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Freedom and Subjection in Islam through the Prism of Salafism in Tunisia

This paper examines the concept of freedom in Islam, focusing on the Islamic doctrine of retreatist Salafism in Tunisia. Within Salafist Islam, freedom means strict adherence to religious purity and devotion. In contrast to Western, universalist conceptions of freedom, this religious movement frames freedom and subjection not as mutually exclusive but, indeed, as intertwined conditions.

- In Islam in general, freedom is understood not as an individual right but as a divine duty and moral responsibility that elevates humanity through submission to God. This foundational principle frames freedom as liberation from temporal and material constraints, aligning human will with divine purpose.

- Among quietist Salafists, the notion of freedom is closely tied to submission to God and acceptance of established authority, both of which are seen as expressions of divine will. This understanding positions obedience to authority as a fundamental component of their conception of freedom.

- Quietist Salafists adopt an apolitical stance, prioritising individual piety over any form of political or social engagement. By contrast, jihadist Salafists seek to establish a state governed by *sharīʿa*.

- Retreatist Salafists not only abstain from political or social contestation, they reject proselytism entirely, embracing complete withdrawal. They view this attitude of withdrawal and compliance as a way to safeguard religious integrity and avoid *fitna* (discord or strife), which they believe could endanger the unity and well-being of the Muslim community (*umma*).

CONTEXT

Understanding the concept of freedom in Islam through the lens of quietist and retreatist Salafism aligns with a perspective of cultural relativism. Such an approach can enrich debates on the diversity of human experiences. It can also inform inclusive governance policies concerning the religious sphere across the Global North and South, East and West, fostering mutual understanding and respect for cultural and religious differences.

FREEDOM: AN ISLAMIC HETERONOMY

What does freedom mean in Islam? According to Bruno Étienne, the French anthropologist, sociologist, and political scientist,

> [t]he development of the concept and idea of "freedom" followed a different chronology in the Islamic world compared to the West, which moved from Christianity to secularization. (Étienne 2006: 72)

However, philosophical and theological debates around freedom were influenced by Greek philosophy in both contexts, with similar discussions among theologians and philosophers such as the Aristotelians and the Mutazilites.[1] Mutazilism was a rationalist current in Islam asserting that humans, endowed with reason, were free and responsible for their actions, an interpretation that mainstream Sunnism rejected (Amir-Moezzi and Schmidtke 2009).

Étienne also observes that the concept of freedom is extremely complex and diverse, which makes reaching a universal consensus on its contemporary meaning challenging. He emphasises the need to explore whether freedom should be understood as an internal principle – rooted in the human mind, encompassing autonomy, self-determination, and moral agency – or merely as the absence of external constraints, such as oppression or coercion by societal or political forces.

FREEDOM IN ISLAM, OR, THE FREEDOM OF ISLAM

The concept of freedom (*ḥurriyya,* حرّية) in its modern sense does not explicitly appear in the Qur'an. Instead, freedom is understood in terms of duties and responsibilities (Nawaat 2005). Terms derived from the Arabic root for freedom, such as liberation (*taḥrīr*) and liberated (*muḥarrar*), describe acts of emancipation or devotion rather than an inherent right. Thus, freedom in an Islamic context is perceived as a fundamental responsibility intended to elevate humanity by aligning human will with a divine purpose, rather than a right centred on individual autonomy, as in the predominant Western conception.

This concept is also reflected in the distinction between the free person (*ḥurr*) and the slave (*ʿabd*). While *ḥurr* has legal and social connotations in Islamic jurisprudence, it also carries profound spiritual significance, emphasising liberation not only from human domination but also from material attachments. In the historical context of early Islam, the emancipation of slaves was encouraged as a meritorious act, reflecting a transition from human subjugation to complete submission to God. In this context, freedom entails a transformation of the human condition: from subjugation to temporal and material forces to servitude to God, who is considered the ultimate liberator.

The idea of freedom as liberating oneself from the temporal human domain to become free through submission to God represents a particular relationship with the world: a resonance with the divine (Rosa 2019) that is not established in relation to other humans (i.e. to fully experience one's humanity) but, rather, that can exist only through submission to divine authority. In the following sections, we will examine how this alternative conception of the "relationship with the world," distinct from the modern Western perspective, finds its expression within traditional Salafist doctrine, particularly in its quietist and retreatist currents.

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1 Mutazilism was a significant theological school in Islam, influenced by Hellenistic philosophy and centred around five key principles: divine unity (*tawḥīd*), justice, human accountability, an intermediate status between believer and non-believer, and the moral imperative to command good and forbid evil. This school diverged from mainstream Sunni belief by positing that the Qur'an was created, not eternal, an idea considered to challenge the divine nature of Islamic scripture. Twelver Shiites adopted core tenets of Mutazilism, emphasising both reason as fundamental to faith and human freedom as a counter to predestination.

