the Salaf Salih. Methodologically, traditional Salafists tend to adopt a literalist approach to interpreting Salaf texts and place significant emphasis on textual worship. In contrast, neo-Salafists advocate for utilizing Salafism as a direct reference to the primary sources of Islam to advance the "civilizational project" of the Islamic world.

Upon conducting the pathology and categorizing the current research as "applied research," solutions have been proposed in two key areas - discursive and operational-strategic domains. In the realm of discourse, in order to progress towards dialogue and eventually foster cooperation, it is imperative to introduce a macro model of trans-religious solidarity, rooted in monotheistic and civilizational perspectives. The "Pattern of Monotheistic Civilization" embodies self-evolution and places emphasis on ijtihad rooted in religious scriptures to address contemporary challenges effectively. By prioritizing the construction and advancement of civilization as a guiding principle, fostering unity among Islamic factions becomes more feasible. Within a civilizational framework, establishing a training mechanism through Islamic world missions and revision of existing processes by relevant institutions is crucial.

Adopting a civilizational perspective, specific recommendations for engag-

ing with neo-Salafi groups include:

a) Establishing a strategic research center within ideological and strategic institutions to address the increasing appeal of neo-Salafi movements among Sunni youth.

b) Institutionalizing informal/non-governmental channels to sustain active pursuit of religious diplomacy and advance programs endorsed by esteemed bodies such as the International University of Islamic Religions, the Al-Mustafa Community, or the Organization of the Approximation of Religions.

c) Identifying critical issues within the Islamic world alongside neo-Salafi movements and collaborating to identify shared solutions.

Key words: Pathology, Neo-Salafism, Iran, Middle East, Critical Interaction.