

MAKING SENSE OF SALAFISM

Theological foundations, ideological iterations, and political manifestations

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Introduction: the idea of ‘Salafism’

The ‘religious turn’ in the study of international relations (Petito and Hatzopoulos, 2003; Thomas, 2005; Haynes, 2013) together with the emergence of distinct threats to Western security—military as well as ontological—have brought to the fore concerns about how precisely religion interacts with political ideology in the making of subjects and the emergence of practices. The Muslim-majority world, as the historic nemesis of the West and its foremost ideological challenger after the implosion of Soviet-conditioned bipolarity, has been central to such concerns. The post-9/11 period—our brave new Age of Terror—reinforced the notion that particular strands of Islam were potentially harmful to global conviviality, or to the preservation of a West-centric world order. Among the theo-political outlooks that consequently has received much political currency, and thus scholarly scrutiny, over the course of the last two decades is the nebulous religious philosophy of Salafism (*al-salafiyya*). But what exactly is ‘Salafism’? How has it evolved as a worldview? What are the key ideational tensions within it? And how do these tensions manifest in politics?

In the growing academic literature on Salafism in the English language, three overarching tendencies appear to exist: one can be referred to as the ‘securitization’ of Salafism, in which Salafism is depicted as a security threat to either Western civilization or Islamic civilization, or indeed both (Oliveti, 2002; Schwartz, 2003; Habeck, 2006). Albeit far from alarmist, a set of penetrating studies on key thinkers in Salafi militancy has further served to consolidate the focus on security (e.g., Lia, 2007; Lahoud, 2010; Wagemakers, 2012; Kassim, 2015; Hegghammer, 2020), but have not engaged with Salafism as a broad category. A second tendency entails an inverse, often apologetic, ‘mainstreaming’ of Salafism, through which Salafism is rehabilitated as little more than Sunni Islam with added rigour (DeLong-Bas, 2007; Oliver, 2004). The third scholarly tendency could be referred to as the ‘localization’ of Salafism, found in a host of valuable studies that focus on the development of Salafism in particular national settings (Hegghammer, 2010; Bonnefoy, 2011; Lacroix, 2011; Rabil, 2014; Thurston, 2016; Pall, 2018; Wehrey and Boukhars, 2019; Adraoui, 2020). In addition, two edited volumes on comparative Salafism have contributed immensely to the field (Meijer, 2009; Cavatorta and Merone, 2016). Intellectual histories of Salafism are few (Lauzière, 2016; Maher, 2016; Weismann, 2017), while theological interrogations are both few and tentative (Murad, 1999, 2008; Abou el Fadl, 2001; Malik, 2002; Sheikh, 2015; Nahouza, 2018).

Even if widely invoked, the conceptual entailments of the term ‘Salafism’ remain opaque and ill-defined. While Gallie (1956) wrote of ‘essential contestability’ surrounding the definition of key notions in much of political theory, Salafism is characterized by *compounded contestability* in that a whole series of concepts and their relationship remains contested, at times with ferocious consequences. In its origin, though, Salafism is primarily a theological outlook which, over time, has morphed into multiple competing ideological currents.¹ Following Freeden (1996), ideologies (and theologies, too) are not to be understood as static dogma but instead as spatio-temporally malleable ‘semantic fields’. Ideologies are demarcated by concepts (both core and peripheral) and characterized by perpetually evolving hierarchies between them. The appeal of a given ideology relies on its proponents’ ability to reify or naturalize these contingent conceptual relationships and to convince others that their definitions are the ‘correct’ ones while competing definitions are somehow fallacious (Freeden, 1996, 2001). This approach to ideological analysis is, as we shall see, eminently apposite for the analysis of Salafism.

Lexically, the term ‘Salafism’ derives from the Arabic expression for predecessor (*salaf*) or, more elaborately, ‘the righteous forebears’ (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). The Salafi self-ascription is thus anchored in a homogenized model of religious normativity, derived from a reimagination or recasting of the very early generations of Muslims (Afsaruddin, 2007), often defined as the first three generations of Islam: that of the Prophet and his Companions (*ṣaḥāba*), that of the Followers (*tābi’ūn*) of the Companions, and that of the successors to the Followers (*atba’ al-tabi’ūn*). The foundational epoch of Islam is construed as providing the original model of religious belief and praxis, in contradistinction to the religious ideas and norms of successive (*khalaf*) generations. In this way, Salafism is predicated on a kind of theological *originalism*, according to which doctrinal and legal prescriptions are to be explicated with an epochal fixity, based on the historic time of enunciation (here, of course, relating to revelation and scripture). Salafi originalism thus entails an interpretative method that seeks meaning from historically circumscribed semantic constructions, the adherence to which identifies not only ‘original meaning’ but also ‘original intent’ (cf. Solum, 2008).

Salafism is premised on a return to an imagined primordial Islam, free of the accretions and religious ‘innovations’ of millennium-long traditions within Sunni jurisprudential schools (the *madhāhib*, sing. *madhhab*) and spiritual practices (including, but not limited to, Sufism, as institutionalized in the Sufi *ṭuruq*). Itzhak Weismann (2017, p. 33) usefully refers to Salafism as ‘the basic theological-ideological formation that postulates a return to pristine Islam to overcome tradition and bring regeneration’. To its adherents, Salafism is neither a sect nor even stand-point: it is (ontologically) unadulterated Islam and (epistemologically) Islam rediscovered. As with comparable forms of puritanism, the scripture—both the Qur’an and the compilations of *aḥādīth* (transmissions of the Prophet’s words and deeds, sing. *ḥadīth*)—are central to Salafism’s epistemology. With a proclivity for both *literalism* (deriving from an emphasis on the apparent purport of the text, a method known as *ẓāhir al-rivāya*) and *selectivism* (in addressing the creedal credentials of any author before accepting his scholarship), Salafism has become a theological thought complex with well-known strictures and semantics, easily distinguishable from more customary expressions of scholarship and religiosity. The *politics* of Salafism, however, are less easily distinguishable and can take up a variety of, even contradictory, positions on questions of statecraft, citizenship, fidelity, and mutiny.

In the remainder of this chapter, I outline Salafism’s conceptual history and the consequences for Salafism today. The aim is to synthesize a complex intellectual-cum-political history of Salafism by, first, examining its trifold genealogies in premodern or early modern thinking. Second, I discuss three religio-political syntheses from the twentieth century, all evolving within a single site of contestation, namely Egypt. Thirdly, I turn to a cartography

of contemporary Salafi currents, offering modest revisions to the taxonomies found in the literature. Finally, I show how recent developments in Salafism may lead to new fluidities and hybridities, eluding neat categorization and challenging some widely-held assumptions about Salafism.

Premodern and early modern genealogies of contemporary Salafism

Genealogy A: Ibn Hanbal and the Ahl al-Ḥadīth

While contemporary Salafism is predicated on a form of ‘anti-madhhabism’ (Murad, 1999), it remains strongly influenced by distinct theological and legal maxims that can be traced back to Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780–855), a Baghdad-based imam of the eighth century and the eponym of the Hanbali *madhhab*. Of the four extant Sunni schools of jurisprudence, his was the most explicit, or rigorist, in relying on *aḥādīth* as proof texts (*adilla*, sing. *dalīl*) in matters of doctrine (*‘aqīda*) and legal rule-derivation (*fiqh*), uneasy with more speculative or rationalist forms of argumentation (Haddad, 2007). Ibn Hanbal’s reliance on the explicit import of the text (*naṣṣ*) was exceeded only by the literalism of the *Zāhiri* school, founded by his student, the Persian Dawud al-Zahiri (c. 815–883), and later popularized by Andalusian jurist Ali Ibn Hazm (994–1064). The Zahiris would outright reject analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) as a method for deducing jurisprudential rulings while considering consensus (*ijmā‘*) to be binding only when comprising a first-generation consensus of the Companions of the Prophet (Kamali, 2003).

