

## Understanding Salafis, Salafism and Modern Salafism

### Memahami Salafis, Salafisme dan Salafisme Moden

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#### ABSTRACT

*The use of the term Salafism in modern times is ambiguous and confusing in many ways. This ambiguity can be realized when many Salafis themselves are not entirely clear as to what Salafism entails, assuming that it is simply to follow the Quran and Sunnah – a problematic definition since it implies that others do not. Furthermore, due to the ambiguity of the term, Salafism in an actual broader sense is claimed by all Muslims, in that the universal Islamic ideal is to imitate the Prophet and the early Muslim community. This paper provides an understanding on the world of Salafism, particularly the phenomenon of modern Salafism. It begins with a brief definition of Salafism, its history and attempts to discuss its realities and complexities in the modern world. The paper also highlights the various groups and categories of modern Salafis as observed by several academics and commentators. It concludes with an analysis of the ideology, characteristics and components of modern Salafism.*

*Keywords: Salafism; Wahhabism; Islamism; Saudi Arabia; Jihadism*

#### ABSTRAK

*Penggunaan istilah Salafisme pada zaman moden ini adalah tidak jelas dan mengelirukan. Ia berlaku dalam pelbagai cara. Kesilapan ini berlaku apabila Ahli Salafi sendiri tidak mengetahui maksud Salafism dengan betul tetapi mengandaikan kefahaman mereka itu bertepatan dengan al-Quran dan al-Sunah. Lebih bermasalah apabila mereka mendakwa fahaman orang lain mengenai Salafism adalah salah dan bertentangan dengan apa yang mereka faham. Oleh sebab itu, kerana kekaburan tersebut, pengertian Salafisme yang lebih sejagat dan dituntut oleh semua masyarakat Islam seperti idea mencontohi Nabi SAW dan Masyarakat Islam awal tidak diperolehi. Makalah ini memberikan pemahaman mengenai dunia Salafisme, khususnya fenomena Salafisme moden. Ia bermula dengan definisi ringkas Salafisme, sejarah dan percubaan untuk membincangkan realiti dan kerumitan di dunia moden. Kertas ini juga menyoroti pelbagai kumpulan dan kategori Salafis moden seperti yang diperhatikan oleh beberapa ahli akademik dan pengulas. Ia menyimpulkan dengan analisis ideologi, ciri dan komponen Salafisme moden.*

*Kata kunci: Salafisme; Wahhabisme; Islamisme; Arab Saudi; Jihadisme*

#### INTRODUCTION

Salafism (Arabic: *Salafiyah*) derives from the Arabic term ‘*salaf*’. Essentially, the linguistic meaning of ‘*salaf*’ is that ‘which has passed’ (*salafa*). In the Arabic language, those who preceded us from our forefathers are considered our *salaf* (plural: *aslaf*). The Quran also uses the word ‘*salaf*’ in this sense. It says (Quran 43: 56):

...And We made them a people of the past (*salafan*) and an example to later ages...

In the Islamic context, the term *salaf* refers to early Muslims who were companions of Prophet Muhammad, those who followed them and the scholars of the first three generations of Muslims. These early Muslims known as *salaf al-salih* enjoyed a special status among Muslims based on the Prophet’s saying, “*The best century of my people are those of*

*my century, then the following, then the following.*” (Al-Bukhari 1400H: no. 2652) Logically, their close proximity to the period of the Prophet means that they were closer to the original teachings and are therefore less corrupt. Al-Asqalini et al. (n.d.), In his commentary of this hadith, Ibn Hajar Al-‘Asqalani (d. 850) in his famous *Fath al-Bari Sharh Sahih Al-Bukhari* stated that the first generation is that of the Prophet’s companions. He added that the last of the third generation of Muslims, whose narration was accepted live circa 120AH/738CE. This was the period where innovations in the religion spread far and wide. The Prophet’s companions received direct teaching from the Prophet and witnessed both the revelation and the context, while the subsequent two generations received the teachings of Islam according to the interpretation of the Companions.

However, several definitions of the generation of *salaf al-salih* exist. Some have restricted it to the

generation of the Companions (al-sahabah), while others have included the two generations of the Companions and their Successors (al-Tabi'in). Some have broadened the definition to include the third generation called the 'successors of the successors' (atba' al-tabi'in). But as widely accepted, *salaf al-salih* includes the third generation as they are believed to greatly influence and impact the subsequent development of Islamic thought and practice in the modern era. This includes the period from the early life of Muhammad to the death of the last successor to the successors, roughly between 570-855CE.

*Salafiyyah* is known to be the *manhaj* or way of the Salafis. A Salafi is a practitioner of *salafiyyah*. Linguistically, the term *salafi* is an ascription to the *salaf*. A Salafi is one who ascribes himself/herself to the ways and teachings of the *salaf*. From the linguistic standpoint, if someone says, for example "ana Britani" (I am British), it means he comes from Britain or ascribes himself to Britain. The letter 'i' at the end of the word (e.g. *Britani*, *Salafi*) shows that the person saying the word is associating himself to it. In the Arabic grammatical methodology, the letter 'i' is the Arabic letter 'ya', and this letter 'ya' is specifically known as 'ya al-nisbah' or 'ya al-munasabah' (it means 'ya' of attribution or ascription) when used to ascribe someone to something else. Hence, when a person says "I am a Salafi", he is saying that he ascribes himself to the *salaf* or the way/teachings of the *salaf*.

