



NO BRIDGE TOO FAR: UNDERSTANDING
AND INTEGRATING SALAFIST ISLAM



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Despite what many in the West believe, Muslims have long grappled with the question of modernity. Debate and discussion are key components of Islam, as scholars, jurists, clerics, and, in some cases, politicians continue to reinterpret the *Qur'an* and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad in an ever-changing world. Perhaps the most notorious, and ironically the least understood, of these interpretations to emerge over recent centuries is Salafism. This movement, like all those of a religious nature, is hardly monolithic and to tie all, or even a majority of Salafists to terrorism is to commit a grievous error. Simply put, Salafists are Sunni Muslims who believe that only the *salaf*, the earliest community of Muslims who lived during and immediately following the life of Prophet Muhammad, practiced true Islam. Like the Puritans of 17th century England, Salafists seek to purify their faith internally through both a strict, literal reading of the *Qur'an* and the emulation of the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, also known as *Sunnah*. The result is a conservative religious movement that appears alien and dangerous from an external perspective, but in reality is mostly law-abiding and peaceful in nature. One of the great tests of our time, both at a personal and national level, will be to interact with and integrate Salafists into global society. The stigma surrounding Salafism is not unfounded, and indeed terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda do have their roots in Salafist doctrine. However, the greatest allies in the fight against extremism are the Salafists themselves and a thorough knowledge of their faith is a vital part of any modern study of Islam.

Before proceeding into an examination of Salafism's origins and core beliefs, one must first possess an understanding of key terms when discussing Islam. "Salafi" and "Salafist" are interchangeable terms when describing an adherent of Salafism, though a practitioner of the movement would reject both. They consider themselves Sunni Muslims. The terms are the creation of both mainstream Muslim and Western academics who need a label to describe this

conservative trend. The designations of “Wahhabi” and “Wahhabist” refer to followers of the state-sanctioned Salafism practiced in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Saudi Arabia. To put it one way, all Wahhabis are Salafists, but not all Salafists are Wahhabis. Finally, there are major differences between Salafism and Islamism. Islamists, broadly speaking, believe Islam should play a central role in politics, the application of law, and should govern all human interaction. Islamism is externally focused while Salafism is more internal, focusing instead on purifying the *ummah*, the global Islamic community, and theological debates rather than politics.¹

Though Salafists themselves claim no “founder” of their religious movement, one can trace the origins of the faith to Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah (henceforth Ibn Taymiyyah), a Sunni Muslim theologian active during the 13th-14th centuries. A controversial figure in his own time, Ibn Taymiyyah took issue with the veneration of Islamic saints and rejected the *madh’hab*, the four Sunni legal schools that developed 3-4 centuries after the life of the Prophet. He looked to the *salaf*, the first three generations of Muslims, as the source for religious authority. Yet, to label Ibn Taymiyyah an ultraconservative is an oversimplification, for he advocated relatively progressive stances on divorce and the conditions of Hell. He was among the first in Islam to assert that divorce was permissible and he maintained that Hell was a temporary place where nonbelievers were purified before entering Heaven, similar to the modern Catholic perception of purgatory.

Ultimately, Ibn Taymiyyah’s beliefs can best be understood in light of the times in which he lived. The course of his life witnessed the final destruction of the Crusader States in the Levant, the bitter infighting between various Muslim factions for control of the Middle East, and

¹ Dar, Rashid, and Shadi Hamid. "Islamism, Salafism, and Jihadism: A Primer." *Brookings*. Brookings Institute, 28 July 2016. Web. 07 June 2017.

most importantly, the devastation brought by the Mongol Invasion of Syria. He attributed Muslim defeats and weakness in these matters to the heretical innovations, or *bid'ah*, introduced in the early medieval period from foreign sources, and the competing Islamic sects of Sufism and Shi'ism. The former replaced *Sunnah* and *hadith*, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad handed down through *isnad*, or documented chains of transmission, with a spiritual connection with God while the Shi'is destroyed the unity of the *ummah* with its overemphasis on the ideal leadership in Islam. In Ibn Taymiyyah's eyes, had Muslims stood together and adhered to only the *Qur'an* and emulated the lives of the *salaf*, then the tragedies that befell the Islamic community would never have taken place. The perceived lack of purity and unity within the *ummah* would become a mainstay of Salafism over the following centuries.²