Due to their ‘fideist minimalism’ (Al-Azmeh, 1988, p. 266), both Hanbalis and Zahiris were labelled the ‘Folk of Hadith’ (*ahl al-ḥadīth* or *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth*) in contradistinction to those juristic approaches—most prominently the Hanafis—they deemed driven by excessive scholastic discretion and opinion (the *ahl al-ra‘y*). The Ahl al-Ḥadith movement thus became a broader fideist movement that questioned the role of ratiocination in jurisprudence as well as in doctrine, opposed initially to Mu‘tazilite sophistry but later also to the Ash‘ari–Maturidi creedal condominium of Sunni Islam. The divine names (*asmā‘*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*) mentioned in the scripture, therefore, were affirmed (*ithbāt*) while denouncing attempts of allegorical interpretation (*ta‘wīl*)—a theme that later became a mainstay in Salafi discourse.

Genealogy B: Ibn Taymiyya and creedal proto-Salafism (al-salafiyya al-i‘tiqādīyya)

What might be referred to as ‘proto-Salafism’, or creedal Salafism (*al-salafiyya al-i‘tiqādīyya*), became emblematic in the scholarship of the fourteenth-century imam Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn ‘Abd al-Halim al-Harrani (1263–1328)—better known by his matronymic Ibn Taymiyya—the most important medieval reference for contemporary Salafism. According to Lauzière (2016), he was the first to speak of the school of the Salaf, *madhhab al-salaf*, as a theological position. A maverick (or, to his followers, a *mujtahid*), his mission was to introduce a reform theology to re-establish orthodoxy in doctrine and orthopraxy in devotional acts. Although trained in the Hanbali rite and with students that spanned the other Sunni rites, Ibn Taymiyya adopted positions that were not dominant in any of the extant four schools of jurisprudence or three schools of theology. Regarding himself as a staunch defender of Islamic monotheism (*tawḥīd*), his theology also entailed novel claims: true monotheism was no longer entailed only in the unicity of lordship (*tawḥīd al-rububiyya*), which is the belief that God is the Lord of all else, but also unicity of worship (*tawḥīd al-‘ibāda* or *tawḥīd al-‘uluḥīyya*), which demands that all worship be directed to Him alone without seeking intermediaries.

His denouncement of both the (high-church) *'ulamā'*† of the rival theological schools—particularly the Ash'aris, even as he muddied the waters by calling them anachronistic names such as 'Jahmis' after the heterodox theologian Jahm Ibn Safwan (d. 745)—and (low-church) folk religion steeped in local understandings of Sufism, earned him the authorities' wrath. He was imprisoned on charges of corporealism (*tajsīm*) and likening the attributes of God to those of His creation (*tashbīh*), a dual charge that his followers from Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350) onwards have also faced. Ibn Taymiyya's intransigence in the face of significant hostility from state officialdom paralleled Ibn Hanbal's tribulations as a consequence of the latter's stance on the uncreated (*qadīm*) nature of the Qur'an, and both became sources of inspiration for later Salafis, keen to follow in their footsteps as martyrs for orthodoxy.

Like in matters doctrinal, so too, in matters political, Ibn Taymiyya was an iconoclast. The Mongol carnage infuriated Ibn Taymiyya, and although the Mongols had largely converted (at first to Sunnism and later also to Shi'ism), in three separate fatwas, he denounced Mongol leaders as apostates on account of their bellicosity towards Muslims and on account of them ruling by the syncretic Yasa code of law, rather than the Shari'a (Hoover, 2019). This would, in time, set a precedent for the anathematization (*takfīr*) of Muslim leaders who did not rule in conformity with Shariatic injunctions.

Genealogy C: Wahhabism (al-da'wa al-najdiyya)

Although modern forms of Salafism antedated the emergence of the eighteenth-century mission of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) on the Central Arabian plateau of Najd, he is seen as the very epitome of the call to eradicate accretions (*bida'*, sg. *bid'a*) in religion. As with Ibn Taymiyya, from whom he took many positions, both creed and religious practice were to be purified and the primordial monotheism of the Salaf reinstated (DeLong-Bas, 2007). By the epistemic leapfrogging of centuries of legal scholarship and theological discourse, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's reform movement (often eponymously referred to as Wahhabism) constituted a remaking of Islam in the name of the forbearers, stripped of human subjectivity and the interpretative methods of historic Sunnidom. The quest was to salvage Islam from the idolatrous deviancies that had become prevalent in the course of Muslim history and to return to authentic Islam, practised by the first generations. Above all, the cardinal sin of polytheism (*shirk*) was to be eradicated and those seen to be guilty of this abomination (in particular, the Shi'i and the intemperate groups among the Sufis) were to be fought and converted anew (Commins, 2006).

Influenced by the revivalist *zeitgeist* of proponents of the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, such as Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi (d. 1750) in Medina—who inspired the Yemeni reformers Muhammad bin Isma'il al-San'ani (d. 1768), and later Muhammad al-Shawkani (d. 1834), and shared intellectual pedigree with the influential Indian reformer Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (d. 1762)—Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab took a staunch position against those he considered guided by 'blind adherence' to traditional praxis (Nafi, 2006). He likened their mindset to the proclivity of heathen peoples to continue their forefathers' misguidance. He considered the veneration of tombs, saints, and charms to violate *tauhīd*, and believed those engaged in such actions to be infidels (*kuffār*), while his own followers were true monotheists (*muwahhidūn*). As their power spread, the razing of tombs, the plundering of shrines, and the levelling of graves (even of the immediate Companions and family of the Prophet) became the signature move of the arrival of the Wahhabi 'true believers'.

The collective anathematization (*takfīr*) of groups of people also paved the way for massacres of rival persuasions, once Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab allied with the Saudi chieftains in 1744 CE to spread both the Wahhabi mission and the Saudis' territorial domain (Commins, 2006).

For both the Wahhabi zealots and the aspiring rulers of the peninsula, considering the enemy as infidels disinhibited violence: it could, after all, be construed as metering out divinely-ordained punishments. The alliance between the clergy (Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his progeny) and the chieftains-turned-kings (the House of *Sa‘ūd*) made for a pact that would see the influence of both spread first across Arabia and later globally (Al-Rasheed, 2002). Wahhabism remains the single most important influence on the development of contemporary Salafism, as evidenced in the global dissemination of the theological tracts of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, often considered mandatory texts in Salafi religious instruction.²

Late-modern antecedents of contemporary Salafism

There is significant confusion in the literature concerning the loose network of Muslim modernists of the 1880s–1930s who, to various degrees, invoked or were ascribed with Salafi notions. According to Lauzière (2016), though initially forced by the Procrustean interpretations of a whole generation of Western Orientalists, beginning with Louis Massignon (1883–1962), it remains a (category) mistake to include this group in a discussion of the evolution of modern Salafism. The import of the abstract noun of *‘salafiyya’* rather should be understood with spatio-temporal specificity, and it is perilous to read contemporary Salafism back in history by means of a reverse teleology. Yet, as Griffel (2015, p. 213) notes, the curvature that links the liberalizing modernists from the turn of the twentieth century to the reactionary reformists some decades later was predicated on ‘a real similarity of approaches to Muslim reform’, while Weismann (2017, p. 36) too notes ‘structural affinities and continuities’, even if the aspired end goals were vastly different. In the following, I shall discuss key ideas entailed in Muslim modernism, how it gave rise to the making of a self-conscious ideology of Islamism, and how Islamism radicalized and ultimately synthesized with Wahhabism to produce contemporary Salafism.