It is also worth noting that the term Salafi is both a label and self-designated term. This is unlike the term "Wahhabi" in which it is being rejected by its adherents who prefer to be called Salafis or *ahl sunnah wal jamaah* (People of the tradition and community). The importance of labeling oneself a Salafi is explained in the words of the prominent Saudi scholar Salih Al-Fawzan who says (Al-Fawzan n.d.):

...Ascribing oneself to the *Salaf* is an ascription which is necessary and required so that a differentiation can be made between the true Salafi and the one who hides behind them. Also so that the affair does not become confusing to those who want to guide themselves by them (the Salaf). So, when the heretical groups and astray partisanships that lead astray have increased, then the People of Truth announce and declare their ascription to the Salaf with a view to free themselves from those who oppose them...

As a community who subscribe themselves to the *salaf*, the Salafis consider the period of the Prophet and subsequently his Companions to be the 'golden age of Islam' (Sadik H. Kassim 2004; Maryam El-Shall n.d.; Abou 2005). In the Salafis' definition, this

'golden age of Islam' consisted of the time the Prophet ruled Medina and subsequently the period ruled by the four close companions of the Prophet who were known as the *khulafa' al-rashidun* (Rightly-Guided Caliphs). They were Abu Bakar (d. 634), Umar (d. 644), Uthman (d. 656) and Ali (d. 661). Some consider Umar bin Abd al-Aziz (n.d.) (d. 720), the Umayyad Caliph as the fifth Rightly-Guided Caliph although he was not a Companion of the Prophet. Salafis highly idealize these periods of time and believe that Islam during those times was perfect and fully realized. Consequently, they assert that Muslims should reclaim the golden age of Islam by following and closely imitating the Islamic practices and codes of conduct that existed during that time.

In the modern context, the term Salafi is widely used to describe individuals and groups sharing their views. These include among others the *Ahl al-hadith* (literally: People of the Prophetic tradition), the *Ahl al-hadith* term is used to denote the conservative traditionalists, especially at the time of the Mu'tazilite or Ash'arite conflict during the Abbasid era. The term is also used to refer to many Islamic movements (both historical and modern) that emphasize the use of hadith in Islam (Roy 1992), the Saudi-based Wahhabis, the India-based Deobandi's school and the related schools in various parts of the Muslim world. More often, it is the Saudi-based school of thought that is referred to as Salafis, as it seeks to purify Islam from the impurities of *shirk* and *bid'ah*. Although the objective of emulating the *salaf al-salih* remains a central theme, their approach is very much characterized by Muslim thinkers and reformers such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Abdul Wahhab. To some, the term "neo-Salafis" is more appropriate in order to distinguish them from the early generations of Muslims (the *salaf al-salih*).

## HISTORY OF SALAFISM

It is difficult to place the origin of the use of the term *salafiyyah* or Salafism. What is clear is that, from a historical point of view, the term *salafiyyah* has always been associated with the general attitude of Muslims who emphasize the importance of adhering to the first century Islamic religious and political authorities. Obviously, they were those who were believed to have consistently practiced the original messages of Islam as instructed by the Quran and best exemplified by the sayings and practices of the Prophet. In the *nahj al-salafiyyah* (methodology of Salafism), the practice of Islam and understanding of

its tenets and principles by the first three generations of Muslims is considered orthodox i.e. one that is pure and unadulterated.

Many contemporary scholars and researchers have traced the historical emergence of Salafism to the thoughts of Ibn Taimiyyah (Haykel 2014). However, it is believed that Salafism and Salafi ideas have existed long before the period of Ibn Taimiyyah. For example, in the eighth century, Salafi ideas could be seen in the theological and juridical school of the so-called *Ahl al-hadith*. Adherents of this school emphasized the use of *hadith*. They were not bound by the tradition of *taqlid* (imitation) and considered themselves free to obtain guidance directly from authentic hadith of the Prophet alongside the Quran (Wagemakers 2012). In contrast, their methodology differed from that of *ahl al-Ray'u* (People of Opinion) who were open to any human opinions and interpretations. While we believe that Salafism is not a new phenomenon in Islam, we consider, however that the historical emergence of “modern Salafism” could be traced to the ideas of Ibn Taimiyyah.

#### MODERN SALAFISM

The term “modern Salafism” refers to a religious inclination or tendency towards a set of ideas and identity. These ideas and identity are subscribed to by modern Salafis who advocate strict adherence to their understanding of Islamic practices as enjoined by Prophet Muhammad (d. 632), the final prophet of Islam and subsequently practised by the early pious predecessors known as the *salaf al-salih*. Following the *salaf* is the reason for their self-designation as Salafis.

The term “Modern Salafism” in the contemporary context is usually used to denote post-Ibn Taimiyyah Salafism. Although this signals that the term refers to the ideas and thinking of the Salafis since the thirteenth century, this paper focuses primarily on modern Salafi ideas in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Adherents of Salafism throughout this period are hence referred to in this paper as “Modern Salafis.” They are seen as individuals who strive for the revival of historical legacy of Prophet Muhammad, his Companions and the early Muslim generations through materializing the authentic past in the current times and future. In matters of religious legitimacy and understanding, these Salafis always revert to Ahmad bin Hanbal (d. 855) a prominent Sunni theologian who is also the founder of the Hanbali school of *fiqh* (jurisprudence). He is known

among the Salafis as *imam ahl al-sunnah* (Leader of the People of Prophetic Tradition). Besides Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taimiyyah, his famous student Ibn al-Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah (d. 751) and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab were among the most important figures that have shaped the *manhaj* of modern Salafism.

