The Theoretical Challenges of Salafism for the Islamic World

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Abstract

The main objective of this research is to explore and critically analyze the intellectual and theological foundations of the Salafist movement, which has had a significant impact on the Islamic world, particularly in the Middle East, over the past one hundred and fifty years. This study aims to identify the fundamental principles of Salafi thought, its unique methodology in engaging with and interpreting sacred texts (the Quran and Sunnah), and to highlight the theoretical challenges posed by this movement to the broader Islamic world and other Islamic interpretations. Given the role of Salafism in shaping negative phenomena such as Islamophobia and internal conflicts, a precise understanding of its intellectual roots and challenging points is essential for a conscious engagement with this movement. This research seeks to answer the following questions: On which principles are the intellectual and theological foundations of Salafism based? What is the Salafi approach and methodology in understanding and interpreting religious texts, and how does it differ from other Islamic intellectual movements (such as religious revivalism and religious intellectualism)? What are the main weaknesses and theoretical challenges of Salafi thought that could pose problems for the Islamic world? The core issue is a deeper understanding of the intellectual mechanisms of a movement that, despite its apparent diversity in tactics (ranging from missionary to jihadist), is nourished by a single theoretical origin. By presenting a specific interpretation of Islam, it consistently has the potential to influence the social and political spheres of Muslim communities, making an understanding of it crucial for analyzing current trends in the Islamic world. This research employs qualitative content analysis to examine the primary and key texts produced by theorists and followers of the Salafi movement. The data collection method is based on library and documentary studies. The aim is to identify the common intellectual foundations of various Salafi groups by referencing primary sources and analyzing the dominant discourse within these texts. Additionally, a comparative method is used to distinguish the Salafi approach from two other major currents of contemporary Islamism: religious revivalism and religious intellectualism. This approach allows for a more precise identification of the

unique characteristics and points of divergence within Salafism. Analyses show that Salafis regard the first three centuries of Islam as the golden age and the standard of correct belief and practice. They view the way out of decline as a return, unconditionally, to the lifestyle and religious understanding of that era. This movement emphasizes a literal and direct understanding of the Quran and Sunnah, without the need for specialized interpretative methods (jurisprudential, theological, philosophical, or mystical). Any form of exegesis, rational interpretation, or attention to the objectives of Sharia is considered an innovation and deviation. A basic knowledge of the Arabic language is deemed sufficient for understanding the religion (ittibāʿ al-naṣṣ, literally: following the scripture). Salafis, by bypassing the framework of the Four Sunni Schools and the traditional system of ijtihad and following the mujtahid (taqlīd), believe that every Muslim can and must directly refer to the texts. Although the return to tradition is a shared concern among many Islamic movements, Salafis interpret it as a return to the understanding and practice of the Righteous Predecessors (Salaf Ṣāliḥ), rejecting any rational or historical revisions. Salafis view modernity and the manifestations of Western civilization as innovations and modern ignorance (jāhiliyya), because they lack precedent in the era of the Salaf and are contrary to the apparent understanding of the texts. Consequently, their approach to these phenomena is generally rejection and confrontation (and, in the jihadist form, struggle). The ultimate political goal of Salafis is the revival of the historical caliphate system with all its traditional functions. They consider modern nation-states to be illegitimate and believe that the only way for Muslims to regain dignity is through the re-establishment of the caliphate, based on their understanding of Sharia. This research concludes that Salafi thought, despite its claim of a return to authentic Islam, poses serious theoretical challenges for the Islamic world. These include the appropriation and distortion of fundamental Islamic concepts, intolerance towards pluralism and the promotion of violence, opposition to rationality and human achievements, the weakening of Islamic unity, the strengthening of Islamophobia, and the marginalization of more compassionate and rational interpretations of Islam.

Keywords

Introduction

Over the past 150 years, the Salafi movement has been one of the most vocal and, to some extent, influential currents in the Middle East and occasionally the world. This may be due to its provision of the raw materials for Islamophobia. Whether when this discourse took shape in the form of Wahhabism as a governing ideology, or when it aspired to the caliphate and, through the approach of excommunication (takfīr), sought to eradicate both Shiites and Sunni opponents, or when the new Taliban, caught between following the "Salaf Ṣāliḥ" (the Righteous Predecessors) and the modern state, emerged, or when various small and large terrorist groups in the Middle East, claiming to be engaged in daʿwa (the call) or jihad, operated—all of these movements adhere to common intellectual and jurisprudential foundations, although certain specificities of thought or action distinguish one from another. The intellectual ecosystem, concerns, and consequently, the method of approaching texts among them all follow a unified framework. The intellectual Salafism has a common core that, depending on geographical conditions and the interpretations of its leaders, manifests in diverse forms.

The experience of the past hundred years in the Middle East has shown that Salafism, especially in its jihadist form, represents a particular interpretation of religion that, due to its pragmatic nature, quickly takes action with minimal theoretical groundwork. It opens the door to dissimulation (taqiyya) and justifications, and the possibility of aligning itself with extra-regional powers and turning its weapons against Muslims is conceivable. Like any other theoretical discourse, this movement does not disappear after failures on the battlefield; rather, it shifts from one form to another, and potentially from one country to another, yet it remains continuously focused on revising and strengthening itself. Perhaps for this reason, despite the significant setbacks it has faced in recent years on operational fronts and its weaknesses in intellectual and theoretical confrontations, it continues to present itself as one of the sub-currents of political Islam, holding onto the hope that one day it may take control of the social and political arenas of Islamic countries. For this reason, it is essential that studies on Salafism continue to be pursued, updated, and monitored.