Antecedent A: reformist Salafism (al-salafiyya al-iṣlāḥiyya)

In the late nineteenth century, much of the greater Middle East found itself under imperial domination, either European or Ottoman. Faced with decline, Jamal al-Din Asadabadi (c. 1839–1897), commonly known as ‘al-Afghani’, insisted that for Islam to free itself from foreign encroachment and compete with Western civilization, Muslims had to recover, or rediscover, Islam’s rational bases. While scholars debate al-Afghani’s commitment to any theological tradition (Kedourie, 1966; Hourani, 1970; Keddie, 1972), they generally agree that his goal was to *mobilize* religion as a political resource towards a reinvigorated pan-Islamic consciousness. For al-Afghani and his followers, secularism meant subservience to foreign masters, while a reformed Islam would offer a rival pathway to modernity. Al-Afghani was well-travelled in Europe, and his pan-Islamism came to be influenced by Western thinkers, such as François Guizot, according to whom civilizations advance by progressing on two fronts, socio-economic development and intellectual enhancement through conceptual innovations (Hourani, 1970, pp. 114–115). As such, al-Afghani chose efficacy over authenticity: if it served to empower Islam, he would adopt any notion as Islamic.

Al-Afghani’s most prominent student was the leading Egyptian scholar Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905). Like al-Afghani, ‘Abduh was a pragmatist and, even as he was trained at Al-Azhar, the bastion of Sunni traditionalism, his tenure as Egypt’s Grand Mufti from 1899 was driven by a quest to challenge traditional Islam’s ossified institutions (Sedgwick, 2010). For ‘Abduh, unquestioning adherence to *madhhab*-bound legal precedent stifled creative thought; it was not a matter of re-establishing a pre-*madhhab* orthodoxy but of progressive telos, of the unimpeded exercise of reason in the image of the Enlightenment in Europe. In marked contrast to the strict

constructionism of the Hanbalis, ‘Abduh insisted on the need for the human intellect to decipher the intent of the sacredlaw.

In the thirty years after ‘Abduh’s death, his Syrian protégé, Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935), however, fundamentally changed the tenor and redirected the energies of the reformist enterprise. While ‘Abduh’s opposition to traditionalism was grounded in inertia, Rida’s animus to historic concepts and practices related to their inauthenticity. With the territorial expansion of Saudi domains, the Wahhabi movement became ascendant, and in it, Rida saw an ally. Sensing a shared mission, such as the rejection of being bound by juristic precedence and seeking the return to pristine sources, Rida became an apologist for Wahhabism and, despite significant incongruities, facilitated the convergence between Wahhabism and reformist Salafism (Lauzière, 2016). In this rapprochement, Rida was not alone but may well have been influenced by three Damascene scholars, ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Bitar (1837–1917), Tahir al-Jaza’iri (1852–1912), and Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866–1914) as well as two Baghdadi savants Nu‘man Khayr al-Din al-Alusi (1836–1899) and the latter’s nephew Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi (1857–1924). Together, they spearheaded the intellectual assault on popular Sufism, questioned the soundness of established madhabs, and rehabilitated Ibn Taymiyya (Weismann, 2001, 2009; Nafi, 2009; Griffel, 2015). In 1926, Rida’s student, Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi (1892–1959), became the founder of the first puritanical Salafi organization in Egypt, *Jamā‘at Anṣār al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya*, antedating the Muslim Brotherhood’s formation by two years.

Antecedent B: the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn)

As explained in the following section, much mutual animosity exists between sections of the Salafi movement and sections of the Islamists (understood, here, as those motivated by ideological precepts to challenge or capture the state in the name of Islam, cf. Denoeux, 2002). Nevertheless, in their historical dialectic, they mutually influenced and reshaped each other. Pivotal for the development of the Islamist paradigm was the emergence in 1928 of *Jamā‘at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* (The Society of Muslim Brethren, or Muslim Brotherhood, for short). Dedicated to societal revival (*tajdīd*) over intellectual reform (*iṣlāḥ*), the Muslim Brotherhood spread across the Middle East, North Africa, and in parallel forms further afield in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and within diaspora communities in the West to become ‘the most influential revivalist Islamic movement of the twentieth century’ (Al-Abdin, 1989, p. 219).

To the founder-leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the teacher Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), Egypt needed Islam to recover from colonialism. Al-Banna’s formative years coincided with a *Kulturkampf* surrounding the Egyptian nation’s collective identity after formal independence from the British in 1922 (Mitchell, 1969). Amid strong secularization tendencies within Egypt’s elites, who often prided themselves on speaking French over Arabic, al-Banna decried the ‘colonised, submissive and servile Islam that accepts its confinement to the private sphere’ (Soage, 2008, p. 27). Instead, al-Banna sought a reinvigorated, and very public, Islam, true both to the nature of Islam, as a political faith, and the religion’s historic mission. A proud (and perhaps chauvinistic) Arab, al-Banna linked the historic decline of Islam with the Muslim centre of gravity having moved away from Arabs to non-Arab ethnicities, including Mamluks, Persians, and Turks, ‘who had never tasted true Islam’ (Qureshi, 1999, p. 146). The incorporation of foreign ideas—such as Greek philosophy, Christian fatalism, Jewish ritualism, and Persian superstitions—had served to contaminate and weaken Islam, whose primordial strength derived from the purity of its doctrine. Nevertheless, al-Banna did not extend his critique to Sufism as a whole, seeing it rather as part of an ancient culture of devotion in contrast to the hedonistic pursuits of contemporaneity.

To al-Banna, Islam was no mere theology but a comprehensive ideational system (*niẓām*), encompassing personal morality, community, society, economy, politics, and statecraft (Mousalli, 1993). Islam was thus rearticulated as a potent political ideology and, as such, entailing (as all political ideologies) conceptions of a normative socio-political order together with a programmatic commitment—in this case, to arrest, and reverse, the secularization of Muslim lands. Adopting part of the repertoire of Salafism (a term he did use, albeit eclectically), he deemed the secular distinction between religion and government to be an ‘innovation’ (*bid‘a*), and thought of those who accepted this distinction to have imbibed ideas from their colonial masters (Soage, 2009a, p. 298). Al-Banna’s interpretation of the lordship (*rububiyya*) of God rather entailed the application of His rule to all facets of private and public life (Lia, 1998).

In opposition to ‘Abduh, but somewhat in line with Rida, al-Banna was ‘suspicious of reason’ (Soage, 2009b, p. 192), and less than impressed with Western empiricism and its technological fruits. Still, al-Banna’s thought may be more Western than he acknowledged. Beholden to the *étatisme* of Western models of statecraft, it was in the Islamization of the Westphalian state that he found a panacea for the woes of the Muslim condition. The very ideologization of Islam itself also testifies to a mindset that was far from traditional. Overall, al-Banna was a syncretic thinker who did not call for a particular theological understanding of Islam but rather offered Islam as a formal political identity to withstand the influence of Western imperialism and its local agents.