The contemporary use of the term Salafism refers to two dissimilar definitions or types. The first denotes the ideas or the school of thought that surfaced in late nineteenth century in Egypt and Damascus as a reaction to the prevailing spread of European ideas and sought to expose the roots of modernity within Muslim civilization. This type of Salafism is closely identified with modernist reformers such as Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). Living in mid nineteenth century Egypt, Abduh witnessed a period when Western encroachments upon the Middle East were becoming more prevalent. He believed that this impacted the Muslim societies whose blind imitation of the Western ways resulted in moral decay and stagnation across many Muslim communities (David 1990). Together with other reformers in his time, namely Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1354), Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1354), Muhammad al-Shawkani (d. 1250) and Jalal al-San'ani (d. 1225), they suggested that the solution lies in reviewing the original sources of the religion (David Commins 1983). This include besides the Quran and Sunnah, adherence to the practices of the *salaf al-salih*. These early reformers however, did not advocate that the Muslims cut themselves off completely from the Western world. In fact, they favour the reformation of Islam via a reinterpretation of the early Islamic sources *vis-à-vis* modern methodologies, resources and way of life.

The second type of Salafism – quite different from the modernist form of Muhammad Abduh is one that is dominantly associated with Saudi Arabia and believed to have been established by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. This type of Salafism is widely known as Wahhabism. It is a more traditional type of Salafism and adherents of this particular form of Salafism follow a rather literal, straight-forward and sometimes uncompromising form of Islam. These Salafis look to Ibn Taimiyyah, not the nineteenth century figures of Muhammad Abduh, Al-Afghani and Rashid Rida.

#### THE SALAFI-WAHHABI CONNECTION

The study of modern Salafism will not be complete without looking into *Wahhabism* (a reference given



to the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab) and its relation with Salafism. According to Khaled Abou El-Fadl (n.d.), the term Salafism did not become associated with the Wahhabi creed until the 1970s. He argued that it was in the early twentieth century that the Wahhabis referred to themselves as Salafis. In current academic discourse, the term “Salafi” and “Wahhabi” are sometimes used interchangeably; many are confused while others refer to them as one. Wahhabi is a label given to those who follow the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The Wahhabis are always referred to as Salafis, and in fact they prefer to be called as such. As a rule, all Wahhabis are Salafis but not all Salafis are Wahhabis. Historically, the Wahhabis called themselves *al-muwahhidun* (the monotheists) referring to those who follow the *tawhid*. Thus, *tawhid* became the central ideology of Wahhabism. The Salafis, including the Wahhabis sometimes call themselves *ahl al-sunnah wal jamaah* which literally means “the adherents to the Prophetic tradition and the assembly” though historically this name was used by other Muslims like Ash’aris and the Sufis.

Ideologically, Salafism is wider than Wahhabism. Salafi thought has existed for hundreds of years and has spread throughout the Muslim world and beyond. Wahhabism only existed from the mid eighteenth century. While it is true that Wahhabism is Salafism, it is only one of Salafism’s many orientations. Salafi and Wahhabi are not two sides of the same coin (The 1991 Encyclopedia 2018). There are Salafis who are not Wahhabis. There are Wahhabis who are not Saudis. Because of their inclination towards social activism and political reform, many social analysts and political observers group them under the label of “fundamentalist” and “political Islamist” but the differences between both groups are marked enough to prove that not all Salafis are Wahhabis, and that the Wahhabis and other Islamist groups such as the *Ikhwan Al-Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt, are different and distinct movements. One may disagree with their religious-political aspirations; however it is inappropriate to treat them in the same manner or classify them under a single category.

#### MODERN SALAFISM: REALITIES AND COMPLEXITIES

It needs to be mentioned here that the use of the term Salafism today is ambiguous and confusing in many ways. This ambiguity can be realised when many

Salafis themselves are not entirely clear as to what Salafism entails, assuming that it is simply to follow the Quran and Sunnah – a problematic definition since it implies that others do not. Furthermore, due to the ambiguity of the term, Salafism in an actual broader sense is claimed by all Muslims, in that the universal Islamic ideal is to imitate the Prophet and the early Muslim community. This is because the very term Salafism connotes authenticity and legitimacy. In other words, every Muslim is a Salafi as they are obliged to follow the Prophet and his Companions in practising Islam. This is fundamentally the reason why non-Salafi Muslims today reject Salafis’ exclusive claim on the term arguing that other Muslims may also have claim to the term since they are also followers of the *salaf al-salih*.

While Salafis themselves have failed to provide a universally-accepted meaning of the term “Salafism,” scholars and observers have also struggled with its definition. In fact, the pivotal question of who or what group qualifies as Salafi remains in dispute. In recent years and especially after the incident of 9/11, the study on Salafism has attracted much attention (Roel n.d.; Wictorowicz 2001; Wictorowicz & Kaltner 2003). Many individuals began to conduct research and write on modern Salafism. Some Western writers and even the media have failed to provide an accurate description and analysis of Salafism; while some writings on Salafism have been based on assumptions. It needs to be emphasized here that Salafism is not alien to Islam. It is not a deviation of the religion. Salafism is but one of the many manifestations of Islam like Sufism and Shi’ism.

