

Does ISIS Really Follow the Salafi Version of Islamic Law and Theology?

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Articles & Testimony

While the group's core appeal among most recruits is its supposed Salafi orientation, the project of raising a generation of Islamic State 'citizens' is driven by factors that have little relation to Salafi doctrines.

Guest contributor Jacob Olidort critically examines ISIS's claim of adherence to the doctrine of Salafism, a popular orientation among conservative Muslim clerics who attempt to model their actions on a certain vision of law and theology in the early Muslim community. Himself a scholar of modern Salafi thought, Olidort concludes that ISIS's claims are at odds with Salafi doctrine. Contrary to conventional Salafi doctrines, ISIS displays more affinities to politics than theology; many of its state-building activities are at odds with traditionally Salafi teachings, including the very concept of a caliphate. ISIS uses Salafism as more of a political vehicle, concludes Olidort, used to establish credibility for their ambitions.

"Build an Islamic state in your hearts, and it shall be built on your land," was the advice the Salafi thinker Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani gave to his followers as their Muslim Brotherhood counterparts were busy participating in elections and lobbying for states to make "sharia" the source of legislation. It is this line, cleverly borrowed from the late Brotherhood leader Hasan al-Hudaybi, that captures the key distinction between the Brotherhood and other Islamists and the Salafis, and the unique appeal of the latter today **as I have described elsewhere (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/fall-brotherhood-rise-salafis>)**.^[1]

It is also this line that has been so profoundly misunderstood in academic, policy and public discourses on religion and politics in the Middle East, and which has become the basis of flawed assumptions regarding cause and effect that we describe today regarding some of the latest regional changes. I have sought to address at least three of these flawed assumptions on previous occasions: First, that where Salafis do not engage in either politics or violence they lack policy relevance. **Correction (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-politics-of-quietist-salafism/>)**:

Salafis comment and engage politically along a spectrum, and sometimes those who do not engage directly in politics can have the greater political influence.[2] Second, that when Salafis engage in formal politics their actions and statements reflect their Salafi perspective. **Correction (<http://pomeps.org/2016/02/19/salafi-politics-during-the-arab-uprisings-methodological-insights-from-game-theory/>)**: Salafis can comfortably engage in political activity out of pure personal and pragmatic interest rather than any kind of ideological commitment.[3] Third, that when it comes to Salafi-Jihadi groups, Salafism is the only explanation of their intentions and actions. **Correction (<https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/fueling-islamic-states-engine-1089>)**: Salafi ideas are *necessary* but *insufficient* for understanding what drives Salafi-Jihadi groups, and often key decisions could be impacted by a range of other factors, including opportunism and rivalries.[4]

The reason we misunderstand Salafism is that we see it as a political concept when, in fact, it is a theological one. In this way, Salafis are a mirror opposite of Brotherhood Islamists, all consistent in their political ambitions (despite differences in means) but inconsistent in a clear theological platform.[6]

These contrasts have colored the relationship between Brotherhood Islamists and Salafis (who regard the former as sworn enemies for rushing into politics before clarifying first principles) and has informed how they have cross-pollinated (in the case of Salafi-Jihadis, blending the violent activism of strains of the Brotherhood with the theological exclusivism of the Salafis).

Despite the existence of states with Salafi leanings, understanding them as exclusively Salafi enterprises often proves elusive. In the case of Saudi Arabia, for example, one can argue that it is the royal family rather than the Wahhabi clergy that are the true decision-makers.

Enter the Islamic State, or ISIS, which claims to not only be building a Salafi state, but also an apocalyptic caliphate. [7] How Salafi is ISIS?

As Exhibit A we might begin with the group's official Arabic language publications. **In a recent report (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/inside-the-caliphates-classroom>)**, I conducted the first systematic overview of these texts, which range from short pamphlets to large manuals for religious observance and commentaries on medieval theological tracts and textbooks for schoolchildren -- all told, about one hundred fifty titles (not including the group's propaganda magazines in different languages, leaked bureaucratic documents and official statements).[8]

Where security and counter-terrorism communities have rightly focused on the group's organizational and operational paper trail, this study fills the gap of understanding the group's literary trail. Moreover, the quantity and range of genres of this material underscores the fact that the group's literature is itself key to understanding its organizational and operational objectives -- as I describe in the report, not only does ISIS view its publications as an intellectual arsenal but as a theater of conflict unto itself.

Publishing, and more specifically focusing on the details of ritual observance and theological concepts, has always been the core activity for Salafi communities. Indeed, it was their ability to give permanence to ideas through publishing houses, and later through other forms of media, at a time when other groups were focused on political treatises and more pointed critiques of the West that helped them navigate the more volatile political changes of the last several years.

For its part, ISIS does draw heavily on Salafi principles and texts. A majority of its commentaries are works by Wahhabi authors -- and continue to be a focus of these activities, with a clear direct targeting of today's Saudi religious establishment for what ISIS sees as the latter's betrayal of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's legacy. Moreover, its textbooks on creed (*'aqida*) include chapters on "nationalism," "patriotism," "democracy" -- consistent with the kinds of writings of earlier Salafi authors who deemed these political concepts as unnecessary divisions of the

Muslim community and as signs of unbelief. And the group does not recognize the Islamic schools of law in its textbooks on jurisprudence, referring exclusively to hadith reports, Qur'anic verses and statements of select scholars who share its views -- all consistent with Salafi epistemology.[12]

But the project of at least rhetorically justifying, if not working towards the realization of, a state-caliphate project seems to have cornered the self-proclaimed caliphate into an intellectually awkward spot, precisely because Salafis have not traditionally created the blueprint for such initiatives. One can even go so far as to say that, aside from law and creed, there really is no one uniquely Salafi approach to subjects that one might expect on a school curriculum (and which ISIS includes in theirs) -- subjects like literature, geography, mathematics, physics and biology.