Despite Ibn Taymiyyah's prolific career, his community was small and it eroded quickly following his death. Moreover, his teachings were discredited following the spectacular successes of the Mamluk, and later the Ottoman Sultanates during the 14th-17th centuries. After all, why was there a need for greater purity and devotion when Allah granted the Muslims such overwhelming cultural and military success? Most Muslims concluded that there wasn't. The writings of Ibn Taymiyyah would not find an audience again until the overwhelming power of Christian Europe began to dominate Muslim-majority lands in the 18th-19th centuries. During this time, multiple prominent scholars around the world emerged who championed Ibn Taymiyya's teachings, though each would add their own personal touch to what constitutes Salafist doctrine. From Salih al-Fullani in Western Africa, to Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi in India, and to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Saudi Arabia's state religion, Salafist clerics and jurists provided one of the few answers to why Muslims were now subjects of non-Muslim

² Rapoport, Yossef. *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*. Islamabad: OUP Pakistan, 2010. Print.

nations, or in the case of al-Wahhab, impious Ottoman Sultans. Themes such as purification and resistance to colonial powers resonated across a broad spectrum of Islamic society.

A trio of thinkers at the end of the 19th century from the al-Azhar University in Cairo would create the modern divisions within the Salafist community. Muhammad Abduh was both an educator and an evangelizer who believed in the need to transform the Islamic community through religiously-inspired social change, or *da'wa*. He decried participation in politics and offensive violence, believing both to be anathema to the *salaf*, and also advocated for increased interfaith dialogue between the other Abrahamic religions. Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was a political activist, a *haraki* in Arabic, who advocated for government-enforced Islamizing programs and a wholesale rejection of Western culture. Finally, Rashid Rida took al-Afghani's teachings a step farther. According to Rida, only violence would bring about the purification of the Islamic faith and could one day restore the Caliphate, the position of supreme Sunni leadership, to its former glory. Their writings form the basis of the three main Salafist sects: Quietism, Activism, and Jihadism, which will be discussed later.³

Though there are divisions within Salafism, they look to a common textual ancestor and share five major beliefs. A pair of *hadith* are the starting point for Salafism. The first comes from the Bukhari Sunni collection, which states, "The best of my community is my generation, then those who follow them, then those who follow them." The second is an exchange between the Prophet Muhammad and a recent convert. The Prophet states that, "My community shall divide into 73 sects, all of whom will perish in Hellfire except for one," and when questioned as to which sect will survive, responds, "Whoever follows what I and my Companions follow."⁴

³ Stanley, Trevor. "Understanding the Origins of Wahhabism and Salafism." *Jamestown*. The Jamestown Foundation, 15 July 2005. Web. 07 June 2017.

⁴ Olidort, Jacob. "Salafism: Ideas, Recent History, Politics." *The Washington Institute*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 2016. Web. 7 June 2017.

Taken together, these two *hadith* establish Salafism as a highly exclusive faith and mark a major departure from mainstream Sunni Islam, which is comparatively inclusive. There is little internal debate as to the authenticity of these *hadith* and generally Salafists do not believe in questioning Islamic textual sources.⁵

The five unifying beliefs in Salafism are as follows. All Salafists consider themselves the sole true adherents of Islam. They alone have preserved the “true” religion of the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, the pious predecessors of the Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, Salafists reject the divine and metaphoric representations of Allah, also known as *tawḥīd al-asma’ wa’l-ṣifāt*. This manifests itself in a rejection of the 99 names for Allah and opposition to depicting either Allah or the Prophet pictorially. Of particular importance to Salafists is that Allah has an exclusive right to be worshipped. Anything that compromises or detracts from worshipping Allah alone, *tawḥīd al-uluhiyyah*, is heretical. This tenet has placed the Salafists at odds with all other branches of Islam. Shi’is have important shrines, such as the one at Karbala, that are imperative to their faith while Sufis venerate the tombs and relics of Islamic saints. Even Sunnis, the branch with which Salafists have the most similarities, respect holy or historical locations. To Salafists, these practices are completely heretical. In addition, there is no room for *bid’ah*, or innovation, and *ahl al-bid’ah*, those that espouse innovation within Islam. A Salafist, for example, would object to a *qadi*, a Muslim judge, from making a ruling based on *ijma*, the previous consensus of Islamic jurists. This would be *bid’ah*, an injection of un-Islamic material into law. Finally, all Salafists, in some form or another, revere the works of Ibn Taymiyya, though he is by no means granted divine or prophet status. In the eyes of Salafists, he was a reformer from whom all Muslims stand to learn a great deal.⁶

⁵ Khadeejah, Abu. "What Is Salafiyya?" *AbuKhadeejah.com*. UK Salafiyya, 2016. Web. 7 June 2017.

⁶ Qadhi, Yasir. "On Salafi Islam." *Muslim Matters*. Islamic Relief Fund, 22 Apr. 2014. Web. 07 June 2017.