FRAMING FREEDOM IN SALAFIST THOUGHT

Quietist Salafism is a transnational Sunni movement characterised by strict adherence to religious purification, ritual worship, and individual piety. It rejects liberal and democratic political frameworks, viewing them as un-Islamic and rooted in Western ideologies. Quietist Salafists advocate unconditional obedience to established political authorities (*walī al-amr*), including those of illiberal or authoritarian regimes, as a means to avoid discord (*fitna*) and ensure societal stability (Eyre 2023). They view freedom as being closely tied to submission to God and to the acceptance of established authority, which is considered legitimate as long as it does not contravene religious precepts (Wiktorowicz 2006, Amghar 2007). Quietist Salafism also focuses on personal transformation through religious education, the study of Islamic sciences, and the emulation of the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) (Abu Rumman 2014).

Conventional quietist Salafism, also known as *al-salafiyya al-ʿilmiyya* (scientific Salafism), played a significant role in Tunisia, particularly following the 2011 revolution and the fall of the Ben Ali regime. In Tunisia, this movement was epitomised by figures such as Bechir Ben Hassen, who rose to prominence after the revolution. However, conventional quietist Salafism lost much of its influence following the emergence of jihadist Salafism and a wave of terrorist attacks between 2012 and 2018, during which the Tunisian state launched a crackdown on jihadist-linked Salafist movements (Leaders 2012). Bechir Ben Hassen himself was sentenced to six months in prison in 2018 for defamation and offence against others via social media, a development that contributed to the decline of his public role (Kapitalis 2018).

Retreatist Salafism (*al-salafiyya al-iʿtizaliyya,* السلفية الاعتزالية), discovered and sociologically categorised in post-2011 Tunisia (Jaballah 2025), stands out from the subcategories of quietist Salafism previously identified in sociological literature, such as exclusivist and non-exclusivist tendencies (Amghar 2007), as well as scientific Salafism with its organised proselytism (Wiktorowicz 2006). The heuristic definition of Salafism in Tunisia, which I coin "retreatist Salafism," illustrates a voluntary withdrawal not only from politics, but also from society and public life. This emerging trend diverges from quietist Salafism by favouring complete withdrawal – even from proselytising activities. Unlike quietist Salafists, retreatist Salafists demonstrate total submission to authorities, even when these authorities openly contravene religious precepts, marking a fundamental distinction in their relationship to governance (Wiktorowicz 2006). While both quietist and retreatist Salafists reject political activism, the latter embodies a more radical disengagement, offering a novel interpretation of freedom centred on withdrawal and self-preservation.

The concept of freedom in quietist Salafists' specific understanding of Islam does not emphasise individual autonomy. Instead, freedom is defined as absolute submission to God and acceptance of the authority of the ruling power, which they believe reflects divine will on earth. This construction of a pious, fundamentalist Salafist self, devoted to God, is considered the ultimate phase of liberating the individual from the bondage of non-eternal life, becoming free by becoming a slave and subject of God alone (*al-ʿubūdiyya li-l-lāh*). We will now examine this specific perspective on the human–divine relationship, focusing on how it shapes the perception of freedom and influences Salafists' broader relationship to the world.

FREEDOM THROUGH THE FUNDAMENTALIST SALAFIST PRISM

Quietist Salafism, as a reformist branch advocating the return to the "fundamentals" of Islam, encouraged the depoliticisation of religious scholars and their dedication to religious purity and strict conduct as a solution to the decline of the worldwide Islamic community (*umma*) (Jaballah 2025). For this movement, the problem was not the submission of the

religious to power, nor power itself, but rather the profanation of the religious through its politicisation and involvement in political affairs. According to Salafism, these matters should be entirely entrusted to those who hold command, referred to as *ūlū al-amr*, a term rooted in classical Islamic tradition. These leaders, having acquired power, are deemed legitimate under this interpretation (Jaballah 2025). The dangers, damages, and disasters caused by conflicts and opposition to power, particularly *fitna* – a term in Islamic tradition historically associated with internal conflicts or civil wars within the Muslim community – are considered by Salafists to be particularly harmful to Muslim society (Jaballah 2025).

Today, jihadist Islamic fundamentalism engages in direct ideological and armed conflict with the West, both within Western countries and against the globalised Western culture in the Global South. This Salafist current rejects the Western version of freedom in its universalist, modernising sense, as well as its liberal, individualistic, and essentially libertine symbolic universe which refuses restrictions and subjections, demonstrating strong independence of mind and marked non-conformism. Jihadist Salafism advocates a civilisational model rooted in a specific interpretation of Islam, where power is in the hands of a caliph who acts both as religious and political leader and whom society follows because he applies divine *sharīʿa* and declares war (*jihād*) against the enemies of the Islamic *umma* (Jaballah 2023). Unlike traditional apolitical Salafism, jihadist Salafism does not accept a ruler who does not share the same doctrine, but considers him an infidel even if he is Muslim, demanding that the caliph be chosen by Muslims through the oath of allegiance (*bayʿa*). Both currents reject the Western civilisational model, particularly the universalist model of freedom, but to different degrees: jihadist Salafism by declaring war against the West and against Muslim powers and elites who follow the West, quietist Salafism by radically withdrawing from politics, and retreatist Salafism by withdrawing not only from politics but also society at large, to live according to the dictates of *sharīʿa*. Retreatist Salafists have created a new reading of freedom that radically differs from Western conceptions, even providing a different reason for human existence.