Antecedent C: Sayyid Qutb’s radical Salafism (al-salafiyya al-qutbiyya)

Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) began as an educator and a prolific literary critic and ended up a radical ideologue. Though he was born in the same week of October 1906 as Hassan al-Banna, he came to Islamism only in his early forties and, formally, to the Muslim Brotherhood only after al-Banna’s death. Influenced initially by the work of the French eugenicist and Nobel Prize laureate Alexis Carrel (1873–1944), an early proponent of gassing undesirable elements in society, Qutb developed a critique of the degenerative potential of Western civilization (Larsen, 2011). An antithesis to prevailing narratives surrounding the liberating consequences of the Enlightenment, Qutb’s oeuvre described Western modernity as having ontologically enslaved people. His educational pursuits in Colorado in the period 1948–1950 did little to assuage his critique and rather reinforced his perception of Western pursuits of the ‘good life’ as trivial, even primitive. Contrary to the modernizing effects of Muhammad ‘Abduh’s travel encounters with Europe, Qutb’s experience of the United States exacerbated his animus towards what he saw as the unhinged hedonism, sybaritic licence, spirit-devoid scientism, and violent racism of Western society (Soage, 2009b).

On his return to post-colonial Egypt, Qutb publicly turned to Islam. He gave up his position in the civil service and joined the Muslim Brotherhood, eventually becoming editor-in-chief of the Brotherhood’s weekly and a ranking member of its committee and council structure, including head of its Propagation Section (Calvert, 2010). As the emerging chief ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, he wrote scathing critiques of capitalism, Western society, and non-Islamic ideologies. While initially receptive of the Egyptian revolution of 1952, he soon fell out with Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasser (1918–1970) and the Free Officers for their lack of enthusiasm for an Islamic programme. After a failed assassination attempt on Nasser in October 1954, he was imprisoned and wrote most of his works on Islamist political thought in jail.

Appalled by the socio-cultural and political position of contemporary Islam, Qutb identified two principal causes of Muslim decline: first, Muslims’ lack of adherence to the Qur’an—which for Qutb was fundamentally a political text—thus detaching themselves both from celestial guidance and divine grace. Second, was the filling of this void of religion by ungodly ideologies,

courtesy of colonial imposition and the gradual internalization of foreign precepts by Arab elites as well as non-elites. Borrowing from his South Asian contemporaries, Syed Abu al-A'la Mawdudi (1903–1979) and the latter's student Abu al-Hasan 'Ali Nadwi (1914–1999), Qutb referred to this state of the supplantation of Islam and the erasure of its guidance, as a state of *'jāhiliyya'*, an expression historically used to denote the pre-Islamic age of ignorance (Khatab, 2006). For Qutb, a form of heathenism was thus inherent in any secular political authority which was not in alignment with the supposed directives of God. Juxtaposed to the overpowering *jāhili* dystopia were the practices of the Salaf, who for Qutb were not only religious role models but political role models, too, inasmuch as they had abandoned *jāhiliyya* precepts, internalized Quranic guidance, imbibed Islamic ideology, and institutionalized an Islamic polity (Soage, 2009b).

Yet, history would need some help in coming full circle. In proffering a form of Islamic actionalism—and taking a leaf out of the Leninist playbook—Qutb argued that the vanguard (*ṭalī'a*) would have to arise to challenge both the ideational and institutional manifestations of *jāhiliyya*. The vanguard movement would spread until it became a community of believers, spreading through Muslim lands (by *da'wa* and jihad) until, finally, it challenged the hegemonic pretensions of non-Islamic socio-political orders. For Qutb, any location which failed to apply the Shari'a was simultaneously a heathen realm (*dār al-kufr*) and a realm of war (*dār al-ḥarb*) and, as such, a recourse to force was admissible. Albeit epistemically totalist, Qutb's call was not for a totalitarian model but rather for a kind of piercing sovereignty of the divine that did away with the need for strong political institutions. This was the notion of *ḥākimiyya*, or the absolute Sovereignty of God over all beings and all institutions (Khatab, 2002; Calvert, 2010).

In his prison-written manifesto, *Ma 'ālim fi-l-ṭarīq* (rendered into English as 'Signposts Along the Way' or 'Milestones'), Qutb condemned Muslim governments as *ṭāwaghūt* (sing. *ṭāghūt*, a term that concurrently denotes 'transgressor' and 'demigod') for ruling based on human—thus specious—judgement, rather than divine *ḥākimiyya*, reaping only decline and degeneration in consequence. The conclusion was that anyone acting outside of the parameters set by Shar'i governance and statecraft was 'outside of God's religion' even as he might 'claim to profess this religion' (Qutb, 2002 [1964], p. 122). With this, Qutb initiated a form of political *tafīr* of secular forces, both Arabist and Occidental, applying a formula for the anathematization of fellow Muslims not seen in Islamic intellectual history since Ibn Taymiyya.

Qutb's writings were sufficiently perspicuous to function as evidence against him in the expedited trials that ended with his death sentence in 1966. While he was hastily buried, the ideas of the martyr endured. Within the Egyptian *Tanzīm Al-Jihād*, the electrician-turned-revolutionary, Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Faraj (1954–1982), while not a trained scholar, managed to adapt Qutb's thoughts on jihad into a call for clandestine direct action. His tract on jihad, *The Neglected Duty* (1979), took vigilante jihad in a decidedly Clausewitzian direction as the primary instrument of establishing, *de novo*, an Islamic order. As with Qutb, jihad was posited as individual obligation (*farḍ 'ayn*)—not an obligation that rested with any political or religious authority (Orbach, 2012). Jihad could henceforth take the form of attrition or assassination over outright strategic coercion, paving the way for the decision of the Al-Jihad Organization to slay 'the Pharaoh', President Anwar Sadat, in 1981 (Kepel, 1993; Jansen, 2013).

A cartography of the contemporary Salafiscape

Keen observers have commented on the myriad of mutual contradictions plaguing the many contemporary groups that refer to themselves as Salafi. Hegghammer (2009, p. 264) averred that

the epithet ‘Salafism’ was frustratingly ‘vague and ambiguous’, proposing instead an expansive use of the term ‘Islamism’, according to which different types of Salafis would constitute subsets of Islamists (which, however, makes for useful schemata only if all Salafis are indeed Islamists, which does not appear to be the case). Taking on the challenge of disambiguation, a number of authors have instead sought to offer taxonomies by which the increasingly global Salafi movement could be better understood. Wiktorowicz (2006) developed the most frequently cited typology to describe rival articulations of Salafism, positing three foundational types of Salafis, which he described as, respectively, ‘purists’ (for the primacy-of-theology group), the ‘politicos’ (for the primacy-of-politics group), and the ‘jihadists’ (for the primacy-of-militancy group). This section presents a modestly revised taxonomy that seeks to avoid some of the pitfalls of the previous lexicon.

Stream A: Conformist Salafism (*al-salafiyya al-taqīdiyya*)

The semantic repertoire of what I am calling ‘Conformist Salafism’ entails several core concepts: a self-referential focus of being the ‘saved sect’ (*al-firqa al-nājiyya*) and, eschatologically, the ‘victorious group’ (*al-ḥiẓba al-manṣūra*); a focus on *tawḥīdīc* orthodoxy and the making of the *muwaḥḥid* subject; a focus on *taṣfiya* (purification) of the faith tradition and *tarbiya* (cultivation) in the Salafi canon; an insistence on a particular normative approach (*manhaj*) to religiosity and admonitions against deviating from it; and a focus on submission (*tā‘a*) to authority and the avoidance of sedition (*fitna*). The differential markers between ‘true believer’ and malbelievers continue to be the rectitude of doctrine (*‘aqīda*) and the combatting of overt and covert forms of polytheism (*shirk*), including the illicitness (*hurma*) of seeking intermediation (*tawassul*) from prophets, saints, and relics.

