1 Global Salafi Ideology

Salafism has a bad reputation. I cannot count the number of times that I was told by Salafis in Jordan that “the West” has a wrong and very generalised view of Salafism. Although the irony of that statement, being rather generalising itself, was often lost on them, it does make some sense. The trend as a whole is often associated with violence and terrorism, particularly in popular discourse, even though most Salafis never engage in either of these. Such stereotypes are not limited to Western countries, however. Pall, for instance, recalls how a Lebanese person, who was probably used to associating Salafism with violence and militancy as well, once referred to some Salafi youngsters as “very good guys” but was shocked to hear them described as “Salafis”, as if these two do not go together.

However, a less drastic “accusation” against Salafis in general – that they are very strict and have views about, for example, non-Muslims that are at odds with what most people adhere to – hits closer to home. The general ideology espoused by Salafis is one that is quite different from what even most Sunni Muslims believe in, although this is not always apparent. This chapter delves into the ideology of global Salafism in three parts: firstly, I deal with the definition, origins and spread of Salafism; secondly, I describe and analyse the most important concepts in modern-day Salafi ideology that will be used throughout this book; and thirdly, the divisions within Salafism with regard to applying this ideology in practice are described. This chapter, as such, not only forms a general yet comprehensive treatment of global Salafi ideology in and of itself, but also acts as the basis on which the next chapter, which looks specifically at Jordanian ideological contributions, builds.

2 Pall, Salafism, 18.
The Definition, Origins and Spread of Salafism

In their article on the Ghost Dance movement in the United States, the Rastafari movement of Jamaica and the Maya movement of Guatemala, Price, Nonini and Fox Tree refer to these trends as “grounded utopian movements”. By this term, they mean “thoroughly modern movements” that may “have emerged, persisted, disappeared, and re-emerged across decades, even centuries” and that make “use of cultural resources such as religious beliefs, the creation of new cultural formations and meanings, and the manifestation of culturally-embedded movement practices.” Such movements are “utopian” because “they point to a[n] ‘ideal place’ (utopia) […] and[,] by implication, to a better time and more satisfying social relationships and identifications”. Rather than concentrating on “instrumental action with respect to states and capitalism”, they focus on “group integrity and identity”. These movements are also “grounded” in the sense that their “identities, values, and imaginative dimensions of utopia are culturally focussed on real places, embodied by living people, informed by past lifeways, and constructed and maintained through quotidian interactions and valued practices that connect the members of a community”. Salafism, as has been pointed out elsewhere, can also be seen as such a grounded utopian movement, focussing on the “ideal place” or “utopia” of the first generations of Islam, while simultaneously being grounded in the very real places Salafis live in and the actual people they meet.

The Definition of Salafism

It is precisely the focus on the utopia of al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ that leads me to refer to Salafis – i.e., those who claim to follow the salaf as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible – as such. According to several hadīths ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad, “the best of my (i.e., Muhammad’s) community” (khayr ummatī) or “the best people” (khayr al-nās) are “my generation (garnī) and then the ones who follow them (thumma iladhīna yalīnahum) and then the ones who follow them (thumma iladhīna yalānahum)”. This suggests that the first three

4 Martijn de Koning, “Moge Hij onze ogen openen”: De radicale utopie van het ‘sala-fisme’,” Tijdschrift voor Religie, Recht en Beleid 2, no. 2 (2011): 49–51; De Koning, Wagemakers and Becker, Salafism, esp. 20–1.
5 These traditions exist in slightly different forms. See Sahīh al-Bukhrā’ī, book 57 (“Kitāb Fadā’il Aṣhāb al-Nabī”), chapter 1 (“Fadā’il Aṣhāb al-Nabī”), nos. 2–3; Sahīh Muslim, book 44 (“Kitāb Fadā’il al-Ṣaḥābah”), chapter 52 (“Fadāl al-Ṣaḥāba, thumma iladhīna Yalīnahum, thumma iladhīna Yalānahum”), nos. 2533–6.
generations of Islam are the best that ever lived, and it is also these three that are usually equated with \textit{al-salaf al-\-zāliḥ}.

