The Evolution of Salafism

A History of Salafi Doctrine

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Although the notion of Salafism has existed for centuries, varying doctrinal and dogmatic contributions from different scholars have produced diverse interpretations over time. It is therefore important to distinguish where this term originates and who can rightfully be referred to as Salafis. "For decades, a majority of Scholars in the West…and self-proclaimed Salafi activists in the Muslim world, conceived of *salafiyya* as an enlightened reform movement aimed at the revival and progress of Islam."[1] This view emanated from the modernist reform movement initiated by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who sought to bolster Muslim societies through Pan-Islamic unity in response to European colonialism. To achieve this end, Afghani advocated that Muslims engage in personal re-interpretation (*ijtihad*) rather than rely on the interpretations of Islamic jurists (*fuqaha*).

Today, however, Salafism is understood by many as "a strict and puritanical branch of Islam…developed as an outgrowth of the ideas of Muhammad Bin 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792)"[2] that adheres to a strict understanding of God's oneness (*tawhid*) that is of central importance and a rigid scope of acceptable Islamic practices. However, only considering these two branches truncates and divides the true history of Salafism, which includes the contributions of Afghani, the modernists, and the Wahhabis, but traces its origins even further back.

Salafiyya: Terminology and Creed

At its root the term *salafiyya* derives from the Arabic word *salaf*, literally meaning "past" and is understood in Islam in its Qur'anic context. "This term initially signified the pious forefathers (*al-salaf al-salih*) who represented the first three generations of Muslims," who not only witnessed "the rise of Islam but also applied the Prophetic model as the correct way of life."[3] This period begins with the Prophet Muhammad's first revelation and is believed to end around 855 C.E., the time of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal's death. Ibn Hanbal was a Muslim theologian after whom the rigorist Hanbali School of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is named. *Salaf* therefore came to connote the earliest and most accurate version of Islam.

Some of the first uses of the term *al-Salafiyya* date to the writings of the late 13th and early 14th century Islamic jurist Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 C.E.). Taymiyya's writings are considered seminal to the development of the Salafi movement, with much inspiration taken from Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. Having witnessed the conquests of both the Mongols and the Mamluks in the Muslim world, Ibn Taymiyya became concerned with "purging Islamic beliefs of what he consider[ed] heresies [and] also protecting the unity of the *ummah*."[4] He even went so far as to suggest that it was within the power of the ummah to revolt if the ruler went against a command of God or the prophet.[5] He therefore used his writings as a medium for establishing what he believed

to be the proper path of Islam and the correct method for Muslims to declare and practice their faith. For instance a *fatwa* issued by Ibn Taymiyya, entitled *al-Fatawa al-kubra*, stated that "'the way of the Salaf is to interpret literally the Qur'anic verses and hadiths that relate to the Divine attributes…without indicating modality and without attributing to Him [God] anthropomorphic qualities.'"[6]

However, Henri Lauzière marks a division in historical and contemporary understandings of the term *al-Salafiyya* in this context, noting that Ibn Taymiyya likely used this expression to refer to a group of Salafis rather than an ideological perspective encompassing both law and theology.[7] In this way, one could both follow the *salaf* in creed and still adhere to the jurisprudence of

Picture of Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani. © Wikipedia: Public Domain
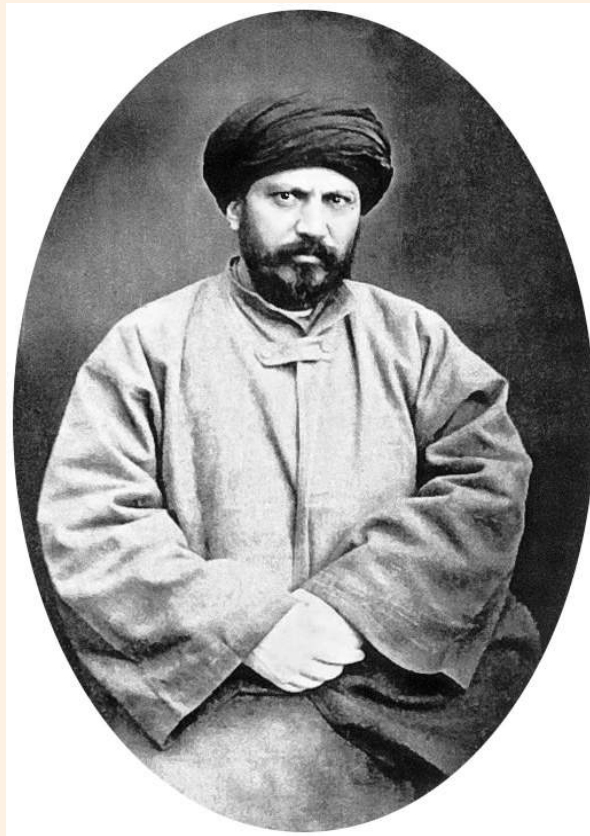
any *madhab*, or school of law; this is evidenced by several Shafi'i jurists, contemporaries of Ibn Taymiyya, who "conformed to the *salaf* in creed."[8]

Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya and several of his most prominent students, including Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, al-Dhahabi, and Ibn Kathir, "were [distinctly] loyal to the Hanbali law school."[9] As theologians, Ibn Taymiyya and his students exercised their personal reinterpretation when they felt it was necessary, so as not to blindly accept another's reasoning without personal understanding, though they still practiced a strict reading of the Qur'an and *hadith*.[10] As Islamic scholars and theologians, these men held deep and complex understandings of Islamic texts and were thus better equipped than the majority of the Muslim population to engage in *ijtihad*, particularly at a time when religious texts were not easily accessible to the masses. This tension between choosing to practice *ijtihad* or blind imitation (*taqlid*) remains a somewhat vague topic among Salafis today due to conflicting appeals made among Salafi scholars that were never resolved.

In addition to the aforementioned belief that Muslims must return to the authentic practices and beliefs of the pious ancestors, Ibn Taymiyya's writings on creed (*'aqida*) aided the development of basic tenets that would come to form the foundation of a global Salafi movement. Later doctrines included a particular conception of *tawhid* that is divided into three categories: the Oneness of Lordship (*tawhid al-rububiyya*), the Oneness of Godship (*tawhid al-uluhiyya*), and the Oneness of the Names and Attributes (*tawhid al-asma' wa-l-sifat*). These terms, likely coined by Ibn Taymiyya, imply respectively that God's status as the Lord of all creation must be recognized and attributed only to God, that all worship must be directed only towards God, and that God's Names should be understood exactly as they are presented in the Qur'an without metaphorical interpretation.

Additionally, Salafism from the beginning sought to counter unbelief in all forms (*shirk*), to proclaim the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad as the only valid sources of religious authority, to rid Islamic societies of all reprehensible innovations (*bida'*), and to advise only a strict and literal interpretation of the Qur'an and *hadith*.[11] These core principles ultimately stemmed from Ibn Taymiyya's desire to purify Islam by ridding the faith of all heretical accretions and establishing guidelines for future generations to avoid the same acquisition of profane practices.

To this day, Salafis continue the purging efforts initiated by Ibn Taymiyya and remain alert to any heresies. "The strictness of the Salafi *'aqida* can probably be seen at its clearest in the concept of *al-wala' wa-l-bara* (loyalty and disavowal)," referring "to the undivided loyalty (*wala'*) Muslims should show to God, Islam and their co- religionists over all other things…and the disavowal (*bara'*) they must show" to non-Muslim accretions, such as Judeo-Christian influences in religious practices.[12] Over time this concept developed a broader meaning in Salafi rhetoric, imploring Muslims to reject anything deemed un-Islamic and thereby become a measure by which people are determined to be "true" Muslims. For instance, Salafis have denounced Shiites as infidels for rejecting the first three caliphs before Ali ibn Abi Talib, and have condemned Sufis for their practices of saint veneration and shrine worship, which is considered blasphemous by Salafis. This narrow interpretation of "proper" Islam has led some to criticize the Salafis for being too literal and anthropomorphizing God, but it more deeply reflects the yearning for doctrinal purity at the heart of Salafism.

