

WHAT IS SALAFISM?

Dr Naheed Anwar BA (Hons), MA, PhD (Roehampton University)

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Analysis of the modern-day Salafi ‘movement’ has, in Western academia, resulted in a radical reformulation of Salafism’s definition and the ideas surrounding its origins in the history of Islamic thought. This is because until recently, it was erroneously believed that Salafism emerged from the work of major reformist figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935), who, in an effort to modernise the Muslim world, used an approach that was heavily influenced by ideas from the European Enlightenment.¹

However, with the recent emergence of Salafi communities and organisations all over the world, Western academics have discovered that the standard contemporary assessment of the sect differs profoundly from the 19th and early 20th century view, which defined it as a broad, political and flexible approach. For instance, resolving the conundrum of what Salafism is has been a significant preoccupation for Lauzière (2016)—a specialist on the genealogy of Salafism within Western scholarship. He discovered during his postdoctoral research, that his earlier dissertation on Salafism was ‘built on received ideas that had no empirical basis’.² He suggests, therefore, that we shrug ‘off some of our presuppositions about the term’ and carefully examine the reasons why 19th century Muslim scholars used the label *Salafi* and why confusion over its meaning arose:

Why exactly have scholars accepted and reproduced the false idea that al-Afghani and ‘Abduh were leading Salafis?³

Hence, in an attempt to define (and demythologise) Salafism within Western academia, this study addresses some of the questions posed by Lauzière (2016), particularly those concerning the misuse of the

¹ Lauzière 2016:4.

² Lauzière 2017.

³ Ibid.

term by followers who falsely claim *Salafiyyah* for themselves.⁴ Further, in keeping with Lauzière's (2016) methodology, it too aims to stop chasing what Lauzière (2016) argues is 'a historical mirage' or 'conceptual chimera⁵ [of Salafism] that exists only in our modern scholarship'; it does so by avoiding the pitfalls of previous scholarship by choosing not 'to let the secondary literature set [its] parameters', and by considering 'the problems inherent in the historiography on Salafism'.⁶ In refusing to impose 'our habits of mind on primary sources',⁷ or in other words, refusing to accept taken-for-granted frames of reference as a starting point, this research strives to use greater objectivity in trying to understand how modern-day Salafism operates not only as a *new* religious movement, but also as a 'discourse' in the Foucauldian sense, since it possesses its own tradition, 'source texts, methodological principles, and norms of comportment'.⁸

Consequently, in giving due 'consideration to both the philological and philosophical dimensions of the question': *What is Salafism?*, it is possible to see that although contemporary manifestations of Salafism have been presented in parts of the global North as a *new* religious movement, an insider perspective¹⁰ reveals that Salafism is in fact a rigorous scholarly and purifying approach that dates back to the early days of Islām. According to the authentic Prophetic reports, it was during this period that the first three generations of Muslims—who are referred to in Islamic scholarship as *al-Salaf al-*

⁴ The misuse of the label 'Salafism' in a 20th/21st century geo-political context is to be presented in future articles.

⁵ *Chimera*: 'an imaginary monster compounded of incongruous parts' [implying how misunderstood the concept of Salafism is]. Source: merriam-webster.com

⁶ Lauzière 2017.

⁷ Lauzière 2017.

⁸ Farquhar 2014:272.

⁹ Lauzière 2017.

¹⁰ Refer to author's (2022) article: *Situating British Salafism From Within* for a discussion on the importance of research which can comprehend the provenance of Salafism's theological underpinnings from an 'insider' perspective.