As straightforward as this may seem, the \textit{hadīths} mentioned above are actually rather unclear. Even if we assume that these traditions are reliable sources of what really happened,\(^6\) it is not entirely obvious what “my generation” means. As has been pointed out by several scholars, it is unclear whether this refers to an actual generation (and exactly how many years that would entail) or to a century of Muslims. The latter explanation would, for example, allow certain scholars revered by Salafis, such as Ahmad b. Hanbal (780–855), to be included among the \textit{salaf}.\(^7\) Despite this lack of clarity, Salafis manage to distil a fairly homogeneous body of doctrines from this utopian period that they try to emulate, although not one that they can all agree on, as we will see later.

In naming and labelling a group of people, it is not uncommon to look at what the object of study calls itself. However, in the case of Salafis, that is slightly problematic. Some Salafis refer to themselves simply as “Muslims”, “the people of the Prophetic practice and the community” (\textit{ahl} al-\textit{Sunna} \textit{wa}-l-jamā\textit{‘}a)\(^8\) or “followers of \textit{al-salaf} al-\textit{zāliḥ}”. The first is analytically impractical since “Muslims” suggests far too wide a group. The second label is somewhat subjective and more or less a synonym for “Sunni Muslims”, which is more narrow than “Muslims” but still too broad to be useful. The third label, finally, may mean the same as “Salafis”, making it slightly redundant, or may loosely refer to a more

\(^6\) For more on the academic debate on the authenticity of the sources of Muhammad’s life, see Andreas Görke, “Prospects and Limits in the Study of the Historical Muhammad,” in \textit{The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam: Essays in Honour of Harald Mochi}, ed. Nicolet Bockhoff-van der Voort, Kees Versteegh and Joas Wagemakers (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 137–51. One could argue that academic questions about the sources’ authenticity do not really matter in this respect since the important thing here is whether Muslims believe them to be authentic. This is correct, yet Muslims themselves, at least the \textit{hadīth}-scholar al-Albānī, are sceptical of the authenticity of some traditions of Muhammad’s life as well, though not these particular ones. For more on al-Albānī’s methods in this respect, see Amin, “Nasiruddin.”


\(^8\) For more on the origins of the term \textit{ahl al-\textit{Sunna} wa-l-jamā\textit{‘}a} from a Salafi perspective, see Muhammad ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Mi‘rā, \textit{Ma‘ālim Manhaj Ahl al-\textit{Sunna} wa-l-Jamā\textit{‘}a} (Amman: Jam iyyat al-Kitāb wa-l-\textit{Sunna} – Lajnat al-Kalima al-Tayyiba, 2011), 69–74. Interestingly, this author is typical of many Salafis in the sense that he claims the term \textit{ahl al-\textit{Sunna} wa-l-jamā\textit{‘}a} for Salafis by describing its beliefs and characteristics as those of Salafism, as if “ordinary” Sunni Muslims do not really fit into this category. See ibid., 49–130.
The Origins of Sala\'fiyya

The trend we call “Salafism” today – the defining feature of which is the strict emulation of the utopia of the “pious predecessors” in every sphere of life – is often described by its adherents as nothing more than simply Islam in its pure and unadulterated form. The Salafi movement analysed in this book is, however, of far more recent origin and has its roots in the twentieth century. Still, a general desire to emulate the salaf in some way – though less detailed, less broadly applied and less focussed upon than by modern-day Salafis – is much older and goes back into history almost as far as Islam itself, to the eighth century. Until that period (but after Muhammad’s death in 632), Muslims had mostly relied on the Qur’an, the different sunna (practices; pl. of Sunna) of an authoritative group of early believers, the latter’s considered opinion (ra’y) and scholarly consensus (ijma) when they wanted to have answers to their questions on religion. On the basis of these sources, the early schools of Islamic law (madhahib, sing. madhhab) developed. In opposition, however, to this “lived tradition”, as espoused by the ahl al-ra’y (the people of considered opinion), a different trend developed. Followers of the latter – known as the ahl al-hadith (the people of the Prophetic tradition or traditionists) – claimed that the increasing number of hadith texts that were found and ascribed to Muhammad as his authentic sayings were of greater value than the “lived tradition” of the ahl al-ra’y and should therefore be focussed on instead.\(^9\)