In regards to law, Salafis have maintained different positions over the years stemming from Ibn Taymiyya's initial split between remaining loyal to the Hanbali School and applying ijtihad

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when necessary. Similarly, modern Salafis remain divided between following the Hanbali *madhab* or rejecting *taqlid* and promoting *ijtihad*. Ibn Taymiyya himself never argued "that *taqlid* was… unacceptable for the common man" and merely highlighted the necessity of the use of *ijtihad* for a qualified *mujtahid*, such as himself.[13] However, "his student and devoted follower, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), not only stressed the importance of *ijtihad* for a qualified scholar, but also argued that ordinary Muslims should be liberated from the taqlid of the four schools of law."[14]

Later scholars would further argue this point in both directions such as Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, who promoted adherence to the exegesis of the Hanbali school, and Nasir al-Din al-Albani who challenged Abd al-Wahhab's position by rejecting *taqlid* in favor of investigating the evidence for legal reasoning. The two positions created a balance between completely blind adherence and personal interpretation of Islamic sources without proper training. "Salafis are thus a heterogeneous group but they [still] share the desire to cleanse the Islamic creed (*'aqida*) as well as its strict method of application to the sacred texts, worship and everyday life (*manhaj*) of all forms of historical, cultural and non-Islamic influence, which they consider religious innovations (*bida'*)."[15]

Evolution of the Salafi Movement: Branches and Manhaj

The Salafi movement further evolved into a lasting tradition under the auspices of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Born in 1703 in Najd, part of modern-day Saudi Arabia, Abd al-Wahhab was surrounded by deviant animistic and Sufi practices during his adolescence and therefore "set out to unify the population and purge the holy land of all reprehensible innovations," inspired by both Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya.[16] He utilized the categorizations of *tawhid* (the Oneness of Lordship, Godship, and the Names and Attributes) and designated the Oneness of Godship (*tawhid al-uluhiyya*), or the oneness of the object of worship,

as the most central category of Oneness and therefore the most theologically significant.[17]

By establishing a protection pact with Muhammad Ibn Saud, chief of the Saud family and ruler of the city al-Dir'iya, Abd al-Wahhab started a campaign to unite the peoples of the Hejaz under his ideology. Mostly concerned with theological questions, Abd al-Wahhab viewed "*fiqh* (jurisprudence) [as] secondary to his doctrine," as evidenced by his continued reliance on the exegesis of Hanbalism, which ultimately bypassed *ijtihad* and extracted a very literal interpretation of the sacred texts.[18] In effect, while vocally promoting *ijtihad*, the practice was an adherence to *taqlid* of the Hanbali School. This created a struggle for Wahhabists who adopted the core dogma of Wahhabism but wanted to employ their own religious interpretations.

Nasir al-Din al-Albani would address this tension in many of his writings while teaching in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s, prompting the formation of a new branch of Salafist thought. In the early 1950s, al-Albani, who was living in Syria at the time, became well-known for his extensive knowledge of the *hadith* and was offered a teaching position at the University of Medina. While there, al-Albani challenged the Wahhabi religious establishment, and by extension the foundational notion of Salafism, through his "call for an *ijithad* outside the framework of the established schools of law," which "compromised the authority of the Wahhabi *'ulama*," the traditional clergy.[19]

However, since Ibn Taymiyya's writings also promoted the notion of *ijtihad*, al-Albani's position also established him as a thinker in line with Salafist theology. Although he was eventually forced to leave Saudi Arabia in 1963 as a result of his unorthodox views, he was later able to return as a member of the High Council of the Islamic University of Medina. His ideas made a lasting impact in the Kingdom, encouraging "a vast revival of interest in studying the *hadith* and its authenticity," which challenged the authority of the *ulama* by questioning the authenticity of *hadith* recited by members of the *ulama* as justifications for their legal reasoning.[20] Al-Albani even

claimed that "Abd al-Wahhab was salafi in creed (*'aqida*), but not in law (*fiqh*)" as he "did not know the *hadith* well."[21] In the 1980s, the Sahwa opposition movement, which blended Wahhabi piety with the political activism of the Muslim Brothers, emerged in Saudi Arabia as a direct challenge to state authority. This not only made al-Albani's approach a much more appealing alternative for the regime to support, but also highlighted the divisive interpretations to Salafism.

These internal tensions have given rise to three branches or schools of Salafism: 1) the quietest, 2) the activist (*haraki*), and 3) the jihadist branches, which have adopted different approaches to the question of how to engage in politics, if at all. The quietest school stems from the teachings of al-Albani and is also known as the scientific school (*al-Salafiyya al-Ilmiyya*) for its focus on education, rather than political participation to promote a properly Islamic way of life. This is in contrast with the activist school, which encourages political activism to reform society "as a means to defend Islam and Muslims from secularization and Westernization."[22] The third school, known as Salafi-jihadi, is the most extreme, advocating "violence as a means of change in Muslim society, in favor of reestablishing the Caliphate."[23] These schools may be viewed as static and separate branches of thought, however it is important to note also that their foundational creed (*'aqida*) remains the same. They make clear that Salafi organizations may change or evolve over time in response to changing political landscapes.