Given the religious context, the "Islamic" framework of governance, and the presence and activities of both small and large Salafi groups in the Middle East, Salafi thought always has the potential to move from a latent state into active involvement, playing a larger role in the social and political arena. What is crucial then is understanding the intellectual and theological foundations

that prepare and justify their actions on the ground. Therefore, it becomes important to answer the question: On which principles is Salafism based? What is their perception and approach to the texts, and what are the challenging points of their thought?

Research Background

In recent years, two research groups have focused on elaborating and analyzing the Salafi movement:

1. Studies focusing on notions like Islamism have, without distinguishing between the boundaries of thought and action among various factions, analyzed all of them under one heading. For example, Dekmejian, in his book Islam in Revolution, has approached the transformations in Islamic societies from a movement-based perspective. He considers the three general features of Islamic movements to be inclusivity, pluralism, and persistence, and applies the term "fundamentalism" to them. He believes that the Islamic movements of the past century are responses to a widespread crisis in the Islamic community, characterized by issues such as a crisis of identity, legitimacy, chaos and pressure, class conflict, military weakness, and a cultural crisis (Dekmejian, 1993, p. 29).

Dekmejian, in outlining the characteristics of fundamentalists, refers to factors such as: dogmatism and rigidity in beliefs, feelings of inferiority, belligerence, conspiracy theories, idealism and a sense of duty, harsh living, and absolute obedience to leadership (Dekmejian, 1993, p. 73). He also identifies key features of fundamentalist ideology under the following points:

✦ A return to the pure foundations of faith and unconscious, unintentional influence by modern ideology.

✦ The comprehensiveness of Islam and the inseparability of religion and state.

✦ A call to the Quran and Sunnah.

✦ Emulation of the society of the Prophet and the early companions.

✦ Jihad against the existing Jahili (ignorant) society and the effort to establish an Islamic community.

✦ Social justice and opposition to economic inequality.

✦ The necessity of political activism, jihad, and martyrdom.

✦ A pure society that preserves moral values, modesty, women's hijab, and abstention from Western customs and practices.

✦ The necessity of political action based on Islamic principles to build an

Islamic society (Dekmejian, 1993, p. 91).

2. A category of research that addresses Salafism in the context of the classification of discourses and active movements under political Islam. There are various classifications in this area:

2.1. Dual Classifications: Some researchers have subsumed all active movements under political Islam into a dual classification. The first report in this section pertains to the classification by Arnold Toynbee, who identifies two general responses in Islamic societies to the pressures and invasions of the West: either a rational acceptance of Western civilization or its absolute rejection. He considers the first path to be that of the Muslim modernists, who boldly move towards progressivism/Westernization, while he deems the second path to be doomed to failure and extinction (Toynbee, 1974, pp. 178-177).

In Iranian research, Khorramshahi has distinguished Islamists with the terms "Neo-I'tizaliism" and "Neo-Ash'arism." He considers the leaders of the Neo-I'tizali branch to be figures like Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi and Muhammad Abduh, with followers such as Muhammad Iqbal and all Shia reformers in Iran. The main characteristic of this group is their inclination toward reason and rational sciences, as well as modern sciences, belief in free will, and critical evaluation of hadith. In contrast, the leader of Neo-Ash'arism is Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and its most famous follower is Muhammad Rashid Rida. The origin of this school of thought goes back to Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, and through them, on the one hand to Ahmad ibn Hanbal and on the other to Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari. The most important features of this group are: adherence to caution, prioritizing transmitted knowledge over reason, excessive focus on hadith and the companions of hadith, textual literalism, appearance-oriented practices, avoidance of exegesis, and a tendency toward predestination (Khorramshahi, 1985, p. 20; Movasaghi, 1995, pp. 103-95). Naturally, Salafism falls under the second movement.

It seems that dual classifications not only fail to aid in the analysis of the Salafi movement, but in some cases, they lead to the misdirection of the researcher and simplistic reductions. These types of classifications, by oversimplifying the issue, have equated the Salafi movement with reformist/ renewalist movements in Islamic societies.

2.2. Triple Classifications: Oliver Roy, in his study of political Islam (Roy, 1999, p. 66), distinguishes between Islamism, traditional fundamentalism, and new fundamentalism, and describes each as follows:

a) Traditional Fundamentalists: They oppose any innovation in traditional

methods of accessing religious texts and emphasize the implementation of Sharia.

b) Islamists: According to Roy, Islamists differ from fundamentalists in three key ways:

1. Belief in revolution and the necessity of political action and gaining power to Islamize society and wage jihad against corrupt governments.

2. Emphasis on women's rights and support for their participation in political and social activities.

3. Belief in dynamic ijtihad and prioritizing the Islamization of the state rather than merely implementing Sharia (Roy, 1999, p. 42).

c) New Fundamentalism: This movement, turning its back on politics and political action, emphasizes individual ethics and spirituality. It rejects ijtihad and opposes the presence of women in social and political spheres. New fundamentalists aim to fundamentally Islamize the society. They do not seek power or government, and they advocate for severing ties with Western culture; thus, they make no effort to reconcile Islam with modernity (Roy, 1999, pp. 99-84).

2.3. Fourfold Classifications: This classification, which reflects recent developments in Islamic countries in the Middle East, mentions Sunni conservative Islam (Saudi Arabia), civil political Islam (Turkey), Islamist and Umma-based political Islam (Iran), and fundamentalist or radical political Islam (Al-Qaeda). These four movements are also referred to in terms of revolutionary, critical, modern, and fundamentalist orientations (Poursaeid, 2013, p. 70).