\(^9\) This is perhaps a result of al-Albâni’s statement that Salafis should always refer to themselves as such shorthand for “Muslims following the Book and the Sunna according to the method of the pious predecessors”. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=8 uyWHfSfJ_M (accessed 25 March 2015). See also the statement on this issue by major Salafi shaykh Muhammad b. Sâlih al-‘Uthaymin, who arrives at the same conclusion as al-Albâni, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe_8UmoELzk (accessed 25 March 2015).

Global Salafi Ideology

Although the *ahl al-hadīth* faced stiff opposition from the *ahl al-raʾy* in the eighth and early ninth centuries, it was clear that the growing body of texts about Muhammad was a religious source that could not be ignored. The *ahl al-hadīth* argued that their reliance on Prophetic *hadiths* was more consistent and more authentic than the *ahl al-raʾy*’s “lived tradition” because the former was based on concrete texts that could directly be ascribed to the Prophet himself. Why, after all, rely on people’s considered opinion when one can – through the use of *hadiths* – supposedly have direct access to the views of the Prophet himself? Thus, it was not surprising that, while the *ahl al-hadīth*’s position did not become mainstream, the focus on the Prophetic traditions that they argued for was incorporated into Islamic law as one of the major sources of the *shariʿa* by Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafiʿi (767–820). This middle ground, as it were, between the two approaches of the *ahl al-hadīth* and the *ahl al-raʾy* went on to form the legal basis of what became known as Sunni Islam from the ninth century onwards and was generally adopted by most Muslims.11

The general desire to base one’s beliefs and practices directly on the Qurʾan and the prophetic Sunna – as early traditionists such as Ibn Hanbal advocated and as Salafis also want today – thus goes back to the formative period of Islamic legal schools. This is not to suggest that twenty-first-century Salafis are modern-day equivalents of the *ahl al-hadīth* – although at least some Salafis seem to view themselves that way12 – but simply that they share a core tenet in their approach to Islamic tradition.13 Importantly, this is also the key legal difference between Salafis and “ordinary” Sunni Muslims, who also view the first generations of Islam as the purest form of the religion.14 The latter see the Prophet and his companions as exemplary and as people whose model should be followed by adhering to a school of Islamic law, which in itself takes into account things like the interests of the Muslim community and considered scholarly opinions. Salafis, by contrast, try to interpret and apply the sources of Islam through the prism of

---

12 See, for example, Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Dahlawi al-Madani, *Tadhkira Ahl al-Hadith: Taʾṣīr al-Firaq al-Nājīya wa-an Nabāḥ Tāʾifat Ahl al-Hadith* (Medina: Maktabat al-Ghurabāʾ al-Athariyya, 1417 AH [1996/1997]), in which the author applies terms such as “the saved sect” (*al-firaq al-nājīya*), which is often used for Salafis, to the *ahl al-hadīth*. Interestingly, the *hadiths* used in the book were verified and commented upon by ‘Alī al-Halabi, probably the most prominent Jordanian quietist Salafi scholar today.
14 Haykel, “Nature,” 34.
the first Muslim generations only, mostly without recourse to schools of law or extra-textual sources.15

Although those advocating a “Salafi” approach to the sources – i.e., bypassing the madhāhib and taking the Qur’an and the Sunna of the salaf as their only guide – have always been a minority, this trend did not die with Ibn Hanbal. It was picked up again by the Syrian Hanbali scholars Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350), who argued that blind emulation (taqlīd) of any school of law should be discarded. The alternative was direct and independent interpretation of the Qur’an and the Sunna (ijtihād) for scholars and – according to some – simply “following” (ittibā‘) these sources for “ordinary” believers.17 A similar desire was expressed by Yemeni scholars such as Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. al-Wazir (d. 1436) and Muhammad b. Isma‘il al-San‘ani (1688–1768), both of whom rejected taqlīd when there were authentic ḥadīths contradicting received Islamic legal opinions.18 These and others, in turn, were a great influence on the nineteenth-century Yemeni scholar Muhammad b. ‘Ali al-Shawkani (d. 1834), who shared his predecessors’ dismissal of taqlīd and advocated finding direct evidence in the original texts.19