Salafism is not a movement or an organization with a structural hierarchy; it does not operate under the leadership of a particular figure in a highly structured organization. Neither is Salafism a school of thought like Hanbalism, Hanafism, Shafi’ism and Malikism in the Sunni schools of *fiqh*. Contrary to those who claim that Salafis reject the four Sunni “schools of *fiqh*” (mazhab). As Salafism is a methodology and not a mazhab, Salafis can emerge from the Maliki, the Shafi’i, the Hanbali, or the Hanafi schools of jurisprudence. Many Salafis accept the teachings of all the four mazhabs if their rulings are supported by clear and authenticated evidences from the Quran and Sunnah. They are not divided on the question of adherence to the four established mazhabs. For example, Ibn Taymiyyah followed the Hanbali school. Some of his students (such as Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) and al-Dzahabi (d. 1348)) followed the Shafie school. Other students, (such as Ibn Abi al-Izz (d. 1390)) followed the Hanafi school. Some Salafis assert that

Muslims do not need to follow a specific *mazhab* but they are allowed to. By saying ‘do not need to,’ Salafis mean that they (those who follow the *mazhab*) would not be committing a sin any way. However, if a Muslim is knowledgeable in Islamic law, he is at liberty to follow any *mazhab* and select the opinion that suits him best, but if he is not well-versed in Islamic law, nor aware of the opinions of the scholars, then he should seek proper guidance from the learned scholar (Al-Shaikh 2018; Anon 2007). Many Salafis actually believe in the authority of all the imams of the *mazhab*, although some of them are not keen and do not encourage others to follow the teachings of a particular *mazhab*. In fact, most Salafis especially the Saudi Salafis (Wahhabis) are followers of the Hanbali *mazhab*. One could also find that Salafis in many occasions quote and mention the imams of the *mazhabs* such as Imam Al-Shafie (d. 820) and Imam Malik (d. 755) in their writings. Salafis recognize these imams as the *salaf*. For example, scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Al Qayyim whose works are always referred to by modern Salafis, and who are widely accepted as having been major proponents of Salafism, often quoted and endorsed many views of Abu Hanifah (d. 767).

As mentioned earlier, “modern Salafism” denotes a religious inclination or tendency towards a set of ideas and identity. By identity, we mean a belief system (ideology) that reflects moral, social and political interests and commitments of the Salafis, and constitutes their ideology of how the world and its system should work. This belief system is based on a pure, undiluted teaching of the Quran, the *sunnah* of the Prophet and practices of the *salaf al-salih*. Indeed, it is not a new doctrinal phenomenon, but one that has its origins in theological and legal debates that far preceded our time. Its basic proposition is that legitimacy, whether in the religious, social, or political realms, must be explicitly derived from religious sources and early Islamic precedents.

As a belief system that is based on original sources of the religion, it could be seen that Salafism, in reality should be embraced by all Muslims. Anyone would agree with its importance. What then is the fundamental difference between a Salafi Muslim and a non-Salafi Muslim? It is not a simple question that can produce straight-forward explanations due to the ambiguity of the term “Salafism” and the complex nature of the phenomenon. However, in a general sense, the significant difference between a Salafi and non-Salafi is not about mere adherence to the Quran, Sunnah and the Salaf which form the fundamental and most important ideals about the Salafi ideology

– but how these objectives are to be defined and how the program is to be carried out. In other words, the difference between the Salafis and non-Salafis is not about belief and following the Quran and Sunnah. It is about interpretations, understandings of religious texts, methodology and approach. As Wagemakers (2012) observes, ‘it is the strictness and methodology with which Salafis try to live up to the standard set by the *salaf* and their willingness to gear their teachings and beliefs towards that goal...that distinguishes them from other Sunni Muslims’. In addition, what makes it more difficult to define Salafism and determine who the Salafis are is the fact that they are not a single entity. There is no one Salafi as there is no single orientation of Salafism. Modern Salafism comes in various shapes and colours.

#### MODERN SALAFISM: FACTIONS AND CATEGORIES

Modern Salafism is not homogenous. It consists of various sub-cultures and orientation – from moderate to extreme and from quietist to political activist to jihadis (or violent-oriented) (Wikipedia 2018). There are various types of modern Salafi groups. While most Salafis are unanimous in matters of *aqidah*, they are divided mainly in issues of jurisprudence and politics. Some scholars have identified several schools of modern Salafism while others have determined their categories. For example, Tariq in Mohamed (2016) outlines eight groups of modern Salafis:

1. *Establishment Salafis* – They are the official scholars of Saudi Arabia appointed by the Saudi government to serve as official *ulema*, *mufti* (a Muslim legal expert who is empowered to give rulings on religious issues) and religious guides. In Saudi Arabia, these Salafis usually sit in the Board of Senior Ulama (Hay’at kibar al-Ulama) and the Permanent Committee for scientific Research and Legal Opinions (al-Lajna al-Da’ima lil Buhuth al-Ilmiyyawa al-Ifta’).
2. *Madkhali* or *Jami Salafis* – Salafis who follow the religious teachings of the Yemeni Shaikh Rabi Al-Madkhali (b. 1931) and the Ethiopian Shaikh Muhammad Aman Ibn Ali Jami (b. 1930). These Salafis are similar to the Establishment Salafis in terms of ideological inclination and their subservience to the government and endorsement of secular and democratic forms of government of the Arab regimes.
3. *Albani Salafis* – Followers of the Albanian scholar from Syria, Muhammad Nasir al-Din Al-Albani