The above classifications pertain to the Islamic world and the demarcation of discourses in terms of the Sunni interpretation; the threefold divisions are closely aligned with the approach of this paper, though with some exceptions, such as certain characteristics or placing certain figures under a specific discourse.

My proposed model for analyzing Salafism is a threefold division of the thought and actions of Muslim intellectuals over the past 150 years. In this framework, the Salafi movement is analyzed alongside its distinction from the religious intellectual currents and religious revivalism, which are seen as three significant movements in contemporary political Islam. As Salafism offered its solutions to the problems of the Islamic world, it also sought (and still continues to seek) to maintain a boundary between itself and the religious intellectuals and the religious revivalist movement. This paper utilizes content

analysis to examine the texts that the Salafi movement draws from, aiming to identify the common foundations among various Salafi groups. Although the primary focus is on the Salafi movement, the paper also highlights, within the scope of the research, the distinguishing features of Salafism in comparison to the other two movements.

Theoretical Concepts and Foundations

Salafism is a social and religious movement within Sunni Islam that views adherence to the way of the Salaf (the early generations of Muslims) as the solution to the problems facing Muslims. The Salafis, citing a hadith from the Prophet Muhammad, consider the first three centuries of Islam to be the best of Islamic centuries and regard those who lived during this period as the intellectual authorities. This movement, disregarding the characteristics and requirements of the modern world and the differences between it and the world of the early followers of the religion, attempts to understand religion in a particular way and then uses that understanding as a criterion to judge the elements of the modern world. They believe that over time, religion has been subject to deviations and superstitions, and the way to revive the faith is a return to the practices of the Salaf and a literal application of the Quran based on its conventional and linguistic understanding. Therefore, they do not recognize any particular methodology for interpreting the Quran, but rather consider familiarity with the Arabic language sufficient for engaging with it. According to some of them, the theological reflections or rational, philosophical, mystical, and scientific approaches to religion have led to an eclecticism and loss of purity in the faith. As a result, they seek to revive religious practices by simplifying understanding and adherence to the texts, leading Salafis to focus on the outward aspects of religion. Since the apparent meanings of the texts often do not confirm the conditions of contemporary life, the demands of modern life are rejected and negated. Unable to comprehend the paradigm of modernity, Salafis view the modern world as an expanded version of the old world and seek to change it according to their understanding of the texts. Salafis are generally divided into two main approaches: the missionary approach and the jihadist approach. The first group focuses on the promotion of Salafi ideas and principles, while the second sees "jihad" as a necessary step to return to Islamic greatness and engages in combating the "other" through takfīr (excommunication).

Salafism should not be equated with "traditionalism," as a return to tradition is observed in all currents of political Islam. Regardless of the differences in

the meaning and scope of tradition, as well as the methods by which each subcurrent engages with tradition, recourse to religious traditions is a vital and identity-forming element for Islamists. What matters is how it is utilized and how tradition is linked to the modern world. Therefore, it can be argued that traditionalism exists in all subcurrents of political Islam, but the interpretation and application of this heritage differ among Salafists, revivalists, and religious intellectuals.

The theoretical transformations of Salafism over the past 150 years have led to a distinction between classical and modern approaches. Both share common foundational principles and possess a global/transnational outlook, but the classical Salafists tend to operate at the national level with a pyramid structure, while modern Salafists work at the global level and utilize a networked structure. Some jihadist groups are referred to as the "new Salafis" (Pourhassan and Seifi, 2015, p. 14). It appears that they all think similarly in terms of fundamental principles, differing only in the application of methods and tactics. This study, using a library research method, seeks to provide a first-hand account of the thought processes within Salafi movements. The content analysis method has been employed to evaluate these texts, and an effort has been made to cross-reference the texts in order to arrive at a more impartial understanding and summary of their views. The key common principles of their thought will be discussed in the following.

Genealogy

To examine the discourse and position of the Salafi movement, one must look back a century to the intense material and intellectual assault of the West on Islamic societies. This was the period during which the West established two new intellectual currents: rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism denied dimensions beyond material rational perception, while empiricism also denied the rational aspects, deeming all propositions that express metaphysical truths to be meaningless.

By denying "hidden" (supernatural) truths, human beings were considered in their material and perceptible form, and their value was defined by their naturalistic aspects. Just as humanism made this tangible, existing human the center of epistemology and placed him in the position of God. A being with such a status should not be bound by constraints; thus, liberalism, with its principle of human freedom, became the second foundation of the ideology of modernity (Arblaster, 1989, p. 26).

Humanism and liberalism introduced the concept of the social contract as

the foundation for the formation of society. This is where, if the contract is bound by specific geographical borders, nationalism arises; otherwise, internationalism is born (Davari, 1986, p. 241).

Modernity has followed the above path in ten stages: the Renaissance, the Reformation (the era of religious reform), the Enlightenment (the era of rationality), the expansion and growth of urbanization, the Industrial Revolution, modernization, economic development and growth, the process of bureaucratization, the rise of technocracy, and the expansion of democratic systems and the spread of democracy. In the tenth stage, religion was excluded from the realm of politics. The transfer of sovereignty from God to the people forced many governments, which had previously justified their legitimacy in the form of divine rule, to adopt the criterion of the people's consent and vote. With the dominance of empiricism, knowledge lost its value, and science parted ways with ethics, as science became limited to empirical propositions and lost its authority to judge value-related issues (Barbour, 1990, p. 27). Thus, certainty in the truth of religion was replaced by doubt. Only a religion whose scientific validity had been proven retained the authority to be referenced and practiced.