From here, Salafism branches out into three factions: Quietists, Activists, and Jihadists. The principal debate among these groups is the application of faith, not the content of it. Quietists are the most numerous group, estimated to be between 70-80% of Salafists, and generally do not participate in politics. There's a "quiet *da'wa*" and peaceful coexistence with both Muslims and non-Muslims is paramount. That being said, there exists a Quietist "continuum" regarding political participation. Absolutist, otherwise known as *Madkhali* Quietists refrain from so much as commenting on any aspect of politics and advocate strict obedience to a ruler, either Muslim or non-Muslim. On the other side of the continuum are politically-inclined Quietists, who weigh in on temporal and spiritual matters, yet refrain from direct involvement. An example of the former are Wahhabis who maintain a deep loyalty to the Saudi state while the latter is best typified by European-based Salafists, such as Abu Khadeejah Abdul-Waahid. Like most clerics based in the West, Abu Khadeejah does offer religious critiques of European nation-states, yet stops short of advocating major resistance or revolution.⁷

The Activists and Jihadists together make up the remaining 20-30% of Salafists, with Jihadists being the smaller group. The classification of what constitutes an Activist rather than a Jihadist group is still ongoing. Often, an Activist group will fail to make institutional changes within a Muslim-majority country and resort to violence, rebranding itself as Jihadist. However, generally an Activist Salafist group works within the laws of its host nation to create *da'wa* policies that reflect their interpretation of Islam. The resulting "Salafi parties" such as the Noor Party in Egypt or the various Salafi factions in Kuwaiti politics are often small, single issue groups that focus on preserving the role of *Shariah* law within a given political system. In both of the aforementioned cases, the group is still highly loyal to the existing regime and is peaceful

⁷ Olidort, Jacob. "Salafism: Ideas, Recent History, Politics."

in its approach. Jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, hold that religious warfare is an individual obligation, also known as *fard'ayn*, rather than a collective responsibility, or *fard kifaya*. Jihadists look to the military successes of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates for inspiration and direction just as much as they hold fast to the *Sunnah*. Though this last group is dangerous, it is important to remember that Jihadists are a minority of a minority faction in Islam.⁸

The secondary debates between Salafist factions concern the degree to which adherents accept certain beliefs. One of these issues centers on the rejection of *madh'hab*. Some Salafists, such as the Wahhabis, still subscribe to the Hanbali School of law regarding Islamic rituals. Others, such as the followers of Jordan's Shaykh al-Albani are completely opposed to any of the legal schools, insisting that they lack *dalil*, or evidence of their authenticity. Another contentious topic, and a critical one for the purposes of this essay, is the degree to which Salafists are prohibited from associating with religious innovators. This is a broad group that encompasses all non-Muslims and most non-Salafist Muslims. Early in the movement's history, strict separation was critical for Salafists to retain their religious purity, yet over time support for the complete application of this tenet has either waned in Sunni Muslim-majority nations or vanished out of necessity for Salafists dwelling in non-Muslim-majority states.⁹

Two final issues are related: the level of obedience Salafists should have toward rulers and *takfir*, labeling the belief of a non-Salafist Muslim as invalid. Generally speaking, Salafists are discouraged from dwelling in nations ruled by non-Muslims due to their classification as *ahl al-bid'ah*. Yet, all Muslims are prohibited from embarking on self-destructive courses of action and resisting a non-Muslim ruler is considered an aspect of that belief. The issue is more

⁸ Olidort, Jacob. "The Politics of "Quietist" Salafism." *Brookings*. Brookings Institute, Feb. 2015. Web. 7 June 2017.

⁹ Qadhi, Yasir.

contentious regarding secular rulers of Muslim-majority countries. Pre-2003 Turkey, for example, was subject to a high level of criticism from Salafists for its strict enforcement of secular policies and for banning religious clothing, such as the *hijab*, from government buildings. Turkish and Arab Salafists accused government officials of *kufr*, of denying religious truth. This made the government illegitimate, though few Salafists defied the Turkish government due to its comparative strength. However, Salafists were among those opposed to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and played a significant role in his downfall during the Arab Spring due to his preference for secular policies. This reputation for resistance, though largely unearned, has led to high levels of discrimination towards Salafists in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority nations.¹⁰

Despite this wealth of information, it is understandable when people ask: Does Salafism matter? Perhaps this is such an obscure offshoot of Islam that it has no place in religious or secular studies. This could not be further from the truth and the statistics, though hampered by misconceptions of Salafists, indicate how important it is for both Muslims and non-Muslims to understand Salafism. There are roughly 120 million Salafists in the world, 50 million of whom live in countries where Salafism is not the state religion, in other words outside the Arabian Peninsula. India has the largest population of Salafists outside of the Gulf, with some estimating the number as high as 25 million. The second largest is Bangladesh, with 20 million Salafists, and Egypt comes in third with 5 to 6 million Salafists. The vast majority of Salafists, with the exception of Indian Salafists, live in Muslim-majority countries. However, it should be noted that there are 17,000 Salafists in France and 5,000 in Germany. Though comparatively low, these numbers are suspected to have more than tripled since the start of Syrian Refugee Crisis, which