Ṣāliḥ (the Pious Predecessors) and the *Saved Sect*, lived, united upon guidance from Allāh and His Messenger Muhammad (ﷺ).¹¹ In fact, it is explicitly stated within the *ḥadīth* literature that this was the time when Islām was at its purest,¹² complete, without deficiency and in no need of addition or alteration,¹³ as summarised by Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Qalshānī (رحمته الله d. 863H):

The *Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ* are the earliest generation of those firmly-grounded in knowledge, guided by the guidance of the Prophet (ﷺ), preservers of his *Sunnah*—Allāh chose them to accompany his Prophet (ﷺ) and to establish His Religion. Allāh, the Most High, was pleased with them as the *Imāms* and leaders of this *ummah*. They strived in the cause of Allāh with a true striving, they fulfilled their duty, benefited the *ummah* and exerted themselves for the pleasure of Allāh (ﷺ).¹⁴

Moreover, Salafi beliefs which are founded upon the authentic and verified statements of the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) refer emphatically to the advice he gave to his Companions (رضي الله عنهم)—and thereby to future generations of Muslims—to keep to the ‘Straight Path’, which is the Methodology (*Manḥaj*) of ‘Saved Sect’, as all divergent paths would lead to the Fire¹⁵ as Allāh’s Messenger (ﷺ) stated in an authentic *ḥadīth*:

The Children of Israel divided into seventy-two sects, and my Ummah will divide into seventy-three. All of them will be in the Fire except one.

The Companions asked, ‘And which sect is that O Messenger of Allāh?’ He replied:

What I am upon today and my Companions.¹⁶

¹¹ Fawzaan 2003:5.

¹² Al-Fawzaan 2003

¹³ Aḥmad al-Madanī 2005.

¹⁴ See *Tahrīr al-Maqālah fī Sharḥ al-Risālah*, 36, cited in Abdul-Wāhid 2017c:5.

¹⁵ Al-Fawzaan 2013:13.

¹⁶ At-Tirmidhī no. 2642, declared *ḥasan* by al-Albānī, cited in Abdul-Wāhid 2017c:6.

Throughout history, therefore, Salafis have vehemently believed in the Prophet's (ﷺ) warning that disagreement within the *ummah* (Muslim nation) concerning *al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaḳīm* (the Straight Path) would occur after his death, and that those who lived after him would see much differing, separation and splitting within the ranks of Islām, just as had occurred in the nations that preceded them.¹⁷ According to another *ḥadīth*, after the good that Islām has brought to the people, there was to come a period of evil, and then good would return, but it would be tainted by those who oppose the Prophetic Way.¹⁸

Further, Muḥammad (ﷺ) warned his followers that *callers* to these divergent paths would be ‘from our people and speak our language’—that is, they would be Muslims who had deviated from the *Path*.¹⁹ When this time comes upon the *ummah*, the Prophet (ﷺ) commanded the people to ‘stick to the United Body (*al-Jamā‘ah*) of the Muslims and to their ruler’, and he (ﷺ) enjoined upon his followers to ‘hold fast’ to the way of his Companions—who are linguistically and religiously speaking, the Salaf,²⁰ as evident in the following authentic *ḥadīth*:

There shall not cease to be a group from my *ummah* obedient to the commands of Allāh. They are not harmed by those who betray them or those who oppose them. They will remain as such until the Decree of Allāh comes [close to the Hour], and they will be manifest over the people.²¹

In substantiation of such beliefs, Salafis place great emphasis upon verses from the Qur’ān that frequently refer to the splitting of the *ummah*, because Allāh regards this act of splitting away from the Truth and its people as deserving of punishment, just as ‘unity upon the Truth and guidance is always mentioned as something praiseworthy and deserving of a great reward, due to the benefit it contains

¹⁷ Qur’ān 6:153.

¹⁸ Al-Fawzaan 2003:6.

¹⁹ Al-Fawzaan 2003:5.

²⁰ Al-Fawzaan 2003:5.