A more detailed discussion of the dimensions and functions of modernity would disrupt the coherence of this paper. What is important from the perspective of this writing is the influence of these ideologies and intellectual schools on the Islamic world, particularly in the traditional and crisis-ridden context of the Muslim countries following World War I. At the Lausanne Peace Conference in Switzerland, British representatives proposed four conditions for the recognition of the new Turkey: 1) the abolition of the Caliphate and Islam, 2) the expulsion of the Caliph from the country, 3) the confiscation of the Caliph's property, and 4) the declaration and implementation of secularism in the governing system (Khatami, 1980, p. 122). Although at this conference, Ismet Pasha did not accept the British conditions, another conference was held in July 1923 (Dhul-Hijjah 1341 AH), and the Treaty of Lausanne was signed. With the recognition of the new Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was chosen as the first president, and in four stages, the Ottoman Caliphate was abolished and, on its ruins, a secular government supported by the military was established. With the abolition of the Caliphate on March 3, 1924, the Sunni world fell into a complete identity crisis: on one hand, longing for its glorious past, and on the other, suffering from the domination of colonizers and dependent native elites. From the ashes of this empire, nation-states emerged, relying on artificially created colonial borders, and became

embroiled in new intellectual schools, which they perceived as ideological and intellectual enemies.

The foundation of Atatürk's government was the removal of Islam from the central signifier of the socio-political order in Muslim societies and the movement towards the West. With a bottom-up perspective, he confronted the concept of Western civilization and concluded that Muslim society needed to modernize and, by emulating the European miracle, achieve prosperity. In Atatürk's view, Islam was an obstacle to this process and had to be relegated to the margins. By removing Islam from its dominant position in Muslim societies, semi-modern nation-states emerged that were neither effective on the objective level nor legitimate on the subjective level. Their ineffectiveness on the objective plane can be observed in the Arab-Israeli wars and their struggles with communist and Ba'thist ideologies. On the subjective level, Muslim societies, which were still rediscovering themselves through the concept of "Ummah," could not establish a new political order based on concepts like the modern nation-state. They were more focused on reviving the Caliphate than on establishing structures based on the sovereignty of the nation-state.

Alongside the aforementioned challenges, the fabricated phenomenon of Israel in the heart of Islamic countries intensified feelings of weakness and identity crisis among Muslims, especially since this regime, in three consecutive wars, not only inflicted heavy defeats on Muslims but also occupied their territorial domains. In such circumstances, several key concerns occupied the minds of Islamic intellectuals: How can Islam be revived? How should the threat of European civilization be confronted? How can the bond between Muslim nations be strengthened? And how should Islamic unity (Pan-Islamism) be achieved? In response to these concerns and as a reaction to excessive internal decline and the all-encompassing onslaught of foreign colonialism, both successful and unsuccessful efforts were made in all corners of Islamic countries, from the Khilafat (Caliphate) Movement in India to the 1926 conference in Cairo, as well as the semi-caliphate claims of King Hussein of Jordan, the claim to the title of Amir al-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful) by King Hassan in Morocco, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (Khādim al-Ḥaramayn al-Sharīfayn) in Saudi Arabia, and the formation of Islamic parties and movements. These intellectual and practical endeavors can be categorized into three main groups: Islamic Salafism, Islamic intellectualism, and religious revivalism. These three share a common starting point: their concern is the way out of the state of decline for Muslim

societies and the return of Muslims to a period of glory and power. For them, "Islam" holds absolute authority, and returning to it is seen as the ultimate solution to overcome this situation. However, they do not share a unified understanding of the concept of "Islam."

Despite the shared starting and reference points of all three groups to Islam as the path to salvation, there are differences in the identity-forming methods of engaging with the texts, and consequently, their interpretations of Islam, which have made their theories and actions distinct from one another. The principles of the Salafis in preparing responses for shaping a new identity in Muslim societies will be explored further below.

Intellectual Foundations

1. The Nature of the Text (Scripture)

It has passed that Salafis (like intellectuals and Islamic revivalists) refer to the text or scripture as a liberating version from the current situation, and the text retains its authority and divine authenticity in their view. In their perspective, the Prophet is not within his earthly history; rather, he receives the message in a non-human history and conveys the exact same message to the world. Therefore, what he brought is of paramount importance both in terms of words and message. The text has a singular meaning that must be sought after. This meaning is perceptible within the words, and no specific form or method is required to understand it.

2. Method of Textual Interpretation

After accepting the authenticity or validity of the text, the issue of interpretation method becomes significant. While religious intellectuals, by critiquing traditional ijtihad and proposing theories like "Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿa" (the objectives of the Sharia), aim to interpret the text within the contemporary context, Islamic Salafis, by moving beyond the classical methods of the four Sunni schools, established an approach that focuses more on the words and the direct meanings of the text. Meanwhile, religious revivalists, while preserving the traditional method of ijtihad, emphasized making reforms to ensure its relevance and responsiveness, thus founding "dynamic jurisprudence."

