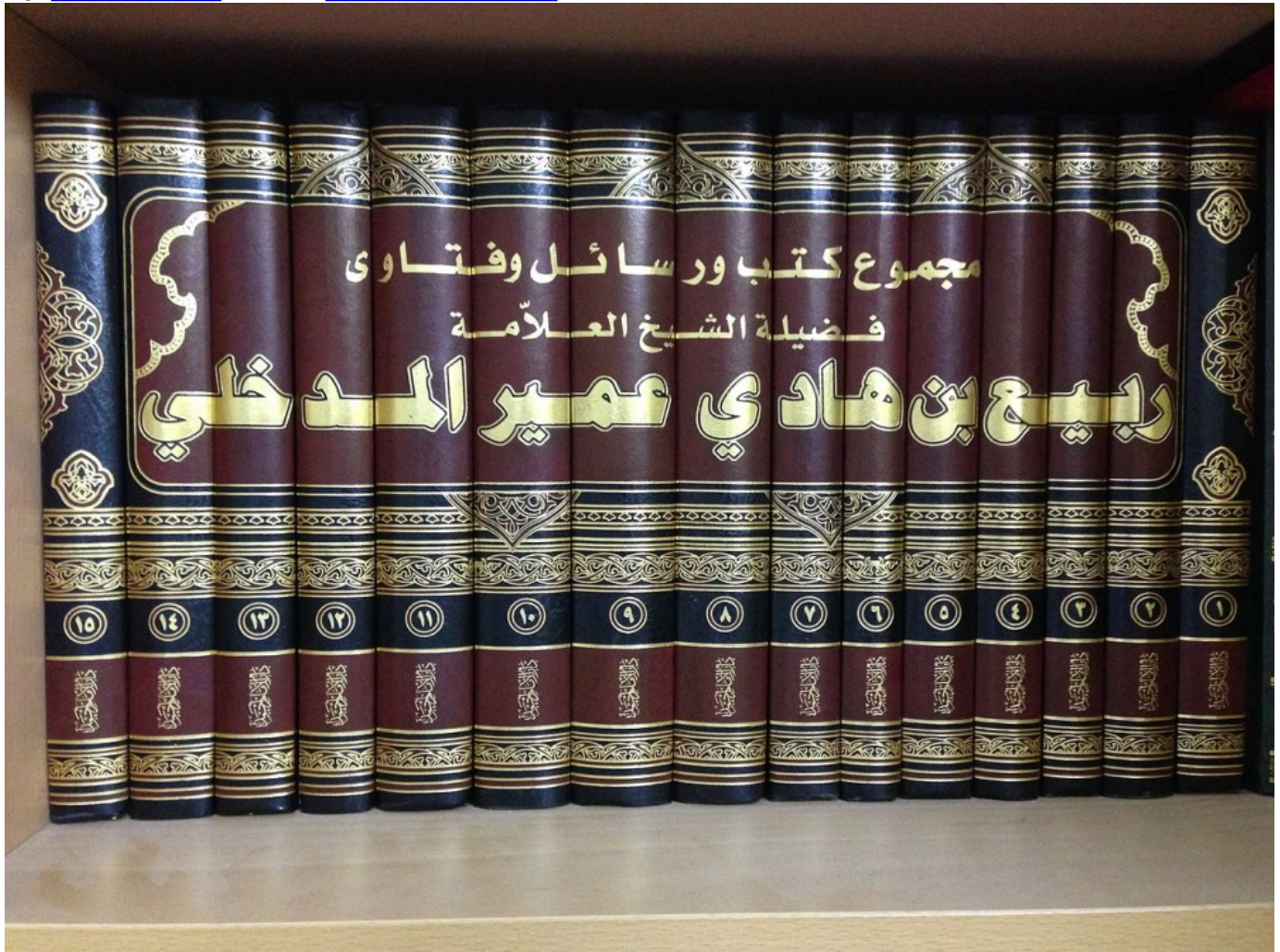


Libya crisis becomes an opportunity for the Madkhalis

The movement reveres and follows the teachings of an 85-year-old Saudi Arabian cleric.

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue



The 15-volume collected works of Rabee al-Madkhali in hadith and Islamic sciences. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Amerrycan Muslim](#).

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) While the self-described Islamic State has tried to regain its footing in war-torn Libya, a less-known Islamist movement is quietly extending its influence across the country.

The Madkhalis, an ultraconservative Salafist group from Saudi Arabia, have been taking advantage of Libya's post-revolution chaos to impose their hard-line interpretation of Islam through force and coercion, patrolling the streets and using their control over mosques to dramatically alter Libyan society.

To that end, the Madkhalis have aligned themselves with nearly every self-proclaimed government and warlord in Libya over the past three years, silencing liberal and Islamist critics in the process.

The Madkhalis have consistently opposed the anti-Western Islamic State, which has sought to set up a new base of operations in Libya after being mostly driven out of Iraq and Syria. Unless a peaceful solution is reached and state institutions provide services in Libya soon, longtime experts and observers warn that the Madkhalis may devastate civil society and impose an undeclared theocracy.

Longtime observers and researchers say the Madkhalis have built up goodwill in communities by providing security services at times when there has been no functioning government, providing a gateway to impose their ideology.

"Madkhalis are pushing the narrative 'We are Salafis, we are not corrupt, we are cleaning up drugs and alcohol, we are providing security,' and there is a certain attraction to that for local communities," said Frederic Wehrey, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who has interviewed Libyan Madkhalis.