The tendency to rely only on the Qur’an and the Sunna, at the expense of extra-textual sources or the blind following of a madhāhib, could also be found outside the Arab world. On the Indian subcontinent, the


17 Haykel, “Nature,” 43–4. The difference between taqlīd (blind emulation of a madhāhib) and ittiḥād (following a Qur’ānic verse or ḥadīth itself directly) is further explained in al-Maḍānī, Tārīkh, 116–17.

18 Brown, Canonization, 314–18.

19 Ibid., 315; Haykel, Revival, 10. For more on al-Shawkānī’s specific position on taqlīd and ittiḥād, see Haykel, Revival, 89–108.
eighteenth-century scholar Shah Wali Allah (1703–1762) thought along similar lines. Although he was very concerned with communal cohesion and therefore quite tolerant of popular religious practices that modern-day Salafis would frown upon, Shah Wali Allah believed that excessive recourse to madhāhib had led Muslims away from Islam’s original message and that this should therefore be discarded. At the same time, however, he did recognise the value of the schools of law as such for their role in bringing order to a Muslim community (umma) under fire in his home country. The teachings of Shah Wali Allah and others inspired the ahl-e ḥadīth movement on the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century, which – like the original ahl al-ḥadīth movement discussed earlier – advocated a supposedly purer and more authentic form of Islam through direct recourse to the Qur’an and Sunna by scholars. The ahl-e ḥadīth movement has, in fact, been active in India and Pakistan till this very day.

Also active until today and related to the ahl-e ḥadīth movement in India is the so-called Wahhabi movement, named after the eighteenth-century reformer Muhammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhab (1703–1792). Hailing from the central Arabian region of Najd, Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab tried to “cleanse” Islam as he saw it from the popular and syncretistic religious rituals and customs it had acquired throughout time, using the utopia of the salaf as his guide. In doing so, he explicitly built on the work of earlier scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya and tried to revert directly to the Qur’an and the Sunna. Although he initially encountered hostility against his views among his own people and even his own family, he eventually allied himself with the tribal leader Muhammad b. Saʿud (d. 1765) and together they conquered large parts of the Arabian Peninsula. This way, Wahhabism became the dominant Islamic trend in Saudi

20 Brown, Canonization, 318–21.
23 Interestingly, a student of mine once told me he had read one of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s books, the famous Kitaḥ al-Tawḥīd, and noticed that there was “really nothing new in the book, just Qur’an and Sunna”. Although a lack of originality is not something authors generally like being accused of, I told my student that Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab would most probably have been proud to hear that.
Arabia and it has remained this way ever since. The ideological kinship between Wahhabism and the ahl-e hadith movement was clear from, among other things, the fact that several Arabian scholars went to study in India, including the prominent shaykh Sa’d b. ’Atiq (1862/3–1930), who studied there for nine years at the behest of his father, Hamd b. ’Atiq (d. 1883).

The interest in generally wanting to revert to the Qur’an and the Sunna is the key element that all groups and scholars mentioned in this section had in common, which they share with modern-day Salafis. This does not mean, however, that all of them were Salafis themselves, nor that they were all exactly alike. Wahhabi scholars, for example, were more likely to follow the Hanbali school of Islamic law, rather than discard this practice in favour of ijtihād, and focussed mostly on cleansing the creed (aqīda) of Islam. Some other reformers dealt with above were much more negative about taqlīd and concentrated on the study of Islamic law (fiqh), rather than on creedal issues. It is also worth noting that the equation that is often made between Wahhabism on the one hand and Salafism on the other is not entirely accurate. Given its strong ideological similarities with Salafism, Wahhabism – a term rejected by adherents to this trend – can certainly be seen as Salafi, but the opposite is not always true. Apart from the difference in approach towards ijtihād and taqlīd, Salafism represents the international trend whose adherents claim to emulate the salaf as strictly and in as many spheres of life as possible, while Wahhabism is its Najdi version, being (at least initially) more local than Salafism and also perhaps somewhat less tolerant.