²¹ Muslim no. 1037, cited in Abdul-Wāhid 2017c:5:7

in this life and the Hereafter'.²² Differing beliefs among Muslims are clearly not a novel or unexpected phenomena within Islām. Significantly, the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) issued a severe warning that splitting would occur because of abandonment of acting upon the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*, and because of the introduction of innovations (*bid'ah*) even though innovations were not present in the religion during the Prophet's (ﷺ) own lifetime.²³ In support of this fundamental principle, Salafis are able to provide many instances²⁴ where the Messenger Muḥammad (ﷺ) severely prohibited and warned his nation from innovating anything into the religion, since Allāh did not leave the religion incomplete; to think otherwise is to oppose His verses (*ayāt*), which clearly state that the religion is complete:

This day, I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islām as your religion. (NQ)

This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved for you Islām as religion. (SI)

(Qur'ān, *Surah al-Mā'idah* 5:3)²⁵

Further, the great danger of innovation is highlighted by the fact that it is one of the central tenets of *al-Khutbah al-Ḥājah*, translated as 'The Sermon Of Need', with which the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) would begin nearly every Friday sermon and admonition to his followers—a tradition that was continued by the *Salaf al-Ṣālih* to introduce their own sermons, writings, and a variety of their affairs.²⁶ In this sermon, the Prophet (ﷺ) warned the believers that 'every newly invented matter is an innovation (*bid'ah*), and

²² Al-Fawzaan 2003:9.

²³ Al-Fawzaan 2003:3.

²⁴ Aḥmad al-Madane 2005; Al-Fawzaan 2003; Al-Madkhali 2015.

²⁵ Muhsin Khan (denoted by NQ) and Sahih International (denoted by SI): both English translations of the Qur'ān are included for the sake of comparison.

²⁶ *Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah 'Majmū' al-Fatāwā'*, (Volume 14: 223).

every innovation is a misguidance, and every misguidance is in the (Hell) Fire'.²⁷ *Bid'ah* was, therefore, believed to have been the root cause of this disputation and division within the Muslim *ummah*, and subsequently the cause of sectarianism and weakness within its ranks.²⁸ This belief goes some way towards explaining why one of the major characteristics of Salafism is its uncompromising preoccupation with the Texts (Qur'ān and *Aḥādīth*) in order to defend the Religion from those who seek to innovate into it, corrupt it and distort it. This view is succinctly reflected in the statement of Abu al-ʿĀliyah (d. 90H), in a quote taken from a classical work within Salafi discourse:

Learn Islām, and when you have learned Islām, do not turn away from it to the right nor the left. Rather, remain upon the Straight Path and upon the Sunnah of your Prophet (ﷺ) and that which his Companions (رضي الله عنهم) were upon—and beware of these innovations because they cause enmity and hatred amongst you, so hold fast to the original state that was there before they divided.²⁹

Accordingly, an essential part of the Salafi mission—past and present has been the battle against deviant groups whom it was prophesised (in the texts) would corrupt the religion's purity from the outside and—more crucially—from within. Within Salafi discourse, this battle began when the first of the deviated sects, known as the *Khawārij*, entered into Islām and diverged from the main body of Muslims by being the first to innovate into the religion.³⁰ Although conflict did not begin until the end of the period of the Companions, they were nevertheless forewarned by the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) that a group of misguidance would emerge after his lifetime who would strive so hard in their worship, prayer, fasting, recitation of the Qur'ān and standing late into the night in prayer that even the

²⁷ Al-Fawzaan 2013:6.

²⁸ Aḥmad al-Madane 2005; Al-Fawzaan 2003; Al-Madkhali 2015.

²⁹ Abu Nu'aym, 'Al-Hilyah' (Volume 2:218).

³⁰ Yahya 2011.

Companions would consider their own acts of devotion to pale in comparison.³¹

However, Salafis cite that the Prophet (ﷺ) made it clear that despite their enthusiasm and seemingly outward piety, the innovated doctrines and extremism of the *Khawārij* would ultimately be a source of misguidance for them, since their implementation of the religion lacked a correct understanding of its foundations.³² Salafis believe that the Prophet's (ﷺ) forewarning to his Companions was based upon his own encounter with a man called Dhu al-Khuwaysirah al-Tamīmī, the first *Khārijite* to rebel against authority in Islām.³³ Dhu al-Khuwaysirah's methodology of rebellion stemmed from his being 'pleased with his own opinion ... above the opinion of the Messenger of Allāh'. The extremism and violence of the *Khawārij* would go on to manifest itself in years to come.³⁴