- (d. 1999) who emerged as the prominent scholar of *hadith* in Saudi Arabia. Like the Establishment and Madkhali Salafis, Albani Salafis adopt the purist and non-political method of Salafism that prefers to focus on purification of the faith and education.
4. *Scientific or Academic Salafis* – These Salafis earn their name from the highly rational methods they employ to discuss and implement their version of Salafism. Very politicized in their approach, these Salafis include the famous Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq (b. 1939) from Kuwait, Abdul Razak Al-Shaygi (b. 1967), Dr Sajid Al-Mutairi (b. 1964) and Dr Hamid Bin Abdallah al-Ali (b. 1960).
  5. *Ikhwan Salafis* (Muslim Brotherhood) – As the name suggests, this Salafi group is heavily influenced by the teachings and political methods of the Muslim Brotherhood organization (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) which originated in Egypt. The prominent figure from this group of Salafis is Muhammad Qutub (b. 1919), the brother of Sayyid Qutub (d. 1966).
  6. *Sururis* – Sururi Salafis are named after clerical inspiration, Muhammad Surur Bin Nayif Zain al-Abidin (b. 1938). Sururi Salafism is a hybridization of the political ideas of Sayyid Qutub and the religious views of the Wahhabis.
  7. *Qutubis* – Qutubi Salafis are closely related to the Sururis. They follow the teachings of Sayyid Qutub. Followers of this group of Salafis may follow a Salafi methodology, but many other Salafis see little common ground between the Qutubis and themselves, often linking them to the thinking of Egyptian Ikhwan.
  8. *Global Jihadis* – This group of Salafis propagate rebellion and violence against their adversaries. The well-known Al-Qaeda organization is a fine example of this Salafi group.

Quintan Wiktorowicz (2006) writes that Salafis are broadly divided into three groups: the *purists*, the *politicos* and the *Jihadis*. The purists, he argues, focus on purification of the faith through education and propagation, while the *politicos* emphasize application of the Salafi creed to the political arena and lastly the *Jihadis* who take a more militant approach and argue that the current context calls for violence and revolution. Similar to the categories laid down by Wiktorowicz, Omayma Abdel Latiff also believes that there are three main currents of Salafism today which are: (1) *al-salafiyyah al-ilmiyyah*, or scholarly Salafism, which is concerned with the study of the holy text and Islamic jurisprudence; (2) *al-salafiyyah*

*al-harakiyyah*, or activist Salafism, which describes both politically active Salafist groups and those groups that are not politically active but occupy a place in the public sphere through their charity work and networks of social support and religious education institutes. This current, also includes *al-salafiyyah al-islahiyyah*, or reformist Salafism; and finally (3) *al-salafiyyah al-jihadiyyah*. *Al-Salafiyyah Al-Jihadiyyah* concerns itself with implementing *jihad* (Omayma 2009).

Similarly, Samir Amghar observes that Salafism in Europe is divided into three streams. The first is “revolutionary Salafism”; it places ‘*jihad*’ at the heart of religious beliefs. The second is “predicative Salafism,” which bases its actions on preaching and religious teachings. The last is “political Salafism,” which organises its activities around a political logic. Each one of these currents, Amghar argues entertains a specific relationship with European societies, Muslim societies and the means – including *jihad* – of hastening the eventuality of the Islamic state (Samir 2007). Bernard Haykel identifies three groups for the Salafis in terms of their political engagement: (1) “Salafi Jihadis” like those in the Al-Qaeda organization who call for violent action against its adversaries and the existing political leaders; (2) “Salafi Harakis” – who advocate non-violent political activism and (3) “Scholastic Salafis” (*al-salafiyyah al-ilmiyyah*) who adopt a quietist approach and a more traditional outlook, arguing that all forms of overt political organisation and action, let alone violence are forbidden (Haykel 2014).

It is important to note that these groups and categories of modern Salafis are by no means scientific. Moreover, the modern Salafi groups and factions are not limited to these only, and could probably be more or less than those mentioned. In addition, interestingly, someone could also be a Salafi and adopt the Salafi methodology without being affiliated or ascribed to any of these groups. There are also those who adopt the Salafi way in certain matters but not others. For example, while many may see Sa’id Hawwa (d. 1989), the famous Muslim writer and preacher from Syria as a Salafi, others do not consider him as one although he draws on some ideas prevalent in the Salafi ideology like anti Sh’ism. See Itzchak Weismann, Sa’id Hawwa: The Making of a Radical Muslim Thinker in Modern Syria, *Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 29, October 1993 pp. 601-23. Another example is Dr Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (b. 1926). While many do not consider Al-Qaradawi as a Salafi, some observers categorise him as a “Salafi reformist” (See Nafi, Basheer, “Fatwa and War: On



the Allegiance of the American Muslim Soldiers in the Aftermath of September 11,” *Islamic Law and Society*, Volume 11, Number 1, 2004, Brill, pp. 78 and 97) and the fact that at times Al-Qaradawi adopts the Salafi position on certain matters. For example, Al-Qaradawi believes that the acceptance of secularism by Muslims means abandonment of shariah. The call for secularism among Muslims, according to Al-Qaradawi is atheism and a rejection of Islam. He concludes that its acceptance as a basis for rule in place of shariah is clear apostasy. This is believed to be a typical Salafi position (March 2009). In other words, they are Salafis at certain times and non-Salafi at others. While we accept these categories and recognize its usefulness, it is undoubtedly not a comprehensive breakdown. Due to the complexities of modern Salafism, these categories and groups at times overlap. Furthermore, many of the groups or labels mentioned above are considered derisive by those who fall into those categories, and therefore, are dismissed out of hand. The categories are, at best, fluid, dynamic and only rough approximations of the personalities and issues that divide modern Salafis. However, they are significantly more nuanced than the categories currently used by Western policy makers, analysts and law enforcement agencies to discuss the Establishment Salafis, Jihadis and those in between.