RETREATIST SALAFISM IN TUNISIA

With the 2011 Revolution, a "retreatist" Salafist current emerged in Tunisia, distinguishing itself from other forms of Salafism perceived as overly politicised or proselytising, particularly *al-salafiyya al-ʿilmiyya* led by Bechir Ben Hassen, which was often associated with practices akin to the Muslim Brotherhood (Ennahda) and, to some extent, jihadists. In a context where Salafism had become synonymous with revolution, politicisation, and mobilisation, the retreatist Salafists sought to embody a "true Salafism" in reaction to phenomena which they described as *fitna* (security chaos, regime collapses, civil wars) across the Arab-Muslim world.

Moreover, this current positioned itself as an alternative by rejecting all forms of politicisation or proselytism, advocating total submission to authority regardless of its religious policies, while opposing revolutionary movements and refraining from existing as an organised public entity. This strategy allows it to avoid being criminalised by the state, thus offering a response to society's religious needs while minimising risks of conflict with the state or negative impacts on social stability. In essence, retreatist Salafism represents a new offer within the religious fundamentalist "market," combining strict piety with social conformity.

Unlike quietist Salafism, retreatist Salafism is non-proselytising and non-organised, which constitutes the key distinction between the two movements. Adherents of retreatism actively reject modern social and cultural norms, perceiving them as corrupt or deviant, and choose to live according to a strict interpretation of Islam (Jaballah 2025). Lacking public figures or structured organisations, this movement prioritises an individualistic

approach and theological isolation. Its lack of social or political mobilisation renders it less visible, yet it may persist as a diffuse phenomenon within contemporary Tunisian society (Jaballah 2021, Eyre 2022).

Whereas conventional quietist Salafism relies on structured pedagogy and organised efforts to disseminate religious teachings, retreatist Salafism focuses on a personal quest for piety and religious conformity, with no intention of collective expansion. These fundamental differences reflect two distinct responses to the social and religious challenges in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

In the retreatist Salafist perspective, submission to God is inseparable from unconditional acceptance of earthly authority, which is seen as an indirect manifestation of divine will. This approach conceives of politicisation as a temporal intrusion into the spiritual realm. For retreatist Salafists, freedom does not lie in emancipation from other humans or political structures but in total submission to God, enabling transcendence of human and material contingencies.

This relationship with the world fundamentally contrasts with the modern Western notion of individual autonomy. In this framework, freedom becomes a state of pure devotion, where individuals achieve spiritual harmony by renouncing any pursuit of power or social recognition. This posture of withdrawal, far from being a weakness or an imposed subjugation, is seen as a voluntary act of liberation, allowing individuals to free themselves from conflicts, *fitna*, and societal pressures to focus entirely on their relationship with the divine.

BECOMING A SUBJECT THROUGH OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

De Gaulejac (2009) highlights that subjection refers both to the process by which an individual becomes subordinate to a power and to the process by which they become a subject. This dynamic directly applies to retreatist Salafists, who, while pursuing a rigorous personal transformation do not form sectarian structures – unlike other isolated religious movements such as Haredi Jewish or Amish communities. If the state (*walī al-amr*) prohibited sectarian practices, retreatist Salafists would adhere to such directives, viewing the state as representing divine will.

Retreatist Salafists do not join collective action movements or the organised opposition; they abstain from violence and refrain from criticising the established order. Instead, their strictly individual approach focuses on personal expressions of faith devoid of politicisation or social mobilisation. This voluntary withdrawal is rooted in a post-revolutionary Tunisian context marked by state repression of jihadist Salafism, shifts in the global geopolitical landscape, and ideological indoctrination in marginalised neighbourhoods. In these areas, young individuals seeking religiosity but wishing to avoid conflict with the state may find retreatist Salafism a more appealing path compared to other forms of Salafism.

Thus, although this current seeks a subjective and individual transformation, it embodies a form of submission to an authority perceived as legitimate, whether divine or state-based. This conception, which might better be described as "normative submission" rather than heteronomy, simultaneously reflects a strict adherence to Salafist principles and an adaptation to political realities. This paradox highlights a tension between the quest for spiritual freedom and subordination to norms perceived as transcendent.

Human experiences regarding the meaning of existence, its ways, and its reasons, are diverse. The ultimate goals of any religion, culture, or civilisation are disparate. Understanding the conception of freedom in Sunni Islam specifically through the prism of retreatist Salafism in Tunisia can enrich debates elsewhere. It can also inform inclusive governance policies in the religious sphere in societies in the North and the South, in the

East and the West, fostering mutual understanding and respect for cultural and religious differences.

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