There are many stories within Salafi discourse about the *Khawārij* and their misguided methodologies and ideas that could be mentioned. Nevertheless, Salafis believe that in following Dhu al-Khuwaysirah, the *Khawārij* were the first to actively encourage the abandonment of the original way (of the *Sunnah*) and incite the Muslims with rebellion against the rulers.³⁵ They did this in the firm (though misguided) belief that revolution against the ruler was mandated by the religion. However, it is reported that the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) ordered his *ummah* to cling firmly to the *Sunnah* and the way of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and to 'obey those who are in authority', even if they were found to be oppressive and tyrannical, and 'even if he beats your back and takes your wealth'.³⁶

Through the centuries Salafi scholars have, thus, argued that the *Khawārij* justify their beliefs by quoting texts from the Qur'an without understanding their meanings in light of the Prophetic *Sunnah*

³¹ Yahya 2011:15.

³² Al-Fawzaan 2003:33.

³³ Yahya 2011: 4.

³⁴ Yahya 2011: 4.

³⁵ Al-Fawzaan 2003:31

³⁶ Al-Fawzaan 2003:31.

and the Methodology of the Companions (رضي الله عنه).³⁷ Moreover, the *Khawārij* have been defined in the early and later books of *Sunnī* history and Creed for their rising up against the Muslim rulers and declaring them to be unbelievers (i.e., *takfir* or excommunication) for the sin of not judging by *Sharī'ah* Law.³⁸ From the outset, the *Khārijite* doctrine also held that anyone who committed a major sin, such as fornication, theft or consuming alcohol, would become a *kāfir* (an unbeliever) and they would deem such a person to be an apostate who should be killed.³⁹ The *Khārijite* pronouncement of *takfir* (excommunication) for the sin of judging by 'other than what Allāh has revealed' facilitated not only rebellion against Muslim governments (beginning with fourth Caliph 'Alī رضي الله عنه) and his successors Hasan and then Mu'āwiyah (رضي الله عنه) but also made permissible, in their view, the killing of any person who opposed their doctrine, or who supported the regime, which over the centuries (until this era), has led to a huge number of deaths.

The beliefs of the *Khawārij* are deemed by Salafis to be the complete antithesis of the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muḥammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم), who never expelled a believer from Islām on account of the major sins that fall short of polytheism.⁴⁰ Salafi writings and speeches often mention the fact that the Prophet Muḥammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) knew that the infectious depravity of the *Khawārij* would grow severe, so much so that he referred to them as *kilāb al-Nār* (the dogs of the Fire).⁴¹ Very early in Islām, the *Khawārij* divided into more than twenty conflicting sects, the doctrinal roots of which were dictated by the prevailing political circumstances of the time; many of these doctrines survive in countless 'Islamist' movements of today.⁴²

Many deviated sects are believed to have existed throughout history within the Salafi narrative, all of whom abandoned the middle way

³⁷ Al-Fawzaan 2003:33; Yahya 2011:60.

³⁸ Al-Fawzaan 2003:33; Yahya 2011:6.

³⁹ Al-Fawzaan 2003:33; Yahya 2011:6.

⁴⁰ Al-Fawzaan 2003:32

⁴¹ Yahya 2011:24.

⁴² Al-Fawzaan 2003.

falling either into extremism or negligence, which subsequently brought about their downfall and destruction.⁴³ This included the *Shī'ah*, who went to extremes in elevating the rank of the fourth Caliph, 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib (رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ) and his offspring, to the point of devoting acts of worship to them at their graves and shrines (which they erected in places such as Najaf and Karbala) while reviling the first three Caliphs and thousands of Companions including the wives of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). There was also the *Jahmiyyah* (followers of Jahm ibn Safwān, executed in 128H), who negated all the Names and Attributes of Allāh, denying that Allāh is over the Seventh Heaven and above His Throne, and they innovated the heretical saying that the Qur'ān is created.⁴⁴ Then there are the *Murji'ah*, *Mu'tazilah*, *Kullābiyyah*, *Ash'ariyyah*, *Māturīdiyyah*, and so on.

