

SITUATING BRITISH SALAFISM FROM WITHIN

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In the name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

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Hypervisible Salafis have become a prime target in the West's aggressive policy against minority Muslim communities ever since it began its so-called War on Terror. Within Britain specifically, being perceived as a potential terrorist and a threat to national security—or in other words the *new enemy within*, has fast become an issue of their basic human rights. One only needs to observe the policies sanctioned by the British government in relation to its *Prevent* counter-terrorism programme or the bogus *Trojan Horse*¹ affair to see the gravity of such an abuse of power towards its Muslim citizens.

During the Trojan Horse scandal,² for instance, Salafis found themselves scapegoated at the 'highest levels of the British government' by 'the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, widely regarded by British Muslims as one of the most Islamophobic Members of Parliament'.³ Gove, a self-proclaimed 'proud Zionist' and promoter of the 'conveyor belt' system of terror theory which purports that the spread of peaceful conservative Islam automatically leads to violent terrorism,⁴ claimed that a letter—which was later proven to be a hoax, revealed a plot amongst Islamic extremists to introduce an "'Islamist' or 'Salafist'" ethos into majority-Muslim schools in Birmingham; this mystery letter was

¹ 'The Inside Story of How a 'Bogus' Letter Roiled Britain', by Lauren Jackson. The key questions investigated by journalists in the podcast are: Who wrote the letter—and why?

² 'Trojan Horse Jihadist Plot to Take Over Birmingham Schools', 7 March 2014, by Jeanette Oldham.

³ 'UK Politicians And Media Need To Open Their Eyes To The Islamophobia They Are Fuelling', 31 March 2022, by Nasim Ahmed.

⁴ 'Extremism At The Heart Of British Government? Is There Really An Islamist Plot Threatening Birmingham's Schools?', 11 June 2014, by Alastair Sloan.

then weaponised to institute major reforms nationwide such as an intensification of the UK's counter-terrorism policy, revamping of schools and their curriculums, not to mention a life-long ban on educators.⁵

The deep-rooted nature of anti-Muslim prejudice within the political arena, the mainstream press and British society in general—all of whom saw no issue with treating Muslims as a *fifth-column* [traitors] based upon a hoax, wreaked havoc on community cohesion,⁶ and elucidates why the UK is listed as a 'hotspot for Islamophobia'.⁷ As a result, Salafis have increasingly been viewed 'through the narrow prism of security and counter-terrorism'⁸—despite working tirelessly to propagate the Salafi position towards acts of terrorism, which categorically states that they are totally contrary to Islamic teachings 'as understood and preserved by the orthodox Muslim scholars of the first three centuries after the passing away of the Prophet of Allāh ﷺ'.⁹

It is no wonder, therefore, that a defense of the Salafi creed is of paramount importance to its adherents; not only to delineate contemporary Salafism's boundaries from the beliefs and insidious permeations of other misguided/deviant Islamic sects who commit violent acts of crime against humanity in the name of Islam [with which Salafism is often conveniently conflated], but also to counter

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 'A study by researchers at Birmingham City University in 2014 that was reported by Channel 4 News found that 90 per cent of Birmingham's Muslims felt that community cohesion was wrecked by the affair', *ibid*.

⁷ The 14th annual report on Islamophobia by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) 'named and shamed the UK by placing it on its list of "hot spots of Islamophobia": *Ibid*.

⁸ Sloan., *Op.cit*.

⁹ 'Islamic Condemnation of Terrorists, Hijackers & Suicide Bombers "The Brothers of the Devils"', 2001/2003 Salafi Publications.

the perils of mistakenly being viewed as an extreme religious group who is on the inevitable cusp of violence and terror.¹⁰

Hence, unlike the majority of studies on Salafism which have proceeded to falsely synonymise it with terrorism, 'jihadism' and Islamic 'fundamentalism',¹¹ this innovative insider research strives towards a more progressive scholarship—one which engages with the voices of a contemporary Salafi community for whom the burden of demystifying Salafism is clearly an immense task. Significantly, this study is not limited to a discussion of how Salafism is perceived from the outside by academics (and others), rather, it examines how Salafism is perceived from within by those who live in accordance with its beliefs.¹²

Consequently, the articles to follow aim to contextualise British Salafism in time, space and place by examining the historical context of its emergence in the UK, particularly Birmingham—and offers some of my own 'insider' reflections of the Salafism's journey from its inception in the late 1980s and early 1990s through to the present day. Further, apart from a critical assessment of how Salafism has currently been defined within Western academia, it includes an overview of the provenance of Salafism's theological underpinnings and how it functions as a method of religious meaning in motivating and constraining the social actions of its adherents.

Enhanced by my personal experience of Salafism's implicit values, I highlight how Salafism's teachings—especially its credal consistency as the Saved Sect, continues to determine it as a discourse from the 7th century onwards. With the theological foundations of British Salafism firmly in place, I proceed to offer a thick description of Salafism's emergence as a grassroots 'movement' in the UK,

¹⁰ 'So, Prime Minister, Are We To Call You An Extremist Now?' 9 June 2011, by Mehdi Hasan.

¹¹ For proponents of this view read: Blanc and Roy 2021; Gove 2006; Heffelfinger 2011; Khan 2016; Lewis 2016; Maher 2016; Wood 2018.

¹² See article by Becker, E., 2017, 'Why Sociologists of Religion Need Theological Training'.

alongside a discussion on the significance of *Salafi Publications* and its role in establishing possibly the first Salafi community in Britain.

In situating British Salafism as a ‘new’ revivalist religious movement (RRM), this research aims to provide the audience with a comprehensive descriptive counter-narrative of the same past event—that is, the emergence of Salafism in the UK but from the unique point of view of its adherents, rather than just that of outsider/observer. This, it is hoped, will fill and address any absences, biases and gaps present within existing narratives of contemporary Salafism, and should also go some way to keep the debate about it as open and as vigorous as possible. More importantly, for Salafis it is a crucial step forward in preventing a violation of human rights that may occur as a result of policies that penalise the wrong people solely on account of their hyper-visible religious lifestyle.¹³

Ultimately, new material on Salafism should help to challenge other conflicting narratives, and, thereby, prevent some ‘official’ version coming to ‘represent for us a true and final account’¹⁴ of its history—especially those that view this otherwise marginalised Islamic group in the UK and the modern world as the cause of Islamic extremism,¹⁵ rather than seeing it as part of the cure.

¹³ Concept paper on: “Islamophobia: A Human Rights Violation And A Contemporary Manifestation Of Racism”, (IPHR).

¹⁴ Butler 2002:36.

¹⁵ 2016. ‘Blaming Wahhabism or Salafism Obstructs the Fight Against Violent Radicalism?’

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