Overall, thus, two concerns underpin Conformist Salafism: first, the quest for authenticity and, second, the fear of anarchy. The former drives it, centripetally, around the socio-cultural mores of Central Arabia (Najd, perhaps, over the Hijaz), whereas the latter manifests itself in the support for established political authority. Adherents strictly avoid the schisms of politics (even as the politics of religious schism remains a hallmark). They reject modern expressions of participatory politics, such as elections and parliamentary policymaking, and all forms of contentious politics, even demonstrations, public protests, and petitions. Party-based political activity is referred to as partisanship (*ḥizbiyya*) and its adherents—the *ḥizbiyyūn* or ‘partisans’—are seen as discordant and driven either by zealotry (*ghuluww*) or passion (*hawā*) for power. At most, the conformist *shaykh* is expected to provide private counsel (*naṣīha*) to leaders without transgressing into activist or militant modes of propagation: the word, not the sword, is thus central to Conformist Salafism.

Conspicuous in Conformist Salafism is the fixation on *manhaj*, by which is meant the epistemological method as well as method of propagation, both of which must conform to the Prophetic model and neither of which can tolerate ‘innovation’. Conformist Salafis thus retain distinct *modi operandi*, chiefly proselytization (*da‘wa*), purification (*taṣfiya*), and cultivation (*tarbiya*). By purification—even as the term has a Sufi pedigree in ideas such as the ‘purification of the hearts’ (*taṣfiyat al-qulūb*)—the Salafis mean the purification of knowledge; the vetting out of bogus (*bāṭil*) ideas and practices in Islam itself (Al-Albani, 2004). It is for this reason that Wiktorowicz (2006) refers to them as ‘purists’.³

Paradigmatic for the intellectual consolidation of Conformist Salafism was their authority in *ḥadīth* studies, *par excellence*, namely the Albanian-born Syrian Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914–1999), who edited the traditional corpus of *ḥadīth* from the vantage point of identifying past errors in distinguishing verified (*ṣaḥīḥ*) narrations from undependable (*da‘īf*) and fabricated (*mauḍū‘*) reports about the Prophet’s words and deeds (Brown, 2018, pp. 294–299).

For Albani, as for the Ahl al-Hadith before him, any allegiance to a *fiqh madhhab* was a form of learned bias, and although his ire was predominantly directed against his ancestral Hanafi school, the Saudi Hanbalis too fell out with al-Albani, forcing his departure from a prestigious teaching position at the University of Medina.

From the vantage point of both ontology and praxeology, the term ‘Conformist Salafism’ is fitting: the adherents must conform to the singularity of religious truth and culturally adapt to a homogenized pattern of thought, speech, behaviour, and apparel. Espousing an ethos of anti-diversity, the Salafi mission is hence dedicated to (re)producing a flock of the faithful who are remade in the supposed image of the first generations of believers, with implications for cultural mores, social interaction, gender roles, and political dynamics. The self-appellation, to the extent that any exists, is of course not Conformist Salafism (*al-salafiyya al-taqīdiyya*), which is rather the detractor’s term for this stream, popularized by the Egyptian-born Kuwaiti scholar ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Abd al-Khaliq (1939–2020). Less abrasive terms used in Arabic are *al-salafiyya al-rasmiyya* (‘customary Salafism’), *al-salafiyya al-da‘wiyya* (‘proselytizing Salafism’), or most abundantly *al-salafiyya al-‘ilmiyya*, which could be rendered into English as ‘epistemic’, ‘scholastic’, or ‘knowledge-based’ Salafism. The core referent here is thus a particular concern with the transmission of ‘sound’ religious knowledge. Its adherents are exhorted to pursue the study of the Salafi canon as the primary obligation of the followers, and many refer to themselves as ‘students of knowledge’ (*tullab al-‘ilm*, the Pashto equivalent to which is, incidentally, *ṭālibān*). Conformist Salafism is thus highly socialized, and often relies on authority figures to mediate issues of scholarly difference or political controversy, which in turn reinforces the epistemic control of a small group of scholars, often Saudi-based or Saudi-educated.

A substream of conformist Salafis could be labelled *neo-Wahhabi* because of its assimilation with the Saudi clerical estate, as products of their education in institutions such as the Islamic University of Medina—the most important Salafi seat of learning (Farquhar, 2016; Thurston, 2016, pp. 67–72)—or in terms of membership in the Saudi-sponsored epistemic communities around the world. This substream remains faithful to the Hanbali school, not only in relation to creed (‘*aqīda*’) but also largely in legal maxims (*fiqh*). Key leaders of the neo-Wahhabi substream have historically included figures such as the two Saudi clerics ‘Abd al-Aziz bin Baz (1910–1999) and Muhammad Ibn Salih al-‘Uthaymin (1925–2001), together with the Ethiopian-born Muhammad Aman al-Jami (1930–1996) and the Yemeni Muqbil al-Wadi‘i (1933–2001).

The current leadership in Saudi Arabia consists of Salih al-Fawzan (b. 1933), ‘Abd al-Muhsin al-‘Abbad al-Badr (b. 1933), ‘Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh (b. 1943), and Rabi’ al-Madkhali (b. 1931). The last-mentioned, a former Head of Sunna Studies at the Islamic University of Medina, has given rise to the eponymous ‘Madkhalism’ for a kind of establishment Salafism that is furious in its ultra-loyalism and opposes any challenge to established political authority, teaching instead unquestioning obedience to rulers (*tā‘at walī al-amr*) as a doctrine of political acquiescence. As such, Madkhalism is opposed to both Islamism and Salafi activism. Sayyid Qutb’s radicalism is denounced as a form of heresy, and he is depicted as non-Salafi by way of ‘*aqīda*’ as well as *manhaj*, while the jihadi Salafis are often referred to as ‘*khārījīs*’, using the name of a secessionist group in early Muslim history (Kenney, 2006). Madkhalis, as other conformist Salafis, do regard secular governance (whether democratic or authoritarian) as a form of disbelief (*kufṛ*), but while they insist that the only acceptable laws are those of the Shari‘a, they do not incite agitation or coercion towards that objective.

Their anti-politicization polemics notwithstanding, the Madkhalis do serve political functions, often in the service of Saudi foreign policy. This is because Madkhalis are best understood not simply as ‘propagandists’ (Wagemakers, 2016a, p. 16), but as anti-revolutionaries. In Libya,

besieged Mu‘ammar al-Gaddafi (c. 1942–2011) sought help from al-Madkhali and several of his international ideational allies, who, true to form, condemned uprisings against the Muslim ruler, just as they had sided with besieged despots in Yemen and Egypt (Bonney, 2016, p. 211). Later, amid a raging civil war in Libya, Madkhali militia (otherwise considered an oxymoron) sided with the Saudi-backed General Khalifa Haftar’s secularists in fighting a coalition of jihadists, all the while staying true to the Salafi disposition by demolishing Sufi mausoleums. Yesterday’s conformists thus became today’s militants.