All of these subjects -- including the very concept of a caliphate -- have no doctrinal basis in the Salafi worldview for the simple reason that they have not been priorities for Salafi groups. More difficult still is that sometimes the very figures in medieval Islamic history who gained fame for their literary or political achievements (and so are logical historical precedents when contemporary groups discuss Islamic governance) were figures who stood on diametrically opposite ends of Salafis in their theological leanings. Examples of this are the medieval jurist Abu Hasan al-Mawardi who was patronized by the Abbasid state (which some Salafis hold suspect for shepherding the famous translation of Greek philosophy into Arabic) but who authored the canonical theoretical treatise on Islamic governance. And, for that matter, Abu al-Ma'ali al-Juwayni, teacher of al-Ghazali (whom Salafis categorically condemn for his Sufism and rationalist approach to jurisprudence), who also wrote on divine governance.

In certain cases ISIS does caveat these ideological awkward points -- in one place, for example, including a lengthy footnote about Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani as being the kind of Sufi who was not as deviant as others. But in many other cases ISIS not only draws on these individuals, but even publishes their works -- for example its edition of Juwayni's famous tract on jurisprudence, *al-Waraqat*, with minimal marginalia.

Here we return to the three corrections above about how we understand the drivers of political and violent movements of Salafi actors.

While its core identity claims and appeal among recruits is the group's Salafi orientation -- in particular its claim to restore the original "pure" Islam of the Prophet Muhammad -- its project of building a curriculum and of raising a generation of Islamic State "citizens" is driven by a range of personal and regional factors with little relation to Salafi doctrines, but for which those Salafi doctrines can be useful rhetorical justification. The danger, as I have written elsewhere, is that groups like ISIS not only promote religious intolerance but also invest in training their children and recruits to fight effectively on its behalf -- it is around this principle that every aspect of their curriculum revolves, from showing children how to assemble and fire weapons to teaching them how to program software and even how to count and spell. In building this enterprise, Salafism serves as a vehicle whose claim to an authentic Islamic hermeneutic and political adaptability allow groups like ISIS to effectively market their vision at a time when both religiously credible and politically representative voices remain elusive.

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[1] Jacob Olidort, "Fall of the Brotherhood, Rise of the Salafis," *Lawfare Foreign Policy Essay*, 11 October 2015, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/fall-brotherhood-rise-salafis> (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/fall-brotherhood-rise-salafis>), Accessed 20 September 2016.

[2] Jacob Olidort, *The Politics of 'Quietist' Salafism*, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Paper (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-politics-of-quietist-salafism/> (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-politics-of-quietist-salafism/>) Accessed 20

September 2016.

[3] Jacob Olidort, "Salafi Politics during the Arab Uprisings: Methodological Insights from Game Theory," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 29 January 2016, <http://pomeps.org/2016/02/19/salafi-politics-during-the-arab-uprisings-methodological-insights-from-game-theory/> (<http://pomeps.org/2016/02/19/salafi-politics-during-the-arab-uprisings-methodological-insights-from-game-theory/>) Accessed 20 September 2016.

[4] Jacob Olidort, "Fueling the Islamic State's Engine," *The Cipher Brief*, 5 May 2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/fueling-islamic-states-engine-1089> (<https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/fueling-islamic-states-engine-1089>), Accessed 20 September 2016.

[5] For my thoughts on this, see Jacob Olidort, "What is Salafism? How a Nonpolitical Ideology became a Political Force," *Foreign Affairs*, 24 November 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-11-24/what-salafism> (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-11-24/what-salafism>) Accessed 20 September 2016.

[6] In his new book, Alexander Thurston articulates this distinction when he writes, "In contrast to Salafism's well-defined theological creed, the theological core of Islamism, as represented by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots and peers, consists primarily of 'generic Sunni Islam,' that is, a set of propositions about what Islam is that do not involve fine-grained distinctions on theological questions such as the nature of the attributes of Allah." Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 170.

[7] William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

[8] To view a sample of these sources, see Aaron Zelin's excellent archive, <http://www.jihadology.net> (<http://www.jihadology.net/>)

[9] See, for example, Jacob Olidort, *In Defense of Tradition: Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī and the Salafī Method* (Ph.D., dissertation, Princeton University, 2015), especially chapter 4.

[10] Jacob Olidort, *Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/inside-the-caliphates-classroom> (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/inside-the-caliphates-classroom>), Accessed 20 September 2016, pp.48-50.

[11] See, for example, the classic Salafī work on this topic by 'Abd al-'Azīz b. 'Abd Allāh b. Bāz (d.1999), *Naqd al-qawmiyya al-'arabiyya* (Critique of Arab Nationalism), second edition (Beirut, 1971)

[12] See, for example, Olidort, *Inside the Caliphate's Classroom*, pp. 14-15.

[13] Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), *Kashf al-shubuhāt* (The Clarification of Doubts), first edition (n.l.: Maktabat al-Himma/Maṭābi' al-Dawla al-Islamiyya, January 2016), p. 24.

[14] See Jacob Olidort, "The Islamic State's 'Homo Jihadus,'" *Lawfare Foreign Policy Essay*, 18 September 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/islamic-states-homo-jihadus> (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/islamic-states-homo-jihadus>), Accessed 20 September 2016. ❖

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