Although Salafis do not always enumerate all the deviated groups that have ever existed,⁴⁵ they are, nevertheless, able to articulate each group's deviancy based upon their misguided beliefs.⁴⁶ For Salafis today, one such sect is the hugely influential political group, *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* (the Muslim Brotherhood) founded in Egypt in the 1920s, whose often 'soft power' approach has made it difficult for many to decipher their deviancy, but whom Salafis view as a hybrid version of the *Khawārij* (discussed in more detail below). Over the last three decades, the Salafis have shown in numerous research papers that the teachings of *al-Ikhwān* are responsible for the rise of many radical groups including the FIS in Algeria, al-Qaeda and Daesh (ISIS).⁴⁷

Significantly, Salafism's uncompromising adherence to the early Islamic period and the original way renders it an 'indispensable' tool to 'understanding Islām and Islamic movements in every age'.⁴⁸ Further, the ongoing efforts within Salafi scholarship to defend its boundaries from the machinations of modern-day revolutionary

⁴³ Al-Fawzaan 2003:56.

⁴⁴ Al-Fawzaan 2003:49.

⁴⁵ Al-Fawzaan 2003:37-49

⁴⁶ Salafi Publications, 2010.

⁴⁷ Salafi Publications, 2010.

⁴⁸ Esposito 1992:23.

groups is proof against those who falsely claim that violent extremism stems from contemporary Salafism⁴⁹—and these efforts show that Salafis continue to view themselves as the only group which has taken the responsibility of protecting and preserving Islām’s purity by calling to the Qur’ān and *Sunnah* upon the understanding of the early *Salaf* without any astray sectarian influences.

In fact, the diligence of the Salafi scholars and students of knowledge in safeguarding the religion from deviated individuals and sects, and from ‘corrupt sayings, false ascriptions, and alien doctrines’, a practice known as the science of *al-Jarh wa al-Ta’dil* (i.e. disparagement and praise), is one of Salafism’s most distinguishing characteristics.⁵⁰ And, because of their role in protecting and preserving the purity of the religion through this science, the status of the scholars is highly revered within Salafi discourse: they are referred to not only as the ‘trustworthy ones’ in every era, but also as *Mujāhidīn* (ones who strive in the Path of Allāh to defend the faith) due to their refutation of *ahl al-bid‘ah* (the people of innovation) for the benefit of all the believing people.⁵¹

Thus, one finds that the Salafi callers (*du‘āt*) often refer in their classes and writings to hundreds if not thousands of scholars from the past fourteen centuries, each contributing to various fields of Islamic knowledge. Names that are oft-repeated include Muḥammad Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110H), al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110H), Abu Ḥanīfah (d. 150H), al-Awzā‘ī (d. 157H), al-Thawrī (d. 161H), Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179H), al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204H), Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241H), al-Bukhārī (d. 256H), al-Barbaḥārī (d. 329H), then those who came later such as Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728H), al-Dhahabī (d. 748H), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774H),⁵² and after them also: Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206H), Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥasan, al-Shawkānī, Al-Aẓīmabādī and Ṣidīq Ḥasan Khān right up to the current times with Ibn Bāz, al-Albānī, Ibn al-‘Uthāmin, Muḥammad Amān al-Jāmī, Muqbil ibn Ḥādī al-Wādī‘ī, Ṣālih al-

⁴⁹ Madkhali 2012:60.

⁵⁰ Madkhali 2012:11.

⁵¹ Madkhali 2012:5.

⁵² Salafi Publications 2001/2000.