These Salafi groups always refer to different religious scholars and texts for legitimacy and intellectual guidance. Their different religious interpretations have profound implications on the political, social and economic behavior of their followers. Disagreement and disputes within these groups are apparent. Can a “good” Muslim listen to music? Should a “good” Muslim refrain from buying Israeli goods and products? Is it acceptable for a “good” Muslim to fight to overthrow a Muslim government who fail to implement the *shariah* completely? Each Salafi subset provides its adherents with different answers and religious justifications to these and a variety of other questions. But the categorization provides nothing more than a rough topography of the Salafis terrain in order to assist observers speak in more nuanced terms about the ideological trends of modern Salafis.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN SALAFISM

As noted earlier, as Salafis are Muslims, their ideological beliefs in matters of creed and jurisprudential rulings are similar to that of the

majority Muslims or the non-Salafi Muslims. Probably, the difference between the approach of the Salafis and others is the fact that Salafis have taken a certain number of beliefs and rulings, and created a new Islamic school of thought, based on them to represent the true *salaf*, so they claim. Consequently, those who subscribe to a different opinion other than the Salafis have “deviated” from the way of the *salaf* and have become innovators in the religion (Al-Buti 1998). There are several characteristics in the modern Salafi ideology that distinguish its adherents from the rest of the Muslim community. These characteristics include:

1. Literalist and puritanical approaches to Islamic theology and law. Salafis base their teachings on a literal understanding of the Quran and the Prophetic tradition.
2. As the name suggests, Salafism’s basic proposition is that legitimacy, whether in the religious, social, or political realms, must be explicitly derived from early Islamic precedents. Salafis maintain that Muslims ought to return to the original textual sources of the Quran, Sunnah of the Prophet and traditions of the authentic *salaf* on all issues. This is done through interpreting the original sources of Islam in light of the modern needs without being bound to the interpretive precedents of the earlier Muslim generation (Abou n.d.). In other words, other than the Quran, Sunnah and traditions of the *salaf*, Salafis ignore and are not interested in the rest of Islamic history. In their fervour to return to a “pure” interpretation of the religion, Salafis tend to reject ‘any kind of rationalist orientation in a wide variety of Islamic intellectual teachings’ (Crow 2005). This somewhat distinguishes the Salafis from other Muslim community who generally regard the Islamic intellectual heritage as an important reference in pursuing Islamic scholarship and guidance (Abou n.d.).
3. Salafis believe that religious texts such as the Quran and hadith are intended to regulate most aspects of Muslim life. They approach the process of applying religious texts to contemporary matters as though it is a scientific enterprise governed by the Laws of divinity (Abou n.d.).
4. Treatment of the Quran and hadith as self-explanatory. Here, one could notice that in many instances, Salafis minimize and at times oppose the use of human intellect and logic to interpret religious texts. According to them, not only do religious texts regulate most aspects of human

life, but their meanings have also been determined by God. In other words, in engaging a religious text, Salafis claim that one does not need to apply human systems of logic, but to simply understand and implement it, as if the meaning of the text is always clear and indisputable (Abou n.d.).

5. Selective in providing evidence as a proof of legitimacy. Salafis selectively pick certain scholars from the Hanbali schools such as Ibn Taimiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah and treat their opinions as immutable and beyond questioning (Mohamed 2016). Moreover, Salafis read these scholars in an abusively selective manner in the sense that they adopt anything they find in the writing of these scholars that conforms to their thinking and worldview while ignoring the rest.

These characteristics are not exhaustive but they are some of the key ones that distinguish Salafis from the rest of the Muslim community. One may notice that the characteristics that generally distinguish the Salafis from the rest mostly revolve around matters of jurisprudence and legal reasoning. In many ways, the dispute and disagreement between Salafis and non-Salafis and between the various Salafi factions are always in matters of *fiqh* and increasingly in political issues especially since the last few decades. The Salafi ideology among others intends to regulate the legitimacy of Muslim practices in daily lives, thus *fiqh* become an important tool for the Salafis to draw the line between what is permitted or Islamically acceptable and what is forbidden. That is the reason why one could notice that Salafis are very obsessed with the issues of what is *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden); and what is *sunnah* and *bid'ah*.

Salafis are not only distinguished by their characteristics and approaches in matters of theology and Islamic jurisprudence. Their eminent characteristics could also be recognized by others through their physical appearance, social interaction, style and content of speaking and obviously religious practices. For example, many male Salafis could be recognized through their unique robe dress and a round cap, albeit there are those who prefer to be dressed in jeans and t-shirt. Many of them also prefer to appear with a long beard and a shaved moustache. Unsurprisingly, Salafis are known for forbidding or at least refraining from practices which are deemed by many non-Salafis as religiously permissible. These practices among others include listening to music, celebrating one's birthday including the Prophet's,

clapping hands in applause, wearing shirts with animal or human images on it, standing up in honour of someone and watching movies. To the Salafis, for every human action there are rules that must be observed. Many a times, Salafis would always refer to the Quran and hadith to showcase that a particular act is religiously sanctioned in many aspects of life including in non-religious matters. This is because Salafis always connect life to religion.