In the view of religious revivalists, ijtihad is defined as a rule-based framework for formulating and presenting questions arising from the historical needs of the Muslim individual to religious texts and articulating them based on the needs of the time. Ijtihad, on one hand, interprets reality, and on the other, it interprets the text, thereby establishing a connection between the

text and reality. The ijtihad system, as a rule-producing mechanism, can be envisioned as follows:
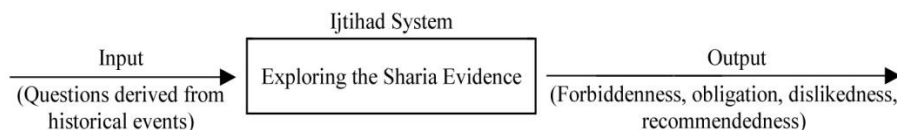

Figure 1. The Ijtihad System

In this regard, Salafis do not acknowledge the validity of historical questions. They view the fundamental problem of the Islamic world as the multiplicity and diversity of interpretations of the texts, and they believe the only way to end this division is by removing intermediaries in the understanding of the texts and inviting all Muslims to a direct understanding of the texts, without the mediation of jurists and commentators. This approach moves beyond the classical framework of referring to the text (referring to scholars and the jurisprudential system) and holds that each Muslim, no matter where they are in the world, can have an understanding of the religion. All of the text is clear and understandable, and its interpretation does not involve particular complexities. What is required of us is "following the text" (ittibāʿ al-naṣṣ); following the Quran and the Sunnah can have three meanings:

1) Referring to the Quran for recitation and gaining rewards;

2) Referring to the text and reflecting on verses related to the Day of Judgment and the fate of the pious and the polytheists;

3) Referring to the text to acquire the practical rulings of life.

In the view of the Salafis, the first two cases are praiseworthy and recommended. As for the third case, if it involves referring to an Imam or jurist for understanding, it is not desirable; because believers must strive to understand the text themselves and directly refer to the Quran and Sunnah. The concept of following the text means that a Muslim should not imitate anyone, but rather follow the text itself. All the objectives of Sharia are embedded in the words of the Quran, and understanding the Arabic language is sufficient for comprehending the text.

The lineage of this method can be traced in the works of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyyah, where both, claiming the purity and refinement of religion and the revival of the Islam of the Salaf, opposed the theologians, philosophers, and jurists. In al-Ghazālī's thought, reform and the salvation of humanity from vices and the attainment of virtues and perfections is achieved through revived sciences, not the superficial sciences commonly practiced among the jurists,

theologians, and philosophers. Sayyid Qutb believed that the real problems of Muslims arose when they resorted to the "interpretation" of the texts. He saw the solution to this issue in completely discarding all "dead intellectual debris" and was determined to acquire the Islamic ideology directly from the Quran (Sayyid Qutb, 2007, pp. 66-69). According to him, the generation of the companions was an exceptional and irreplaceable generation in history, for "the Prophet raised a generation with a pure heart, a pure intellect, a pure imagination, pure consciousness, and a pure constitution [uncontaminated] by anything other than the divine method, which the Quran guarantees" (Sayyid Qutb, 1994, p. 17). However, in subsequent generations, the sources became mixed. Greek philosophy, Greek logic, the myths and doctrines of the Persians, Jewish Israelite traditions, Christian theology, and other residues of different civilizations and cultures entered these springs. These, when mixed with the interpretation of the Quran, theology, jurisprudence, and its principles, resulted in the subsequent generations being influenced by a polluted source. Thus, that first generation was never repeated, and there is no doubt that this mixture in the original source is a fundamental cause of the apparent differences between all other generations and this distinguished and unique generation (Sayyid Qutb, 1994, p. 17). Sayyid Qutb believed:

> Islamic ideology will not be freed from corruption, deviation, and distortion, except when we cast aside everything that has been labeled as Islamic philosophy, all the debates in theology, and everything that has caused differences among the various Islamic sects over the centuries. Only then will we return to the Quran (Sayyid Qutb, 2015, p. 64).

Salafis consider the Muʿtazilite/rationalist movement as a continuation of the path of the philosophers, which was derived from Greek logic. They viewed rational and logical methods as new concepts that were not common during the time of the Companions and the Followers. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, rational arguments have no independent validity, and their role is only to confirm and acknowledge the content of religious texts and strengthen them (Abu Zahra, 1996, p. 529).

The above approach leads Salafis to a kind of literalism (or superficialism) in interpreting the text. They reduce the words and themes of Sharia to simple and lay concepts. On the one hand, they are committed to the meticulous implementation of what is stated in the Quran and Sunnah, and on the other, they oppose intellectual curiosity in understanding the text. Consequently, they settle for the superficial or literal meaning of the text.

Such an interpretation of the text closes the door to confronting new conditions and issues, and in the case of new problems for which there is no explicit ruling in the Quran and Sunnah, Salafis advocate for suspension (i.e., refraining from action). They emphasize the necessity of all areas of human life being governed by a ruling from the laws of Allah, meaning that an action can only be undertaken if a legal text explicitly indicates its obligation, recommendation, or permissibility. In this view, permissibility is considered a legal ruling alongside other rulings, and its determination requires legal evidence. There is no area free of legal rulings that would allow for an inherent permissibility ruling. In other words, actions and things are not inherently permissive, so in the absence of a text in the Quran and Sunnah, the ruling cannot be assumed to revert to permissibility. With this assumption, if a specific ruling on a matter cannot be found in the Quran and Sunnah, there is no justification for undertaking or prohibiting that action, and it is closer to correctness to suspend action. Therefore, the scope of prohibitions, whether due to harm or lack of evidence for an action, is broad. This contrasts with the Islamic revivalist movement, which gives primacy to the permissibility of things unless there is a specific prohibition based on evidence.

3. Concerns for Tradition

All Islamic movements, in their intellectual and practical processes, and in their efforts to reclaim identity and an ideal past, give special attention to tradition. It has been stated that Salafism should not be equated with traditionalism. Tradition, in its technical sense, refers to everything left by past generations for the future (whether material or spiritual). That is, everything that past generations have left behind in the intellectual and civilizational domain, including customs, practices, experiences, arts, and sciences (Suleiman, 1988, p. 16).