Fawzān, Aḥmad al-Najmī, Rabī‘ al-Madkhalī, ‘Abdul-Muḥṣin al-‘Abbād, ‘Ubayd al-Jābirī to name a few.⁵³

Significantly, the works of these scholars throughout the ages are utilised by Salafis to show that they were united in the Foundations (*Uṣūl*) of the Religion, i.e., both in Creed (*‘Aqīdah*) and Methodology (*Manhaj*)—and that these *Uṣūl* have not altered over time or geography.⁵⁴ This fundamental is articulated powerfully and robustly within Salafi discourse through citations of scholars over the centuries such as the saying of Abu Muẓaffar al-Sam‘ānī (d. 489H):

And from that which proves that *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* (the People of Narration) are upon the truth is that if one looks to their writings, from the first of them to the last of them, the older and the later ones, even with them living in different lands and in different times and the vast distances between their abodes, each one of them living in his own land; you will find them in their explanation of the Creed upon a singular way, traversing upon a singular path, not deviating or straying from it; their speech in that regard is united, and their following of the texts is united. You will not see anything from differing or splitting between them, not even a small amount. Indeed, if you were to gather the statements of their tongues, and their narrating from their Salaf, you would find as if it emanated from one heart and one tongue. Is there any clearer evidence than this to show the Truth?⁵⁵

The fact that these scholars continue to be highly revered by Salafis as those entrusted by Allāh to guide ordinary Muslims during times of differing, division, and confusion in the *ummah* is a distinguishing characteristic of Salafi thinking. Salafis hail these scholars as the ‘Inheritors of the Prophets’ (*Warathat al-Anbiyā’*) due to the greatness of their knowledge and their firmness upon the truth.⁵⁶ According to the Salafis and Salafi discourse, one of the hallmarks of these scholars is that they are the most ardent in their practice of *al-Manhaj al-*

⁵³ Abdul-Wāhid 2013.

⁵⁴ Abdul-Wāhid 2021.

⁵⁵ Abul-Qāsim Ismā‘īl ibn Muḥammad al-Asbahānī, (Volume: 2:224-225).

⁵⁶ Al-Madkhali 2001:8.

Salafi (the Salafi Methodology), the most knowledgeable concerning the statements and actions of the Prophet (ﷺ) and the most renowned for differentiating between the authentic and unauthentic Prophetic narrations.⁵⁷ Within Salafi writings and discussions, these scholars (and those who followed their guidance) are also known as *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* (the People of Ḥadīth), *al-Firqat al-Nājiyyah* (the Saved Sect), *al-Ṭāʾifah al-Manṣūrah* (the Aided Group), *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*, *Ahl al-Qurʾān wa al-Ḥadīth*, *Ahl al-Athar* (the People of Narration) and *al-Salafiyyūn*. Furthermore, it is asserted that these synonymous terms were designed to distinguish the People of *Sunnah*, those who cling to the *Truth* from the other Muslim sects who had strayed from the correct Creed and Methodology at different times throughout history.

Hence, even though ‘the usage of the term *Salaf*⁵⁸ was widespread among the early Muslims and was used to guide people to the *Minhāj* (Methodology) of the *Sahābah* and those who followed them’,⁵⁹ it is important to note that Salafis believe that it was not so much the label or terms used that marked the true Creed and Methodology of a believer, but their adherence to Islām upon the guidance of the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) and the understanding of his Companions (رضي الله عنهم). So, it was this that distinguished them from those who went astray and from innovated beliefs that contradicted the Prophetic Methodology and Belief.⁶⁰ This concept is explained as follows:

The terms *Salafi*, *Sunni*, *Athari*, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*, *Asʿhāb al-Ḥadīth* and *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* are interchangeable. All these titles refer to the same body of people who follow the same path. However, not everyone who uses these titles is a true adherent of what they represent. In fact, the majority of people

⁵⁷ Al-Madkhali 2001:8.

⁵⁸ The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) said to his daughter, Fāṭimah (رضي الله عنها) on his deathbed, “Fear Allāh and be patient for indeed I am for you a blessed *Salaf*.” i.e., a blessed predecessor. (Muslim, no. 2450), cited in Abdul-Wāhid 2017c:4.

⁵⁹ Abdul-Wāhid 2017c:4.