## THE MODERN SALAFI IDEOLOGY

As stated earlier, the Salafi ideology as a religious tendency is obviously based on the Quran and Sunnah and emphasizes the importance of following the footsteps of the *salaf*. Theologically, it does not differ much from the belief of the non-Salafi Sunni Muslims. As the scholars from The Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and Legal Opinions) in Saudi Arabia put it (Al-Atawneh 2011):

...*Salafiyyah* is derived from the *salaf*, who were the Companions of the Prophet, and from the *imams* (leaders) of the first three centuries, mentioned in the hadith: 'The best of the people are those who belong to my century, then those who follow them [the second century], then those who follow them [third century] . . . Salafis are those who follow in the footsteps of the *salaf* who, in turn, follow the Book [Quran] and the Sunnah and act according to them...

Similar to the description of Salafism by the official Saudi scholars, the Society for the Revival of the Prophetic Method (*Jam'iyyah Ihya' Minhaj al-Sunnah*), the organization that was instrumental in spreading Salafism in the United Kingdom describes the Salafi way as follows (Anon 1993):

... The Salafi *da'wah* (call or missionary) is that of the Quran and the Sunnah. It is the religion of Islam – pure and free from any additions, deletions or alterations. It is to adhere to the path of the Messenger *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* (peace be upon him) and of the true believers (*salaf al-salih*). *Al-Salaf* is a collective term referring to the pious pioneers in Islam and all those who follow in their footsteps in belief, actions and morals...

Salafi ideology is built on a clear and narrowly defined religious text and methodologically, they are literalist and scripturalist. Their ideology revolves around set of binary dichotomies: (1) *tawhid* as opposed to *shirk*; (2) adherence to the *sunnah* of the Prophet in all matters of *aqidah* and religious practices (*amaliyah*) as opposed to *bid'ah*; (3) respect and adherence to the traditions of the early Muslim generations, the *salafas* as opposed to the rejection of the subsequent Muslim intellectual heritage. Apart from these, fundamentally, the ideology of modern



Salafism stresses the importance of the concept of *Al-Wala' wala Bara'* which is seen as one of the central tenets in the ideology of modern Salafism.

Broadly, the ideology of modern Salafis consists of two main areas namely *aqidah* and *manhaj*. While *aqidah* refers to the beliefs that Salafis hold dear, the *manhaj* refers to the methods of how this beliefs are applied. Muhammad Nasir- al-Din Al-Albani, when asked about the importance and difference between these two components, replies that '*aqidah* is more specific than the *manhaj*' (Al-Albaanee n.d.). He also emphasizes that both *aqidah* and *manhaj* are inseparable in order for someone to be a Salafi and believes that one cannot be a Salafi in *aqidah* but apply *manhaj* of the Ikhwani Salafi (Syakh Albani n.d.). As for *manhaj*, it is the component in the ideology of modern Salafis that witness differences and diversity of opinions. Some also believe that the Salafi *manhaj* could also be viewed in different forms. For example, Salih Al-Fawzan says that *manhaj* means 'the methodology of implementing the beliefs and laws of Islam' and comes in three different forms i.e. the methods of dealings with religious sources (texts of the Quran, Sunnah and well-known sayings of the *ulema*), methods of *ibadah* (worship) and methods of dealing with the community or *ummah* (Al-Fawzan n.d.).

#### COMPONENTS OF MODERN SALAFISM

While the ideology of modern Salafism mainly comprises of its *aqidah* and *manhaj*, the components of modern Salafism can be broadly divided into three main areas namely, (1) the *aqidah*, (2) their approach in dealing with issues of rulings and *shariah* and; (3) issues of political activism (Stephen 2010). In applying these three areas, Salafis seem to revisit the notion and legality of these areas which sometimes causes disagreement and sparks controversial issues within the Salafi fraternity and the wider Muslim community. The first area of the *aqidah* usually remains uncontroversial and seems to be unanimous among many Salafi groups, but the second and third areas at times provoke dispute and controversy:

##### 1. Aqidah

For *aqidah*, Salafis emphasize a particular understanding of *tawhid*. *Tawhid* literally means 'oneness.' In Islam, it means 'believe in the Oneness of God.' The meaning of *tawhid* is encapsulated in the proclamation of the *shahadah* where one believes that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that Muhammad is

His messenger. The importance of *tawhid* for all Muslims can be seen as it forms the first pillars of faith (arkan al-iman). Undeniably, while all Muslims believe in *tawhid*, Salafis emphasize a particular understanding of *tawhid*. This particular understanding of *tawhid* is explicitly manifested in Salafis' categorization of *tawhid* into three categories of belief and action namely Saaleh (n.d.); Shaykh (2006): (1) *Tawhid al-Rububiyyah* (Oneness of Lordship) – that is to denote God's exclusive sovereignty in the universe as the sole Creator and Sustainer and to attribute any of these power to other than Him constitutes *kufir*; (2) *Tawhid al-Uluhiyyah* (Oneness of Godship) – that is to denote God's rights to be the exclusive object of worship, failing which the person is *kafir* and that there should be no intermediaries between Him and man; (3) *Tawhid al-Asma' wa al-Sifat* (Oneness of the Names and Attributes) – that is to denote God's uniqueness with the way He is depicted in the Quran and Hadith without any debate as to their meaning, that is without *tahrif* (distortion), *ta'til* (denial) and without any attempt to explain how they are (takyif) or employing likeness or any metaphorical interpretation (tamthil).