Stream B: Activist Salafism (*al-salafiyya al-harakiyya*)

During the 1960s, persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood in Nasserite Egypt, Ba’athist Syria, and other pan-Arabist strongholds led to an exodus of their activists. Many sought refuge in Saudi Arabia, a kingdom with oil riches looking for human resources to assist state-building efforts (Al-Rasheed, 2002). The Ikhwanista were received with open arms, soon occupying important roles in the charitable sector and in the mushrooming institutions of higher learning. While helping the growth of the Saudi state, this also influenced the tenor of Salafism with more overtly political stances on world affairs. The Ikhwani-Wahhabi hybrid was a more activist kind of Salafism, not shy to address global political issues. A new discursive field emerged under the rubric of *al-fiqh al-wāqī* †, or the ‘discernment of current affairs’, and a new generation of scholar-activists would claim rival authority to the conformists who controlled state institutions (Wiktorowicz, 2006).

In this changing intellectual milieu, the younger brother of Sayyid Qutb, Muhammad Qutb (1919–2014) and Syrian-born Muhammad Surur Zayn al-‘Abidin (1938–2016) were both activist educators in Saudi Arabia. The former lectured to both leaders of the future al-Qa’ida, Osama bin Laden (1957–2011) and Ayman al-Zawahiri (b. 1951), while the latter gave rise to a substream of political Salafism, called *surūriyya* or the Sururi current, which sought to synthesize Ikhwani-style activism (decidedly anti-insurgent) with a strict Salafi theology. Initially, a politically aware Salafism had served regime interests. During the intra-Arab Cold War between the conservative monarchies and revolutionary republicanism in twin Nasserite and Ba’athist forms, the strategic use of religion qua foreign policy strategy allowed the Saudis a new ideological discourse by which to discredit enemy regimes (Sheikh, 2003). Soon, though, political Salafism would turn against the Kingdom.

The Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979 served to politicize Islam across the Muslim world. The radicalization of Salafism dramatically manifested in the seizure of the Meccan sanctorum by a millennial group of Salafis in 1979, led by a disgruntled car mechanic, Juhayman al-‘Utaybi (1936–1980). Though initially a beneficiary of patronage from the senior conformist cleric, and later grandmufti, Bin Baz, al-‘Utaybi’s anti-regime Salafism came to entail a *takefīr* of the Saudi state for the royalty’s decadence, for its courtship of the West, and for its lack of adherence to Islamic precepts (Hegghammer and Lacroix, 2007; Trofimov, 2007). This was a radical and unrepresentative manifestation of activist Salafism, though not entirely unprecedented in Saudi history, where zealous tribesmen had turned against the royalty even before the consolidation of the regime (Al-Rasheed, 2002). Ideological precepts matured over the next decade and came to the fore with American military operations in the region, Desert Fox and Desert Storm. Conceptual innovations entailed politicization of the precept of *al-walā* † *wa-l-barā* †, entailing fealty (*al-walā* †) to both religion and co-religionists and abnegation (*al-barā* †) of non-Islamic ideas and modes of life. Although the fealty-and-abnegation conjunction is salient across all Salafi discourses, activists politicize it to signify a disavowal of non-Islamic alignments, non-Islamic modes of governance, and supporters of either (Wagemakers, 2008).

The new activist impulse in Saudi Arabia, embodied in a new generation of young preachers, was referred to as the *Ṣaḥwa* (or the Awakening) movement, which decried the clerical establishment's legitimization of American troop presence in Saudi Arabia. More global in outlook, the activist Salafis chided the conformists for their myopic parochialism, their lack of comprehension of political affairs, and their complacency towards, or worse complicity in, both domestic corruption and foreign collusion (Lacroix, 2011). They were also far more critical of the Saudi *sotto-voce* alignment with Israel, subservience to the United States, and in general thought that the trivialities that preoccupied establishment Salafis diverted them away from more pressing issues confronting the *umma*. Far from liberalizers, the activist Salafis sought to extract more concessions on Salafi positions from state institutions, such as stricter gender segregation, fewer rights for the 'heretic' Shi'a minority, increased suspicion towards foreign cultures and guest workers, more equitable distribution of public funds, more Shariatic laws in public administration, greater independence of the '*ulamā*', and disentanglement from foreign security alliances (Fandy, 1999).

While the Sahwists did not propagate violent insurrections in the name of religion, they came under suspicion for their critique of the regime. The two foremost spokesmen of the *Ṣaḥwa*, clerics Safar al-Hawali (b. 1950) and Salman al-'Awda (b. 1955), experienced a chequered relationship with the Saudi state. Initially incarcerated in 1994 for inciting opposition to the Saudi government, in the form of public petitions or letters of demand, they emerged rehabilitated in 1999, able openly to preach with a television programme and website in al-'Awda's name (al-Rasheed, 2006). Following 9/11 and the 2003 terror attacks on Saudi soil, al-'Awda denounced violence against the Saudi state while supporting Iraqi resistance against the coalition troops as a legitimate form of jihad. Al-'Awda was arrested again in September 2017 during Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's (b. 1985) crackdown on activist Salafis, ostensibly for tweets that were considered unsupportive of Saudi foreign policy vis-à-vis Qatar (Smith, 2019).

In particular, in the post-Arab-Spring period, Salafi activism expanded and took new institutional forms as Salafi political parties emerged across the Middle East and North Africa. Even if initially wary about the potential for public discord (*fasād*), the post-Arab-Spring period saw the increased political involvement of erstwhile conformist Salafis, including those who had initially condemned the uprisings on religious grounds (Bonney, 2016). Most spectacularly, the newly-formed Hizb al-Nur, the political wing of the Alexandria-based *al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya*, won 107 seats in the post-Mubarak People's Assembly, one of several new Salafi-based parties in Egypt (al-Anani and Malik, 2013). The Arab Spring thus accentuated the polarization of the Salafi faithful. Traditional conformists remained opposed to politics (*siyāsa*), which they believed was a distraction from issues of *da'wa* and '*aqīda*'. But they were now facing two streams of political Salafis: the electoral *nouveau* activists, often ex-conformists wanting to take advantage of the opening of the political space to challenge their ideological foes or avoid marginalization, and the original agitational activists, fundamentally opposed to parliamentary politics and democratic governance but striving to see (an ahistoric and utopian) Islam embodied in the polity.

Stream C: Militant Salafism (al-salafiyya al-jihādiyya)

Where activist forms of Salafism lost credence with major setbacks in the 1990s, such as the clampdown on the *Ṣaḥwa* and the (contrived) failure of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) in Algeria, militant forms of Salafism had already claimed a resounding victory in Afghanistan—a shock so great, according to the militants, that the Communist superpower imploded from its aftereffects. This, then, was the beginning of a kind of Salafi Maoism: the route to power did not go through the ballot box, but power rather grew out of the barrel of a gun.

Often referred to as the ‘father’ of contemporary Salafi jihadism, the Palestinian ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Azzam (1941–1989) was initially a lecturer at King ‘Abd al-Aziz University in Jeddah (where he may initially have encountered a young Osama bin Laden) but later became the paradigmatic jihad practitioner against the Soviets in Afghanistan. He openly acknowledged his intellectual debt to Ibn Taymiyya and Qutb, and had fallen out with al-Albani, under whom he used to privately study, on the latter’s disparagement of Qutb. ‘Azzam’s central idea was that jihad was ‘individually incumbent’ (*farḍ ‘ayn*) upon able-bodied believers in the face of the confluence of two phenomena: the non-Muslim onslaught on Islam and regime acquiescence by nominally Muslim regimes (Hegghammer, 2020). Unlike the *takfīri* strand of jihadism—like that which became the rival ‘Jalalabad school’ in Afghanistan (Hamid and Farrall, 2015, pp. 164–176)—‘Azzam cautioned against the wholesale excommunication of Muslim rulers, and the focal point of his (somewhat irredentist) jihad ideology remained the defence of Muslim lands, rather than revolutionary insurrection against wayward Muslim rulers.