⁶⁰ Al-Madkhali 2001.

who ascribe themselves to these labels have beliefs and methodologies in opposition to the path of the *Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ*.⁶¹

From what has preceded it is not difficult to decipher the reasons why those ‘erroneously’ named in Western scholarship as the founders of Salafism do not fit into this genealogy. Indeed, Salafi historiography reveals that the instigators of Salafism’s hybridisation during the 20th century, the 19th century reformist al-Afghani and his followers, misused the term to falsely claim *Salafiyyah* for themselves. As Shaykh, Dr Abu Iyād Amjad Rafiq (2016) succinctly articulates in explaining ‘the deception and sophistry of modern-day *Khārijite* ideologies and movements and their violations of basic Islamic principles (*Uṣūl*)’, the mechanism by which Islamists infiltrated contemporary Salafism involved deconstructing and dividing the foundations (*Uṣūl*) of Salafism into two parts: namely, dividing the Creed from the Methodology.⁶²

Moreover, argues Rafiq (2016), by promoting this idea within Islamic thought, Islamists were able to water down the purity and tradition of Salafism, and thereby validate ‘engage[ment] in any modern political methodology of reform’, which in reality served only to broadly facilitate ‘the methodology of the *Khārijites*’.⁶³ Consequently, Muslims gradually became accustomed to coined terms such as ‘*Salafiyyah-Taqlīdiyyah*, *Salafiyyah-‘Ilmiyyah*, *Salafiyyah-Siyāsiyyah*, and *Salafiyyah-Jihādiyyah*’ (etc.), believing that they would remain Salafi despite having altered their *manhaj* to bring about political change within their societies.⁶⁴

It is from within this pool that the division of Salafis into purists (quietists), politicians (activists) and *jihādists* (violent extremists) has been derived by Western academics and researchers. This categorisation is rejected by an objective analysis of what constitutes the core *Khārijite* ideology in light of history, the Quranic texts as understood and applied by the Companions to the *Khārijites*, the Prophetic traditions

⁶¹ Abdul-Wāhid 2017c:6.

⁶² Rafiq 2016:1.

⁶³ Rafiq 2016:1.

⁶⁴ Rafiq 2016:1.

regarding them and how the Salaf characterised them through specific traits and doctrines.⁶⁵

Specifically, Salafis believe that it was their anti-textual and rationalist approach, which came to be known as *Salafiyyah-Tanwiriyyah* (*Enlightened-Salafism*) that began a chain of events that would inspire like-minded modernist thinkers such as Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949CE) to develop the revolutionary methodology of the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*), which aimed only to gain ‘political ascendancy, power and leadership’.⁶⁶ Additionally, Salafis have shown through documented research that leading figures within the Muslim Brotherhood such as Sayyid Qutb (executed in 1966CE, Egypt) are revered to this day by virtually every ‘jihadist-extremist’ and terrorist organisation in the world.⁶⁷ In refutation of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897CE), a modernist ideologue who’s reformist political writings have influenced numerous Islamist parties over the last hundred years, Shaykh Abū Khadeejah Abdul-Wāhid (2013) writes:

Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani’s origins are shrouded in mystery, but it appears that he came from a *Shi’ah* family ... In adulthood he was a political activist calling for Islamic differences to be put to one side so as to attain political power for Muslims. He called for the ‘modernisation’ of Islamic thought attempting to reconcile Islamic faith with modern Western values such as nationalism, democracy, enlightenment and rationality—in essence he was a rationalist who saw the benefits of borrowing from other religions, ideologies and thoughts as a mean to political ascension.⁶⁸

In short, such ideologues are not considered by Salafis to have been true scholars (*‘ulamā’*) of their time, nor were they ‘vanguards’ of the faith or rightly-guided in the *Uṣūl* of the Religion. They are counted among the *Khalaf* in accordance with the statement of the scholar and former *muftī* of Saudi Arabia, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn ‘Abdullāh Ibn Bāz (d. 1420H رحمه الله) who said:

⁶⁵ Rafiq 2016:1,2.

⁶⁶ Abdul-Wāhid 2017b.

⁶⁷ Abdul-Wāhid 2017b.