##### 2. Approach to Islamic Law

Another important arena in the constituents of modern Salafism is its approach to Islamic law, and in particular the position Salafis adopt *vis-à-vis* the four established schools of *fiqh*. Unlike their unity on issues of the *aqidah* and matters related to it, Salafis here are divided among themselves. The main difference pertains to the degree to which they follow or reject the teachings of one of the four *mazhabs*. In other words, Salafis are divided in how important they view the practice of independent reasoning – known as *ijtihad* to be in religious legal spheres (Haykel 2014; Wictorowicz 2001). For example, majority of the Saudi Salafis or the Wahhabis tend to be adherents of the Hanbali *mazhab*, whereas other Salafis are not keen on adherence or imitation to any *mazhab*, but instead prefer to interface directly with the sources of revelation (*al-amal bi al-dalil*) whenever they want to obtain an Islamic judgment. Salafis also argue that religious texts and the messages in it are explicit enough as they stand when revealed, and for the conclusion, many of them draw that it is not necessary for one to submit to the traditional methods as stipulated in the classical training.

The main characteristics underpinning the Salafis approach to Islamic legitimacy or law may be summarized as follows, Stephen (2010):

- a. Limit religious legitimacy to the Quran, authentic (strong) *hadith* and consensus of the Companions of the Prophets as constituting the only foundation for Islamic law and for how a Muslim should live.
- b. Avoid the practice of *taqlid* to the *mazhabs* since sources of Islamic texts are clear enough as they stand; and are sufficient for the authority of a legal opinion without the need for interpretation of scholars.
- c. Re-open doors of *ijtihad* based on one's own reading, rather than following strictly to opinions of the *mazhab*.
- d. Enhance the study and use of Arabic language for a correct and literal understanding of Islamic text.

However, the foundation on *ijtihad* and *taqlid* is not as thoroughly maintained in the Salafi methodology. In the history of Salafism these concepts (*ijtihad* and *taqlid*) have undergone some development and the absence of conclusive position on these concepts reflects uncertainties in the founding scholars themselves. For example, although Ibn Taymiyyah's major concern was the *aqidah* and he increasingly issued *fatwas* without resorting to any interpretative precedent, he still considered himself a follower of the Hanbali school. This paradox was later adopted by Wahhabism, which officially permits individual *ijtihad*, but at the same time indicates its subservience to the Hanbali school, with *ijtihad* not being a noticeable feature in their action.

#### POLITICAL ACTIVISM

The arena of political engagement provokes the greatest controversy and mutual polemic among modern Salafis. They are far from united as to where to place politics and engagement in it among their priorities. In matters of political activism, Salafis are broadly divided into two dominating groups. The first group holds an apolitical stance – opposing any political engagement and criticizing those who embrace politics or resort to violence. This group includes the purists Salafis, official scholars of Saudi Arabia, the Jami and Madkhali Salafis. They argue that political engagement always come with a heavy price. The famous Saudi scholar, Muhammad Nasir ad-Din Al-Albani believed that politics and political engagement should be shunned together. He said

that 'the best politics is to leave politics' (min al-siyasah tarku al-siyasah) (Albani n.d.). These Salafis claim than rather focusing on political participation, Muslims should bring change to the *ummah* through educating them to the correct faith and filtering religion from innovations. They Salafis adopt the *tarbiyah* (education) and *da'wah* (missionary) approach.

In contrast to the approach of these Salafis, the second group of Salafis (the politicians) argue that *tarbiyah* and *da'wah* alone without political participation will not change the *ummah*. As Wictorowicz (2001) observes, unlike the purist Salafis, these politico Salafis argue that they have 'a better understanding of contemporary issues and are therefore better situated to apply the salafi creed to modern context.' Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq argues that politics is at the heart of religion and political engagement includes more than just governance. He supports democracy and call Muslims to it because he believes that the alternative to democracy is "a tyrannical system." He believes that "Muslims forming political parties should be supported." Abdul (1985) also supports participation in parliaments, as it helps to assure that legislation which is contradictory to Islamic law will not be passed. In conclusion, it is possible to understand modern Salafism by observing the three essential elements. The first is the theological element which is encapsulated by Salafis unique understanding of *tawhid*. In general, most Salafis are unanimous on the creedal doctrines that define Salafism. Second is their approach to Islamic law which is concentrated on the legality of *ijtihad* and the need for Muslims to adhere to the tradition of any particular established schools of law. On the issue of law, most Salafis view that *ijtihad* is important and that *taqlid* should be avoided by Muslims. Third is the political element which saw the most prominent disputes and disagreement among many Salafis.

#### CONCLUSION

Although the subject of Salafism is very vast in the study of modern Islamic thought, this paper has attempted to capture the widely-accepted meaning of Salafism and explore some of its important features and ideological trend. Importantly, it has explained the meaning of modern Salafism as entailed in this paper. As we have stated earlier, due to the complexities and the ambiguous nature of modern Salafism, it is nearly impossible to produce a definitive, clear and distinct (*jami' wa mani'* as known in Arabic, literally:

inclusive and exclusive) definition of Salafism. Furthermore, modern Salafism is not static as it continues to evolve and even revise its ideology in an ever-changing socio-political contexts. As the paper has also highlighted, not all Salafis are extremists and violent oriented. There are Salafis who are against violence and terrorism. In the contemporary world where Muslims from different orientations and sects live together and integrate, it is critical that Salafi ideas and other religious orientations are contextualized to suit the ever-changing situation. This is important as religion and religious ideas are always intended to bring unity, peace and harmony in the community.

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