Accordingly, each school also ascribes to a different path for maintaining theological views in daily life (*manhaj*). For al-Albani and the followers of the quietest school, the *manhaj* consists of rejecting any form of political participation and even affiliation with any group that can lead to division among Muslims and is therefore inexcusable. The Salafi activists (*harakis*) advocate non-violent political activism as their *manhaj*, deriving from the belief that political participation is needed on the part of Islamists to protect God's Divine governance. Lastly, the *manhaj* for the jihadi-Salafis is the violent overthrow of existing political establishments in order to pave the way for a new caliphate, in part arising from the writings of Sayyid Qutb.

Salafi Doctrine

Within the multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment of the vast Islamic Empire, during both the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, human reason came to shape intellectual life through exposure to Persian and Greco-Roman intellectual texts. Soon thereafter, "rationalist" schools of Islamic thought began to emerge, challenging the traditional approaches of the *ulama*. Worried that reliance on human reason to interpret the Qur'an could yield, rebellion or strife (*fitna*) among the Muslim community, members of the ulama denounced this rationalist approach. In reaction to this rising reliance on rationality the ulama then "asserted that a return to the pristine purity of Islam of...*al-salaf al-salih*, was paramount to salvage the Muslim community from the heretical intellectual vise of foreign influences."[24]

Among the religious scholars advocating this purification of Islam was Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780-855 C.E.), a leading authority on the *hadith*. He pushed for Muslims to refrain from "'speculative theology,'" and claimed that "there is nothing to be said [about God or Islam] other than what is in God's Book [Qur'an], traditions of His messenger or those of his companions and their followers," effectively elucidating a rough outline for what would later become more specifically elaborated upon as Salafism.[25] The designation of *Ahl al-Hadith* became an expression of doctrinal significance, notably marking the Qur'an, Sunna (the customs and practices of the Prophet), and *hadith* (the collected sayings of the Prophet) as the only valid sources of Islamic instruction. This title also became a marker of distinction from the Islamic philosophers who came to be known as *Ahl al-Ra'y* (partisans of opinion).

Although there was a clear epistemological tension between these two groups, the main point of contention between jurists like Ibn Hanbal and the rationalist Islamic philosophers dealt with

issues of social regulation and by extension governance, centered around different understandings of the role of the intellect. For instance, according to the Islamic philosophers, *Ahl al-Ra'y*, the intellect is an essence bestowed from above, which translated to all of society implies that '"authority [the ruler] is the *'aql* (intellect) of society,'" whereas the *Ahl al-Hadith*, regard the intellect as an instinct, completely internal to both a person and a society, meaning that social authority in turn naturally comes from within the society.[26]

Despite the fact that the first written appearances of the term *Salafiyya* seen in the writings of Ibn Taymiyya implied a more general understanding of pure Islamic belief and practice, the term gradually gained a variety of doctrinal views between the late 18th century and continuing until the 20th century, by self-proclaimed Salafist thinkers ranging from the modernist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, to the militant Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, albeit within different contexts. It was around this time that the idea of Islamism more generally emerged as an ideology, and within this broader framework Salafism too adopted an ideological and doctrinal structure.

The general emergence of Islamism was mainly a "response to multiple crises in the vacuum created by the Ottoman Empire's collapse and as an alternative to the dominant ideologies of either East or West."[27] Against the backdrop of European imperialism, emerging Islamist thinkers would argue that these Western powers were seeking to "exploit, control, or destroy Muslim lands. The only way to defend the faith was to fight back, politically, socially and physically."[28] Afghani himself referred to European colonialism as the "yoke of servitude"[29] restraining Muslims worldwide, and believed Muslims under imperial rule could only become free if they embraced the zeal and mentality of the first Islamic *umma*, who achieved "unbelievable progress…in a short period of time."