Religious intellectuals consider the critique of tradition a prerequisite for the real freedom of Muslims. In contrast, Salafis trace the decline of Islamic societies to their neglect of tradition. As Hashim Sharabi puts it, they "rationalize the decline" (Sharabi, 1989, pp. 51-50), viewing it not as destined or accidental but as the result of events and transformations that began with the end of the "golden age" of early Islam, which plagued the Islamic community. Therefore, they believe that the only way for Muslims to regain power and dominance is through a return to the Islam of the Salaf, and the "Righteous Predecessors" of Islam, free from any innovations introduced over the centuries. In this way, they believe Muslims can confront modernity and

stand on equal footing with it. According to Salafis, all of Islam exists in the Quran and Sunnah, and the practice of the Salaf is only considered a guide, not a legal source (Algar, 1983, p. 49). For this group, the return to tradition has the following dimensions:

1. Return to the Quran: An unembellished interpretation of it and contentment with the understanding of the early generations (salaf) in this regard. Salafists in this field vehemently reject any form of allegorical interpretation, deep reflection, or symbolic readings. As they explicitly state: "The Messenger of Allah and his companions (and the followers, may Allah have mercy on them, who were the righteous followers of the companions), all of them are the salaf of the ummah. Whoever invites towards what the Messenger of Allah and his righteous companions practiced, is on the methodology and approach of the righteous salaf. It is incumbent upon all Muslims to follow the Book and the pure Sunnah by referring to the righteous salaf, and that the Quran and Sunnah should be understood in accordance with the understanding of the righteous salaf. This is because the Righteous Predecessors are more entitled to be followed, as their faith was true and correct, their beliefs firm and steadfast, and their worship was sincere" (Arna'ut, 2016, pp. 9-8). Their precedence leads to the precedence of their merit.

2. Reliance on Tradition: This emphasizes the limitations of the text and its report of the divine message.

3. The Practice of the Salaf: In addition to the Rightly Guided (Rashidun) Caliphs, they also paid attention to the companions, their followers, and their successors. These successors even included the founders of the four schools of thought, their direct followers, and figures such as Ibn Taymiyyah. They largely accepted these sources as the expositors of the Sunnah and an important reference for understanding the overall meaning of Islam. They emphasize that "We should stand exactly where the righteous Salaf stood, because they stood on knowledge and were endowed with profound insight" (Arna'ut, 2016, p. 16).

4. The Reason Behind the Decline

Among the theories of most Islamic scholars over the past century, there are relatively detailed discussions on the reasons behind and the manner in which Islamic societies have declined. This topic is significant because, based on it, proposed solutions are presented and the path to the revival of the ideal past is outlined.

Islamic Salafists view the fragmentation of the Islamic community and the infiltration of innovations and deviations among Muslims over the centuries as factors contributing to this weakness and decline. This division is also seen as a result of the distancing of the Islamic community from the fundamental principles, traditions, and teachings of Islam. Therefore, calling for a return to the Quran and Sunnah, as the two essential sources on which "religion, society, and governance must be based," became central to their agenda.

5. Approach to Modernity

Since the new challenge for the Islamic world began with the material and intellectual onset of modernity, the way Salafism confronts this issue has provided a chapter for their identity formation. This issue, in the first stage, relates to their perception of modernity, and in the second stage, it concerns how they engage with or confront the modern world.

Salafists have a confused mentality towards modernity. They do not accept Western technology and new ideologies because they find no proof or validation for them within the tradition. According to their jurisprudential method, only those things are considered permissible for Muslims that are supported by a clear text from the Quran or the practice of the righteous Salaf. Since many of these matters are new and have no precedent in the past, they have naturally not been affirmed or rejected by any scriptural text; and because there is no evidence permitting their practice, they cannot be utilized. From their perspective, "the universality of Islam and a significant part of Tawhid [monotheism] necessitate opposition to any non-divine human, philosophical, or political system" (Sayyid Qutb, 1994, p. 117).

Salafists, by emphasizing tradition and rejecting the rational (philosophical) approach, avoid accepting interaction and borrowing from human knowledge. They view complete reliance on human teachings as a form of compromise with a world that, by separating religion from politics, has turned into a manifestation of satanic politics and modern ignorance. They believe the problem of the Islamic world lies not in a lack of development, but in a loss of identity, and for them, the concern for identity takes precedence over development. Muslim identity, in their view, is tied to adhering to authentic Islam and preventing the mixing of new elements with it. They consider Islam to be identical with civilization (al-Islām huwa al-ḥaḍāra) and believe that:

> The Islamic community, with its qualities, is the only civilized community, while the jahili (ignorant) societies, in all their various forms, are backward societies (Moradi, 2003).

Therefore, Salafists, while excommunicating and rejecting all Western knowledge and civilization, recommend jihad against it. They begin their theory on this subject with the explanation and concept of "Jahiliyya." This discourse was first theorized by Abul A'la Maududi (1979) in his book Islam and Jahiliyya. He presents Jahiliyya as a factor that has transformed Western civilization into a self-interested and worldly civilization, one in which God has no place. This has led to the erosion of human values in this society, where everyone is driven by their own interests and, in pursuit of them, is not deterred by any unethical or inhumane actions. The only thing that limits a person in this society are natural and social constraints; otherwise, the desires and cravings of the self serve as the guiding force for human behavior (Alizadeh Mousavi, 2015, pp. 144-154).

