Salafism: ideas, recent history, politics

Jacob Olidort, PhD
Soref Fellow, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy
jolidort@washingtoninstitute.org
@jolidort
Overview

- Introduction: Terms and Concepts
- Emergence of Salafi Movement in the 20th Century
  - Local Roots
  - New political setting (1924-1961)
  - Salafism ascendant (1961-1980)
- Making Sense of Salafism Today (2011-2016)
  - New trends, new problems
  - Rethinking Salafism
Distinction

**Brotherhood Islamism**

- **Nature:** Political ideology, hierarchical organizations
- **Objective:** To ensure that Islam is in a position of influence, in any form and through any means.
- **Sources:** Cite widely from Islamic and Western sources, showing that Islam is in harmony with Western institutions and ideas.
- **Priority:** Diminish Western influence

**Salafism**

- **Nature:** Theological and legal ideology, meritocratic networks
- **Objective:** To ensure that only their interpretation of Islam is the one that dominates.
- **Sources:** Only Islamic sources by authors who share their worldview and typically no Western sources.
- **Priority:** Diminish what they see as “deviant” Islamic influences (especially Shi’is, Sufis) in order to “purify” Islam.

**Salafi-Jihadis:** Brotherhood Islamism + Salafism

**Wahhabism:** Saudi Arabia’s brand of Salafism; heavier emphasis on theology than law and bound to Saudi monarchy and state.
Types of Salafis*

- **Purists (Quietists)**
  emphasize a focus on nonviolent methods of propagation, purification, and education. They view politics as a diversion that encourages deviancy.

- **Politicos (Harakis)**
  emphasize application of Salafi creed to the political arena, which they view as particularly important because it dramatically impacts social justice and the right of God alone to legislate.

- **Jihadis**
  take a more militant position and argue that the current context calls for violence and revolution.

The difference between different Salafi groups—jihadis, quietists, and politicos—is in the way they interpret political context, not in their theology or legal worldviews.
Terms and Concepts

Salafism (al-salafiyya, Ar.): from “al-salaf al-salih” (the pious predecessors)

- Sunni theological and legal worldview that seeks to redefine Islam as how they imagine to have been during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his early followers, who witnessed his actions and life.

- Sources
  - anything literally stated in the Qur’an, and in those hadith reports (actions and statements of Prophet Muhammad) Salafis deem to be “authentic.”
  - refer only to authors they believe to have championed their “creed” over the centuries.

- Reject anything that:
  - appeared after seventh to ninth century
  - was not explicitly condoned by Muhammad
  - is based on anything other than Q and S

= sunna (nomative example of Prophet Muhammad)

= Bid’a ([reprehensible] innovation)
Why Salafism?

The first three generations:

“The best of my community is my generation, then those who follow them, then those who follow them.” – (Hadith in Bukhari 3450)

The “saved sect”:

- “…My community shall divide into 73 sects, all of whom will perish in Hellfire except for one.”
- “Which is that, Messenger of God?”
- “Whoever follows what I and my Companions follow”

(Other versions: “It is the Community”; “It is the people of the sunna and the Community.”)

(Hadith in Abu Dawud, Kitab al-Sunna 4596; Tirmidhi, Kitab al-Iman 2640)
Salafi Theology

Aqida
creed, theological views.

Tawhid (God’s oneness*)
key principle used by Salafis to justify opposition to other Sunnis (especially Sufis) and Shiites. Salafis divide tawhid into the following:

- Lordship, the recognition of God’s absolute and unique powers.
- Divinity that is worshiped and personally submitted to by all people.
- Names and attributes literally found in Qur’an and which cannot be ascribed to human beings (=Islamic speculative theology)
- Sovereignty (Jihadis, political): rulers who do not apply sharia commit grave sin and violate God’s sovereignty.

*R. Meijer, Global Salafism, xv.

opposite: shirk
(ascribing partners [to God]) – i.e., anything that violates tawhid.

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Salafi Law

- Oppose taqlid (adherence to the Sunni schools of Islamic law – madhhab). Salafis deride this as “blind emulation” and “madhhab-partisanship”.

- Reject entire tradition and methods of Islamic jurisprudence since much of this draws on analogical reasoning, deemed by Salafis to be foreign to Islam.

- Insist on direct application of practices and ideas in hadith reports deemed to be “authentic” (i.e. “proven” that the Prophet Muhammad said them)
Quietist vs. Jihadi?

Takfir – excommunication of other Muslims

Under what conditions does one’s Muslim status change?

Failure to adhere to Salafi theological and legal principles equals

- explicit rejection of Islam

or

- reasons such as misunderstanding, lack of exposure to Salafi ideas, laziness

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PART I

Emergence of Salafism in the 20th Century
Salafism: Political Setting 1924–1961

**Fall of the Ottoman Empire**
- New questions about religious authority in absence of Islamic government

**Replaced by colonial powers and Western-style states**
- Renewed skepticism of legal schools (madhhabs), as well as institutions and figures of “official Islam” (seen as pawns of Western-states)

**Lingering Ottoman concerns over rise of Saudi Arabia**
- Suspicion of local Salafi communities as being proxies, labeled “Wahhabis”

For guide to authentic Islamic governance of society, one must consult sources directly.

Both new Western governments and any of their institutions are foreign imports, thus “innovation,” and cannot be trusted for proper guidance.
Salafism Ascendant 1961–1980

Saudi Arabia’s largesse, and competition for regional dominance as center of Islamic world

- King Faisal opens Islamic universities, media stations and Wahhabi institutes around the world.

Failure of Arab Nationalism as political ideology (with 1967 defeat) and rise of Islamism

- New context for raising awareness of broader socio-political relevance of Islam, especially after 1979.

Crackdowns on Muslim Brotherhood, seen as political threat

- Salafis, who refrain from political sphere, begin vilifying MB-like groups for “distracting” from tawhid.

‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz (d. 1999), Vice Chancellor of Islamic University of Medina (first Saudi Islamic university, opened in 1961); later Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia.
Salafis Divide 1980–2001

Siege of Mecca (1979) led by hadith-oriented messianic cult
- Albani’s strain of Salafism implicated, Salafi teachings held suspect.

Arab fighters returning from Afghanistan (1980s)
- Emergence of local jihadi hubs; renewed suspicion of Salafism

- “Awakening” movement, inspires Salafi political opposition
PART II

Making Sense of Salafism Today (2011–present)
Crossover between the three categories of Salafis (purists, politicos, jihadis) as regional conflicts assume sectarian aspects.

Some Salafis violate ideological principles by forming political parties (e.g., Egypt, Gulf States), with some arguing that this is justified as a way of perpetuating their mission of purification and education (al-tasfiya wa-l-tarbiya).
Rethinking Salafism

The Quietist Continuum

**Quietists**

**Politicos**

**Jihadis**

**Absolutist/Madkhali quietists**
refrain on principle from commenting on any aspect of political sphere and counsel obedience to ruler. Adhere to commentary on religious teachings, personal observance.

**Politically-inclined quietists**
weigh in on current events and politics through their theological and legal worldview, but resist becoming directly involved.
Select References