A decade after ‘Azzam’s assassination, Ayman al-Zawahiri’s *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner* (2001) became conspicuous for articulating a new strategic doctrine for a kind of ‘total jihad’, reconciling earlier debates on the ‘near’ and ‘far’ enemies, while seeking to expand the strategic reservoir of jihad as a millennial war (Gerges, 2009). Al-Qa’ida’s trans-territoriality, however, was non-*étatist*, and conceptually, too, al-Qa’ida invested few intellectual resources in seeking to define the nature or strictures of a future Islamic State (Maher, 2016). Indeed, al-Qa’ida’s approach arguably came spectacularly close to a form of *anarcho-Salafism*: in seeking to destroy states, it hoped that a more Islamic order would grow from the ashes of their destruction.

The creeping nihilism led also to a new anti-nomianism, no longer the kind of anti-sacerdotalism displayed by activist Salafis but extended to major questions of Islamic law. Abu ‘Abdullah al-Muhajir’s *Questions About the Jurisprudence of Jihad*, better known as *The Jurisprudence of Blood*, was the key text, promoting ‘self-martyrdom’ (*istishhād*) operations on civilian targets as a strategy of jihad—thus seeking to settle a divisive debate on the admissibility of suicidal operations. Soon after, the Egyptian Abu Bakr Naji’s epistle, *Management of Savagery*, explicitly embraced anti-nomianism and argued that jihad is ‘nothing but brutality, callousness, terrorism, deterrence and infliction’ (Hassan, 2016, p. 12). To him, disorder and discord were forms of creative violence, and the most abominable level of savagery was morally and strategically preferable to stability under the infidel (*kufri*) order, for ultimately rival institutions of power would emerge from collapsing states. In jihadi terrorology, this text could thus be viewed as signifying the paradigm shift from al-Qa’ida to Islamic State. Where al-Qa’ida had identified enemy states, Islamic State identified enemy people in a form of ‘full-spectrum’ *takfīr* against theological, political, and military adversaries.

Takfīr has always been a volatile subject matter between Salafi groups. Since the mid-1980s, Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, the *nom de guerre* of the Palestinian-born ‘Isam Muhammad Tahir al-Burqawi (b. 1959), perhaps the leading contemporary jihadi ideologue, had reiterated known Qutbist ideas of political systems as religions (hence constructions such as ‘the religion of democracy’) and the imperative of militant resistance to all modern systems of government, including the Saudi state whom he branded infidel (Wagemakers, 2012). The ousting from the faith community on the basis of politics became a technology by which political leaders were transmuted from co-religionists (subject to loyalty) to anti-religionists (thus subject to disavowal), and thus constituted a major reinterpretation of the idea of *al-barā’* †, the final form of which was rejectionist jihad itself. Yet, al-Maqdisi sought to walk the tightrope between the pointed *takfīr* of the non-Shariatic government (*takfīr al-khāṣ*) and the wider *takfīr* of the public at large (*takfīr al-‘umūm*)—a distinction that later disappeared with Islamic State.

Underlying the mutual animosity between the conformists and the militants was a particular theological dispute on the relationship between faith and works, which, like many anachronistic tropes in Salafism, goes back to a seventh-century Muslim schism. Insofar as the Salafi definition of faith (*imān*) entails its co-constitution by interior belief (when verbalized) and exterior actions, it permits the faith (or faithlessness) of others to be judged on account of apparent sins or transgressions. All Salafis reject the precept of *irjā'*, or moral 'postponement of judgement' (to God), as a cardinal theological error, allowing actions to speak for themselves and disallowing faith to be equated with professed belief only. From here, the dual-pronged jihadist argument proceeds as follows: by 'ruling by other than what God has decreed' (*ḥukm bi ghayri mā anzalallāh*), a ruler has not only committed a major (*kabīra*) sin but engaged in the gravest form of infidelity (*al-kufr al-akbar*) and, *ipso facto*, committed apostasy (*irtidād*) (Lav, 2012; Kassim, 2015). Like the Khariji radicals of the seventh century, the jihadis thus take the view that serious infractions against the Shari'a are tantamount to excommunication from Islamdom, and that jihad is mandated against such recalcitrant rulers. It is on this basis that the jihadis often face the charge of being latter-day 'kharijis' both from conformist circles and non-Salafis (Lahoud, 2010). The conformist push-back additionally entails a great deal of writing on whether a ruler who rules 'by other than Islam' can be declared infidel or which mitigating factors might apply, whereas the jihadis charge the non-jihadis with having become *murji'ī* or 'counterfeit Salafis' on account of hesitancy in *takfīr* (cf. Abdelhaleem, 2004).

The Saudi cleric Ahmad Ibn 'Umar al-Hazimi, albeit not an active jihadi, went further still and gave rise to the so-called Hazimiyya current by his public negation of conformist arguments of excusing the transgressor of the Shari'a on the presumption of ignorance (*al-'udhr bi-l-jahl*) which, he argued, did not extend to the gravest transgressions in faith (*al-kufr al-akbar*). Referring back to the third principle in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's treatise *Nullifiers of Islam (nawāqid al-islam)*—whoever harbours doubt about the disbelief of a disbeliever is himself a disbeliever—he even argued that their hesitancy surrounding *takfīr* on this matter would render the conformists disbelievers. This approach of 'excommunicating the excuser' (*takfīr al-'ādhir*) went significantly beyond historic methods of *takfīr* and fed into the internecine feuds within Islamic State in 2014–2018 (Lounnas, 2020).

The hyper-*takfīri* 'Hazimi' faction within Islamic State were called extremists (*ghulāt*) even by the self-declared caliphate and some were executed as secessionists (indeed, 'kharijis') when they turned against its less *takfīri* religious leaders—such as the Bahraini-born Turki al-Bin'Ali (1984–2017)—for questioning the perpetually expanding purview of excommunication (*al-takfīr bi al-tasalsul*) (Bunzel, 2019). At the height of the feud, *takfīr* was pronounced by the Hazimis not only against rival jihadi organizations, but also against rival factions of Islamic State (for harbouring doubt about the disbelief of apparent apostates), some not even sparing the *soi-disant* Caliph (Lounnas, 2020). *Takfīr*, thus, had seen infinite regress, and in the process, jihad had turned on itself.

Seeing the project of Salafi jihadism turn awry in the twenty-first century, repentant jihadis have challenged the ideas that have led to spiralling violence. In Saudi Arabia, three leaders of the so-called *Shu'aybī* current that had previously promoted jihad and legitimized al-Qa'ida, publicly recanted after the Riyadh bombings in 2003. A few years later, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Force offered a 416-page 'post-jihadist' manifesto, entitled 'Corrective Studies' (*al-murāja'āt*), deeming the overthrow of Muslim governments illegitimate (Ashour, 2011), while Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (a key opinion leader in the jihadist intellectual universe and formerly an associate of al-Zawahiri) called for a moratorium on unfettered militancy and a revision of jihadist 'misconceptions' (Lahoud, 2010). But most astounding was that the case of Abu Hafṣ al-Rafiki, the leading jihadi intellectual in Morocco, who not only renounced jihadism, but Salafism altogether (Rachidi, 2017).

Conclusion: Wither Salafism?