⁶⁸ Abdul-Wāhid 2017a.

The Salaf are the best of generations—and whoever follows their Path and proceeds on their Methodology is a Salafi—and whoever opposes their Path is from the latter day opposers (*Khalaf*).⁶⁹

Accordingly, in Salafi circles, reformist figures such as al-Afghānī et al. are ‘*imāms* of misguidance who oppose the methodology of the Legislator, Allāh—and the methodology of all the Messengers, which begins the call to Islām with *Tawhīd*’.⁷⁰ As Abdul-Wāhid (2021) states in clarification of this important point, one which Western academics are often unequipped⁷¹ to fathom:

To be a Salafi means adhering to the Creed, Methodology, and the religious practices of the *Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ* (the Pious Predecessors). The earliest of the Salaf where the generation of our Prophet (ﷺ) and his Companions (رضي الله عنهم). Then after them, came the three virtuous generations of believers who held fast to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (ﷺ) and his Companions. The person who understands this path correctly, follows it truly, without innovating into it nor deviating from it, is a Salafi. To be a Salafi is not merely to imagine that one is upon the path of the Salaf, but *Salafiyyah* is to know the Methodology of the Companions and to follow it—it was they who understood best the meanings and intent of the speech and actions of the Prophet (ﷺ).⁷²

Such has been the effect of the al-Afghani school of thought within Western scholarship for almost a century, that when coupled with a consistent lack of objectivity in questioning the true ‘provenance and authenticity’⁷³ of Salafism—both as a concept and a discourse—not only has an unchecked myth of it become ‘a key tool in the conceptual repertoire of the social sciences and humanities’,⁷⁴ more crucially, it has also proven to be a lynchpin in facilitating the easy categorisation of Islām alongside the ideologies of extremist and

⁶⁹ Abdul-Wāhid 2017c:5.

⁷⁰ Abdul-Wāhid 2017a.

⁷¹ Read: Becker, E., 2017. *Why Sociologists of Religion Need Theological Training*.

⁷² Abdul-Wāhid 2017c:9.

⁷³ Lauzière 2016:2.

⁷⁴ Lauzière 2016:4.

terrorist groups—and thereby the incorrect hyphenisation of Salafism into quietists, politicos and jihadists.⁷⁵ Further, whilst it could be argued that the evolution of hybrid versions of Salafism occurred as a consequence of activists in the Muslim world attempting to keep up with the project of modernity in the West or to fight the ‘crusade against Islām’⁷⁶, according to the ‘purist’ Salafi narrative, the hybridisation of Salafism was an insidious plot set into motion by those who seek to bastardise the banner of *Salafiyyah* and destroy it from within—a battle which began with the first of the deviated sects, the *Khawārij*.⁷⁷

To conclude, and in response to the question: *What is Salafism?* It appears that an insider narrative differs considerably from outsider Western perceptions which view it as a reformist movement within modern Islamic thought. On the contrary, in situating Salafism from *within*, the ‘purity’ of its historicity makes it abundantly clear that one of the strongest markers of its identity is the fact that it is firmly grounded in the foundational principle that it alone is the only Islamic sect to embody the *absolute* truth due to the sources it refers to in every aspect of Religion. For this reason, ‘purist’ Salafis (as they are sometimes referred to by Western academics) have been characterised as being almost obsessed with delineating the boundary that separates them from those who have strayed from the truth, in much the same way that those involved in schisms within other faiths have also tried to defend what they believed to be the true doctrine of their faith, albeit in accordance with their own unique contexts.

Hence, in line with theories on revivalist sects and ‘new religious movements (NRMs)’, the vigorous conviction within Salafi discourse that it alone holds ‘the truth’,⁷⁸ is a current that the reader will find runs throughout this research, especially in relation to the emergence of Salafism in the UK.

⁷⁵ Abdul-Wāhid 2017b:3.

⁷⁶ Wiktorowicz 2004:2.

⁷⁷ See footnote:4.

⁷⁸ Barker 1995; Wilson 1990.

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