This is not to say that Saudi scholars never make use of ijtihād, however, as several scholars have pointed out. See Gauvain, Salafi, 140, 162; Qasim Zaman, Ulama, 152.

Another point of confusion about Salafism can be found in the trend of, as Haykel puts it, “enlightened Salafism” (al-Salafyya al-tanwi‘iya). This term is often associated with modernist reformers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/9–1897) and Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), but – as Lauzière has shown – this is likely more because of a mix-up in labels than because of the actual beliefs of these two men. Moreover, it is unlikely that either of these two men claimed to be Salafis or saw themselves as part of a Salafi trend. This does not mean that “enlightened” or “modernist” Salafis did not exist, however. Several nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers and scholars in Iraq and particularly Syria, such as Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi (1856–1924) and Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866–1914), could also be labelled “Salafi” in the sense that they, too, fully geared their beliefs towards returning to the salaf. They did so, however, with partly different objectives. While the Salafis dealt with in this book reach back to the utopia of the salaf in order to “purify” Islam and try do so on the basis of the Qur’an and Sunna alone, “enlightened” Salafis were mostly concerned with modernising the religion and, among other methods, applied rationalism to achieve this. They wanted to remove “backward” elements such as taqlid from Islam in order to rebuild the religion from the bottom up, as it were, and to make it compatible with the challenges of the modern age. It is this latter aspect, about which the Salafis dealt with in this book –

31 For more on the ideas and beliefs of these two men, see Albert Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 [1962]), 103–60.
frankly – do not really care, that constitutes the most important difference between “enlightened” and “purifying” Salafis.36

The Spread of Salafism

The general attempt to emulate the utopia of the salaf is thus an old and widespread phenomenon in the history of Islam. This, again, does not mean that the scholars and groups mentioned above were all Salafis avant la lettre, but they were indeed precursors to the current Salafi movement in the sense that they all tried to go directly to the earliest textual sources (the Qurʾan and the Sunna). Moreover, this general claim of wanting to return to the beginning of Islam, although it is not as specific and pervasive as modern-day Salafis express it, may nevertheless help explain the spread of Salafism today. A focus on the Qurʾan and the Sunna provides Muslims with a great source of authenticity, giving the impression that they are merely doing what the sources are saying. Given that Salafis are the ultimate advocates of such a method, this approach – although contested by other Muslims, as we will see below – allows Salafis to adopt an attitude of supposed religious purity and authority, which may well be an attractive feature to many Muslim youngsters searching for answers in life.37

Furthermore, some of the scholars and movements mentioned earlier, although often not Salafis themselves, may well have contributed to a renewed appreciation of the study of particularly hadiths. This may, indirectly, also have aided the rise of the Salafi trend dealt with in this book, which – as mentioned – has its roots in the twentieth century. The trend that stimulated and facilitated the spread of Salafism in that period more than any other was Wahhabism.

Before explaining the Saudi-Wahhabi role in the spread of Salafism in the twentieth century, it should be clear that this factor must not be exaggerated.38 Apart from the influence of other Salafi movements already in existence, independent of Wahhabism, it is important to remember that the salaf, the Qurʾan and the Sunna are of great importance to all Sunni Muslims. As such, the general tendency to be influenced by early Islam is not beholden to Salafis alone, but finds a much wider audience. Although Salafis and “ordinary” Sunnis have different

36 The more modernist Salafis in particularly Syria have nevertheless been of great importance to Salafism in Jordan and continue to inspire the more politically minded Salafis in the kingdom. That issue requires a separate publication, however.

37 See, for example, Martijn de Koning, Zoeken naar een “zuivere” islam: Geloofsbeleving en identiteitsvorming van jonge Marokkaans-Nederlandse moslims (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008).

38 See also Bonnefoy, Salafism, 5–13, who points this out as well in the context of his work on Yemen.