The group, formed largely as a religious response to the politically active Muslim Brotherhood, gained in popularity in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Arab countries in the Gulf in the 1990s. The states sought to use the new Salafi strain as a counterbalance against Islamist opposition groups and solidify their own religious legitimacy.

The Madkhali movement reveres and follows 85-year-old Saudi Arabian cleric Rabee al-Madkhali, who is currently based in Medina.

The Madkhalis' unquestioning support of dictatorships and antagonism toward both democracy and the Muslim Brotherhood made them a perfect partner for the regime of Muammar Qaddafi, who opened Libya to the group in the early 2000s. The Madkhalis were the last to abandon Qaddafi despite his regime's violence against its own citizens, urging people to obey the ruler until the waning days of the 2011 revolution.

The movement has quietly formed its own fighting forces and vice squads and aligned itself with warlords and governments in eastern, central, and western Libya, with its eye on complete control over Libyan society.

The Madkhalis' central tenet—*wali al amr*, “the one who rules”— is a near-slavish loyalty to whatever regime, ruler, or group is in power in a particular country. Unlike other Salafis or the Muslim Brotherhood, who demand that governments be influenced by Islam or impose strict Shari'a law, Madkhalis freely throw their support behind secular Arab regimes. The group, as articulated by al-Madkhali himself, argues that these secular and undemocratic regimes have divine authority to rule over their subjects—otherwise, God would not have put them in the position of power in the first place.

So fierce is their defense of whatever regime or ruler they serve, the Madkhalis make it their mission to attack any critics or opposition, using Islamic scholarship to portray them as heretics or unbelievers.

The second core concept in Madkhali ideology is an aversion to politics and a fierce opposition to democracy, arguing that politics by nature creates divisions among Muslims, encourages loyalty to groups other than God, and allows un-Islamic movements to creep into society.

On the social front, there is little to differentiate Madkhalis from the ultraconservative Wahabi strain of Islam that until recently has governed daily life in Saudi Arabia and which the House of Saud has exported across the Muslim world.

Madkhalis believe women have little role outside the home and require male guardianship to travel. They view music, television, and any non-Islamic literature as sinful and mixing with non-Muslims as a threat to lead Muslims astray.

Although the Madkhalis shunned the ballot box in Libya's two postrevolution elections, the group has quietly formed its own forces and institutions and made alliances on the ground to become one of the most influential players in the country.

In western Libya, Madkhalis have formed a policing force to patrol the streets of Tripoli, break up crime and vice, and even disrupt ISIS cells and attacks. The Madkhali force has been so successful, the UN-backed government in Tripoli relies on it and treats it as an official policing force under the interior ministry.

In central Libya, Madkhalis formed an effective fighting force numbering in the thousands which in 2016 was instrumental in driving ISIS from Sirte and other strongholds along the coast. Since driving out ISIS, the Madkhali militias have remained behind, patrolling many towns and villages.

But perhaps the Madkhalis' biggest power play has been in eastern Libya, where a branch of the movement has made an alliance with Khalifa Haftar, a field marshal with backing from Egypt and Russia.

In return for using its forces and pulpit to support Haftar and urge loyalty to the strongman as an Islamic duty, Madkhalis have been given free reign over mosques, endowments, and religious institutions across eastern Libya. Crucially, Madkhalis have been given the power to issue official fatwas.

In each part of Libya, Madkhalis have had a consistent strategy: attack, silence, and delegitimize all rivals, including liberals, democrats, the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadists, and rival Salafi groups. It is a campaign that has strengthened whichever faction it is serving and has put all others on the defensive.

Last November, Madkhali security forces acting on behalf of the Tripoli government shut down a comic book convention in the capital, accusing it of "exploiting the weakness of religious faith and fascination with foreign cultures."

In March 2017, Madkhalis in the east arrested three young men preparing an Earth Day celebration in Benghazi for promoting immoral "freemasonry."

Also last year, a military governor, under the directives of a Madkhali fatwa, issued a ban on women traveling without a male guardian in eastern Libya—though it was later overturned after unprecedented public opposition. Meanwhile, Madkhalis have reportedly organized multiple book burnings in Benghazi, and the movement's supporters run some two dozen radio stations across the country.

Madkhalis have also reportedly been given free control within prisons in both western and eastern Libya, proselytizing and "rehabilitating" detainees.

Madkhalis' lasting impact on the course of the Libyan conflict may be in their targeting and silencing of opposition and political groups. Many Libyan civil society leaders and human rights activists have been silenced, driven abroad, or killed, according to Human Rights Watch—a process that has been accelerated and blessed

by the Madkhalis.

Libyan human rights activists say they fear criticizing the group, who in turn “denounce you at the minbar [in the mosque], on the radio, and arrest you the same day.”

Without a counterbalance to the Salafis, longtime Libya experts and officials warn that there will be little resistance to the fundamentalist group’s control over daily life once militias lay down their arms for good.

“More liberal voices are in retreat if they haven’t disappeared altogether,” said Ben Fishman, a former White House official who worked on Libya under the Obama administration. “The longer it takes to have a functional unity government, the deeper these roots will enmesh themselves into the daily norms of local communities and the more difficult it will be to untangle them.”

A version of this article, which was edited on March 21, appears in the print edition under the title “Libya crisis opens way for ultraconservative Madkhali movement.”