¹⁰ Khadeejah, Abu.

brought increased Muslim immigration to Europe. Scholars disagree over whether Salafism is growing in Muslim-majority countries, however there is consensus that Salafists are the fastest growing Islamic community in Europe. Given these trends and these high numbers, it is imperative that at both a personal and national level, Muslims and non-Muslims need to find a way to interact with Salafists and situate them within their respective national cultures.¹¹

From a non-Muslim perspective, the prospect of integrating, let alone interacting with Salafists appears daunting. How can one relate to those who largely reject one's own culture? From both a national and individual perspective, education and tolerance are the keys. The vast majority of Salafist Muslims in non-Muslim countries follow the tradition of Muhammad Abduh more than the more rigorous Ibn Taymiyyah, let alone Rashid Rida. The Quietist narrative has achieved supremacy in the West and Salafists there generally prefer to live insular lives, understanding that the proselytization of their conservative religion in either the political or personal arena will not bear fruit. To that end, it falls to non-Muslims to learn about the Salafist faith and engage in the interfaith dialogue that Muhammad Abduh stressed so vehemently. No education of Islam is complete without at least a cursory knowledge of Salafism and its tenets. Moreover, the growing Islamophobia in Western countries is largely directed at Quietists despite their nonviolent nature. As individuals, non-Muslims must learn to respect Salafist traditions and, as nations typically supportive of religious freedom, governments should avoid deliberately antagonizing the Quietist community with legislation, such as the infamous "Burkini Ban" in France.¹²

From a Muslim perspective, the "Salafi Question" is more difficult to answer. Muslim-majority countries contain larger numbers of the Activist and Jihadist branches, which are more

¹¹ Olidort, Jacob. "The Politics of "Quietist" Salafism."

¹² Qadhi, Yasir.

problematic for society. Moreover, the exclusive nature of Salafism puts them at odds, often violently, with almost every other Islamic group in existence. Yet, to ignore or repress this religious movement only increases the legitimacy of more active and more violent expressions of Salafism. The most obvious remedy for Salafism in Muslim-majority countries appears to be some form of legitimate political participation. Though Salafists are generally opposed to politics, adding their perspective to national debates has proved to mollify Salafist communities by promoting the Quietists' narrative at the expense of those of the Activists and Jihadists. An example of this is the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey. Though the AKP Government has engendered criticism for its increasingly authoritarian measures, for most of its existence the party incorporated moderate Salafist ideas into its ideology without, initially, sacrificing freedom of religion or secularism in Turkey. The result has been the near-complete pacification of Turkey's Salafist community.¹³

All this being said, the Salafists themselves must do their part to ensure their successful integration into both non-Muslim and Muslim-majority nations. From a theological standpoint, the persistence of disassociation with *ahl al-bid'a* and the right to declare *takfir* are major sticking points that prevent meaningful relationships with non-Muslims and Muslims alike. The high level of exclusivity practiced by Salafists maintains them as a distinct "third column" in whatever society they permeate. Unfortunately, while commitment to a hardline interpretation of *ahl al-bid'a* is decreasing, the right of Salafists to declare other Muslims' faith as invalid is a critical part of their movement, which casts a dark cloud over Salafists' future in the *ummah*. Still, Salafists must ensure the continued dominance of the Quietist faction over the Activists and Jihadists. Direct political or military challenges to either non-Muslim or Muslim nations are

¹³ Olidort, Jacob. "Salafism: Ideas, Recent History, Politics."

dangerous and pave the way for greater discrimination and repression. When performed in unison, these doctrinal and societal changes will allow Salafists to carve out a respected niche in any given society.¹⁴

The continued rise of the Salafism may alarm Western academics and Muslim government officials, yet the antagonistic relationships between them need not dominate the future. Non-Muslims and Muslims require a thorough understanding of Salafist doctrine and an understanding of the conditions necessary for Salafism's spread if Salafists are to be incorporated peacefully into society. The renewed vigor of this religious movement owes itself to the discrimination Muslims face in Western countries and the authoritarian nature of most regimes in the Islamic world. Yet, Salafists must understand that the exclusive and prejudiced parts of their faith are barriers to coexistence and that resorting to violence or major political agitation is self-destructive. The gap between both the West and mainstream Islam and Salafism is intimidating. Indeed, it is a challenge to find two more diametrically opposed cultures than those present in Western Europe and Saudi Arabia. However, in the name of peace, there can be no bridge too far. If people are to coexist and if freedom of religion is absolute, then the effort must be made.

¹⁴ Khadeejah, Abu.

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