In Maududi's thought, there is no sign of disrespect for the sacred or other Islamic figures. This transformation is attributed to Sayyid Qutb, who used the concept of Jahiliyya in a broader sense. He considered Islamic societies, due to the lack of the sovereignty of Tawhid (monotheism), as an embodiment of Jahiliyya. His intended audience in establishing the sovereignty of Tawhid was not the West, but rather the rulers who governed Islamic countries. These rulers, due to their disregard for divine commandments, were regarded as tyrants (Ṭāghūt).

Thus, the theoretical foundations for the formation of jihadi Salafism were established. According to them, the way to change the status quo in favor of Muslims is through fighting and confronting modern Jahiliyya. They sought to mobilize warriors (jihadists) to change the status quo by reconstructing religious concepts such as Hijra, Jihad, Dar al-Kufr (the realm of unbelief), Dar al-Iman (the realm of belief), and so on. Since, according to their analysis, Islam has suffered more from internal division than from the disbelievers, they initially focused their efforts on unifying Islamic societies. In their view, the world is divided into two parts: Dar al-Iman (areas under Salafi rule) and Dar al-Kufr (other areas), and anyone who does not migrate to Dar al-Islam is not considered a Muslim. Naturally, they provide interpretations of texts that align with their beliefs, such as this narration attributed to the Prophet of Islam, who said: "Islam started as exiled and will return as exiled, so blessed are the exiled." When asked: "Who are the exiled?" He replied: "Those who are cut off from their tribes" (Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, 1995, p. 298).

According to this theory, the confrontation with the Jahiliyya society begins from within the society itself, and each individual loyal to the beliefs has the duty to strike at the society and its cultural, political, social, and economic

foundations with all their might to pave the way for its destruction. This includes, if necessary, creating insecurity and erosion in target countries, even if it means "striking a cross-bearer on the head with a stick" or "running over pedestrians with a car."[1] Jihadi Salafi groups see themselves as embodying this narration from the Prophet of Islam, who said: "I give you five commands that God has given to me: the community, assembly, obedience, migration, and jihad." The formation of the community is impossible without jihad, and jihad is the necessary tool to achieve their goals.

The connection between this ideology and the theory of direct individual return to the text leads to the recommendation by Salafists to their supporters: Migration for every Muslim is either physical or mental. If an individual is unable to migrate from one place to another where the obligation of jihad is aflame, they must engage in mental migration and, in the place where they live, establish an emirate based on the "individual – emirate" model, striving to continue the jihad in new lands. The principle of ittibāʿ al-naṣṣ (following the text) aids them in acting upon whatever they understand from the text.

6. Governance Model

The final axis of identity formation for Salafists goes back to the depiction of the desired society and government (including discussions about the model of Islamic governance and the objectives behind establishing a government, etc.). It can be claimed that the result and function of the previous discussions are reflected in this section.

Islamic Salafists organize their ideal society around the concept of the caliphate system. Regardless of the fact that the Salafi movement is internally divided into several groups, it can be said that the central concept that unites all of them is the "establishment of a new religious order," or the "Islamic Caliphate," which they consider a religious necessity. The only way for the advancement of Muslim societies is a return to the Islamic civilization of the age of the Righteous Salaf, an era in which the caliph held supreme authority over both the religion and worldly affairs of the people and had managed to use the caliphate as a tool for implementing Sharia. The call to return to the model of the caliphate began immediately after the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924. In the final days of the Ottoman caliphate, Arab nationalists welcomed its weakening and intensified their efforts to restore the caliphate to the Arabs.

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1. Abu Bakr al-Naji elaborates on this strategy in his book *Idārat al-Tawaḥḥush* (The Management of Savagery) (Naji, n.d.).

The first attempt in this direction was the declaration of the caliphate by Sharif Hussein of Mecca in March 1924, which was only accepted by representatives from Iraq, Hejaz, and eastern Jordan. However, Muslims in India and Egypt rejected him, considering him an agent of the British.

At that time, Rashid Rida, a direct disciple of Abduh, published his important treatise on the caliphate, al-Khilāfah aw al-Imāma al-'Uẓmā (Caliphate or Supreme Imamate). According to the report by the late Inayat from this book, three stages can be observed in Rashid Rida's intellectual efforts (Enayat, 1983, pp. 101-79):

✦ First, he traces the foundations of the caliphate in Islamic political theory;

✦ Then, he presents the gap between this theory and the political practice of Sunni Muslims;

✦ Finally, he puts forward his own opinion on what an Islamic state should be like.

In the first stage, Rashid Rida provides a brief explanation to familiarize readers with the classical theory of the caliphate, aimed at proving its obligation based on Sharia. In this section, he primarily relies on the hadiths of the Prophet and consensus, rather than the Quran. Through extensive quotations from al-Māwardī, al-Ghazālī, and Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, he seeks to convey the idea that the classical theory of the caliphate set such high standards for the proper governance of society that any institution (in practice) known by this name among Muslims must be undoubtedly rejected as a tremendous deviation. He divides the actual caliphate into al-Imāma al-Ḍarūrīya (necessary imamate) and al-Tanāsub bi-l-Quwwa (imposition by force), asserting that the former is permissible in cases where all the conditions of the caliphate, especially justice, competence, and proper lineage, were not found in one person. Consequently, the electors had to choose a candidate who possessed most of these qualities, and the potential fit could only be established by force.

Rashid Rida considers the tolerance of these regimes a temporary solution, which in no way exempts believers from the obligation of striving to establish the correct caliphate.