Within the semantic field of Salafism, one can identify six discursive constants: first, a specific interpretation of doctrinal orthodoxy (*'aqīda*) with roots in Hanbali fideism and a professed concern for the adherence to pure monotheism (*tawhīd*); second, a particular antithetical conception of orthopraxy, self-consciously reliant on the transmitted Prophetic precedent (*sunna*) but with great opposition to (austerely defined) 'innovations' (*bida'*); third, an interpretative approach that is both selectivist (in the discarding of supposedly inauthentic, or *ghayr-ṣahīh*, narrations) and literalist (in disallowing *ta'wīl*, or allegorical understandings); fourth, an animosity to the reification (*taqlīd*) of the historical schools of jurisprudence (*madhāhib*); fifth, a widened and (il)liberally applied technology of excommunication (*taḳfīr*); and, finally, a social identity predicated on in-group fealty and out-group disavowal (*al-walā' wa-l-barā'*). In addition, political-activist forms of Salafism rely on the notion of God's unchallengeable political sovereignty (*hākīmīyya*), which disallows free political choice, while militant Salafis additionally subscribe to the core concept of *jihād* as a personally mandatory (*farḍ 'ayn*) practice.

In terms of its conceptual morphology, Salafism iterates oppositional binaries in social constructions of (often mortal) threats, whether they relate to theological, institutional, or geopolitical 'dangers'. Salafism entails multiple salvific theories—or soteriologies—that link intimately to the choice of *manhaj* of a given Salafi group, ranging from propagation to activism to militancy. The espoused end-goal invariably revolves around a submission to *tawhīd*, but the readings of its entailments differ, and while this often involves a rejection of non-Shariatic modes of governance, it may or may not involve active opposition or violent insurrection. Hence, even if semantically relatively coherent, the presumed homogeneity of Salafism disintegrates on account of amorphous political praxes. As Hegghammer (2010, p. 5) argues, the Salafi label does not 'correspond to discrete and observable patterns of political behaviour' nor to clearly delineable political positions, despite discursive continuities. The shared Salafi moniker thus conceals important theological, ideological, and strategic differences among groups, so much so that Salafism, in the singular, may no longer be a coherent signifier.

The fissures within the Salafi repertoires pertain both to contested hierarchies of objectives and to the preferred operational strategies in response to situational contingencies, such as the involvement in politics, contentious or otherwise, and the legitimacy of violence. Variations of Salafism accentuate competing ideas—from the primacy of theology, to the primacy of governance, to the primacy of militancy—but all are, in the final instance, political ideas, if we follow Asad's (2003) argument that all forms of religiosity have political implications because they entail norms of action and notional distribution of rights and privileges. Noteworthy, however, is that the Salafi dispensation itself demurs to such plurality of interpretation, and each stream of contemporary Salafism continues to see itself as the true *salafīyya*, with the others having fallen into error and deviancy, on occasion meriting anathematization (*taḳfīr*). Each faction, thus, believes itself to be the 'true believers', adhering to not only correct creed (*'aqīda*) but also correct method (*manhaj*). Divisions in thinking apart, monolithic representations of the Salafi phenomenon are belied by the diversity of the Salafi experience across national and regional contexts (Meijer, 2009; Cavatorta and Merone, 2016). The global diffusion of Salafism(s) thus adds not only complexities of variegation but also cultural economies of contestation and decentralization (often exacerbated by the internet's erosion of central authority).

Is it still meaningful, then, to speak of Salafism as a distinct religious orientation? It is, but with the proviso that this religious orientation can lead to multiple, often opposing, political positions. Wiktorowicz (2006, p. 213), for instance, mentions how a close circle of students and associates of al-Albani in Jordan ended up fragmenting when they took dramatically different political positions,

ranging the entire spectrum from conformist to radical to militant. Elsewhere, too, students of conformists are known to have declared jihad, as with the case of Ja'far 'Umar Thalib (1961–2019), the founder of the now-defunct Indonesian Lashkar Jihad (International Crisis Group, 2004).

The classification of Salafisms into (ideal) types is intellectually worthwhile, but the categories themselves are slippery: given sufficient challenges, it is possible for conformists to become politicized, just as it is possible for the activists to militarize. Indeed, the double leap too is possible—from conformism to militarism—as seen with the Madkhali experience in Libya and the senior Saudi conformist cleric Salih al-Luhaydan's public support of jihad in Iraq. Yet, there is no unidirectional 'conveyor belt' from theology to terrorism, and reverse travel remains possible too, as seen when yesterday's clandestine militants sought (unsuccessfully) to become today's social movement in Tunisia's *Anṣār al-Shari'a* association (Merone, 2017), and the many 'repentant' jihadis elsewhere. Overall thus, rather than a fixed typology, the Salafi repertoire emerges as a spectrum that is acutely context (thus also interest) sensitive and driven, at least in part, by opportunity structures. Nor should the fact that Salafis often speak anachronistically in the language of medieval theological schisms—denouncing others as *jahmī*, *murjī*, *khārijī*, etc.—obscure the equally pervasive fact that the Salafi phenomenon is an utterly modern dispensation that responds to particular perceived encroachments by non-Islam, however defined, and the consequent pressures on Muslim identity.

Notes

- 1 According to Griffin (2006, p. 81), 'Ideology is a relatively cohesive, [yet] dynamically evolving, set of collectively held ideas or beliefs [on matters political], whether expressed verbally or in some other semiotic, performative, ritual, artistic or behavioural form'.
- 2 The six most oft-rehearsed tracts of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab all relate to *tawhid* and the ever-present dangers of *shirk*. They are *Kitāb al-tawhīd* (The Book of Monotheism); *al-Uṣūl al-thalātha* (The Three Principles); *al-Qawā'id al-arba'a* (The Four Maxims); *Nawāqid al-islām* (The Nullifiers of Islam); *Shurūṭ lā ilāha illallāh* (The Conditions of [the Declaration] There is No God But Allah); and *Kashf al-shubuhāt* (The Removal of Doubts). Interestingly, his *Kitāb al-kabā'ir* (The Book of Major Sins) has far less circulation, which may illustrate how Wahhabism is a puritanical, but not necessarily pietist, movement.
- 3 Wiktorowicz's (2006) choice of the term 'purist', following the International Crisis Group (2004), has elicited some critique, predicated on the objection that all forms of Salafism are in fact purist (Wagemakers, 2016a, p. 11; Pall, 2018, p. 20). The critique is not damning, however, as the signature identity of the 'purist' stream is precisely the familiar Salafi themes of purification and decontamination of the faith tradition, in turn obtained by adherence to the correct methodology (*manhaj*) that follows the prophetic *sunna* and rejects operative *bid'a*. Although none of the Salafist schools can be said to be pluralist, the purists are particularly self-conscious in disallowing syncretism. Some have argued that such groups should instead be referred to as 'quietist' (e.g., Wagemakers, 2012, 2016a; Rabil, 2014), but this epithet suffers from simplification, in that they are not consistently quietist but may actively speak out in defence of the political status quo, or occasionally against it, while invariably being vociferous in theological debates. Some have preferred the adjective 'apolitical', but that would assume (a) that religion itself is not inherently political, and (b) that a loyalist posture of support is not political—both highly questionable assumptions. Finally, the term 'non-violent' has been ascribed to this stream and while this is largely true, it does not extend to violence by state institutions, nor to what Galtung (1969, 1990) has referred to as 'structural violence' (violence enacted by socio-economic structures) or 'cultural violence' (violence perpetuated by cultural norms). For the above reasons, I use 'Conformist Salafism' as the designation of this stream of Salafism.

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