Nearly a century prior to Afghani, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, surrounded by chaos, violence, and a variance of practices and traditions all claiming to be Islamic, similarly felt that Islam in the holy land was contaminated with non-Islamic innovations. The only proper path to restore the faith was "a return to the orthodox ways of the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-salih*) and a strict obedience to the Qur'an and *hadith*," in line with the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and the Hanbali School.[30] Similar sentiments were resurrected in the 19th and 20th centuries across the Middle East, particularly the "urban centers of Iraq and Syria, where Hanbali theology had deeper historical roots,"[31] and spread by students and scholars who interacted with one another across the region. It was against the backdrop of cultural, military, and political challenges posed to Muslim and Arab culture by the West that Salafism transformed into a multidimensional school of thought with a proposed methodology (*manhaj*).

The Islamic modernists Muhammad Abduh and to a larger extent his student Rashid Rida led a new generation of self-designated Salafi Muslim reformers who returned to the legacy of Ibn Taymiyya. They sought to abide by the Salafi *madhab* "in order to challenge the political framework of the Ottoman Empire as well as its religious institutions and patronage of traditional *'ulama*.'"[32] Further, this "broadening of Salafi epithets" gradually grew to "encompass the realm of the law" in the 1920s.[33] For example, Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi of Ottoman Syria and Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi of Ottoman Iraq, two of the most prominent Salafi scholars of the 20th century, both referred to themselves as Salafis in their correspondence with each other, proclaimed themselves adherents to a Salafi doctrine, and "conceived of the Salafis as a transnational community of past and present Muslims from all walks of life."[34]

Simultaneously, modern Islamism began budding into social and religious organizations, such as the Society of Muslim Brothers founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928 to offer services and support to poor and marginalized Egyptians in a society increasingly overcome with extreme decadence, greed, and materialism among the wealthy elites while the state offered little or no protections for Egyptians living in poverty. Islamism in this context was used as "a bulwark against the

Campaign rally for Salafist presidential candidate Hazem Abu Ismail in Egypt in 2012. © KHALED ELFIQI/epa/Corbis

encroachments of foreign power and the weakening of the *umma* from within."[35] The Brotherhood would become the model for other Islamist organizations that would emerge, particularly in Egypt in the 1970s and Islam again became an alternative to the government, which was failing its citizens. It was in this atmosphere in Egypt that Salafism as a branch of Islamism became uniquely popular, with various groups emerging at universities, mostly in Alexandria. These groups attracted large numbers of students who felt disenfranchised from society and further felt that other Islamist alternatives, like the Muslim Brotherhood, were untrustworthy. It's important to note here that the Muslim Brotherhood can also be classified as a Salafi organization, in line with the writings and ideas of Afghani. It did however differ significantly in ideology from the Salafi organizations that arose in the 1970s, such as *al-dawa al-Salafi-yya*, in line with Ibn Taymiyya's teachings.

From these doctrinal beginnings, Salafi thinkers' early intent to focus on rigorous reinterpretation of the *hadith* was for the purpose of purifying Islam of non-Muslim historical accretions. This fascination with purity became a defining characteristic of Salafi movements worldwide, and as a result, "Salafis are more concerned about 'purity' than almost anything else," as evidenced by their certainty that "an uncorrupted Islamic reality may be achieved through the correct education and training" and their determination to achieve this in society.[36] In fact, "in Salafi circles… there can be nothing more basic and vital to a Muslim's religious life than the study of *tahara*," or "ritual purity."[37] Although this yearning for purity exists across traditions and is by no means confined to the Salafi doctrine, it does maintain a prominent platform of importance for Salafis and their encounters with their surroundings. In focusing "specifically on Islam's ritual purity

(*tahara*) beliefs and practices" it therefore becomes possible to speak about attitudes that are definitively Salafi.[38]

Conclusion

Today, "Salafis represent a social and religious movement whose activities have long-term political effects that are not obvious at first glance." "In a contentious age, Salafism transforms the humiliated, the downtrodden, disgruntled young people, the discriminated migrant, or the politically repressed into a chosen sect (al-firqa al-najiya)." This mindset affords adherents a moral superiority that does not challenge the status-quo, but rather claims to provide the path towards moral purity through direct engagement with religious texts, thereby challenging the ulama's claims to authority over religious interpretation and empowering segments of people who may be seeking religious fulfillment or others who feel marginalized by society."

ENDNOTES

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5   Robert G. Rabil, Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 27.

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7   Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History," 371.

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