The second stage of Rashid Rida's efforts involves evaluating several practical problems that prevent the re-establishment of the caliphate. In this section, he addresses issues such as finding a righteous person to assume the caliphate over all Muslims, identifying an appropriate city for the center of the caliphate, and so on. He acknowledges that the imam can only assume the caliphate of all Muslims if the people of Hejaz, Tihama, and Najd are willing

to pledge allegiance to him, and that the imam must also adhere to the laws of ijtihad, granting all Muslim groups permission to perform their specific rites. Regarding the location of the caliphate, he deems Hejaz and Istanbul unsuitable for its revival and proposes that the caliphate be established in an "intermediate region" between the Arabian Peninsula and Anatolia, where Arabs, Turks, and Kurds live together, such as Mosul. Mosul, which literally means "the place of connection," becomes a symbol of spiritual unity in Rashid Rida's vision and forms a geographical boundary.

The metaphor of the "spiritual link" is Rashid Rida's dream for the revival of the caliphate or the establishment of an Islamic state. His emphasis on the virtues of independent knowledge (al-ʿilm al-istaqlālī) or ijtihad and other related judicial capabilities, which encompass nearly all aspects related to the future institution of the caliphate, indicates the priority of this condition and the marginalization of other conditions (such as competence, courage, etc.). The proposed administrative positions for the caliphate also had a consultative and supervisory nature.

In the third stage, Rashid Rida shifts from the issue of the caliphate to the topic of the Islamic state. Although this may seem contradictory at first glance, in the face of the ideal government and the peak of decline and disintegration of Islamic countries, Rashid Rida addresses the discussion of "al-dawlah" (the state) or "al-ḥukūma al-islāmiyya" (the Islamic government). However, he does not provide a clear definition of the state until the end of his book "al-Khilāfa aw al-Imāma al-ʿUẓmā" (The Caliphate or the Supreme Imamate) and implicitly considers it synonymous with the khilāfah, sometimes using compound terms such as "al-Khilāfa al-Islāmiyya" (Islamic Caliphate) or "ḥukūmat al-Khilāfa" (the government of the Caliphate). In this stage, he also mentions new functions and founding institutions, such as legislation or propaganda. Rashid Rida briefly discusses the principle of popular sovereignty and the possibility of enacting laws by the people.

Despite the above theoretical efforts, for a long time, the theory of the caliphate was referred to as a "displaced ideal," which seemed difficult to attain, until the jihadist Salafis/neo-Salafists first established a "virtual caliphate" on the internet between 2007 and 2013, and then declared the beginning of their caliphate in Mosul.[1] The executive mechanisms of this

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1. Neo-Salafis have different approaches in their agenda for achieving power/caliphate. ISIS and al-Qaeda use a jihadist method, targeting all of their enemies to inflict harm and create fear. However, others, such as al-Tahrir Party, have outlined three stages for the establishment of the Islamic caliphate: 1) the formation and establishment of the core of the call (in which the

system were based on utilizing the practices of the Salaf in governance, and on concepts such as minting coins and delivering sermons in the name of the caliph. The legitimacy of the ruler was derived from the ahl al-ḥall wa-l-ʿaqd (those qualified to make binding decisions), and all positions (amir, wali, etc.) were considered religious. All executive and judicial laws were based on Sharia and the Quran, and religion, rather than nationality, was the basis for citizenship. Therefore, concepts like citizenship have no meaning in this theory; instead, individuals are identified by their Muslim (or non-Muslim) status.

Challenges of Salafism

In this article, aside from the sub-discourses within the Salafi movement and their developments, an effort was made to examine the intellectual foundations of their thought. Salafis place the central signifier of their discourse on "the Islam of the Salaf (early generations)" and consider the return to and practice of this Islam by Muslims as the way out of the state of decline and isolation of Islamic societies. Based on this focal point, other elements and concepts (such as ijtihad, progress, types of government, etc.) are positioned in a chain of equivalence. On the other hand, concepts such as philosophy, Sufism, maṣlaha (public interest), taʾwīl (interpretation), modernity, modern science, Western civilization and culture, and nationalism are rejected within this discourse.

Since the formation of discourse is not possible without the process of "othering," Salafism seeks to define its own boundaries of identity by introducing the "Other." From this point, its challenge with other Islamic approaches, especially political Islam as interpreted by the Islamic Republic, begins to grow. In competition with others, the Salafis aim to separate certain concepts from their thought and present them in a new form within their own discourse. For instance, the Salafis borrow the concept of "tazkiya" (purification) from Islamic literature, viewing it as "the purification of the Islamic community," which is achieved through adherence to Sharia and the establishment of a government that upholds Sharia. The "Sharia" in question is not the one found in the four Sunni schools, but rather refers to what is directly mentioned in the Qur'an and Hadith and can be understood by direct reference to them. In this way, the first theoretical challenge of the Salafis lies in the

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recruitment of believers who adhere to the party's ideology takes place); 2) the stage of calling the Ummah to Islam and spreading Islamic rulings across all aspects of human life; 3) the formation of the Islamic caliphate and the propagation of Islam's global message.

appropriation of high Islamic concepts. They have provided interpretations of jihad, enjoining good and forbidding evil, Islamic government, martyrdom in the path of God, the conduct of the Prophet, etc., which have made it difficult for other Islamic discourses to interpret and adapt these concepts in a contemporary context.

The second challenge relates to the negative functions of the logic of understanding religion within Salafism. The departure from the formal and specialized system of religious interpretation and the referral of religious understanding to common, everyday perceptions has created a space for multiple, contradictory interpretations among Salafis. Given the pragmatic nature of this movement, especially in its jihadist approach and its tendency to label or excommunicate (takfīr) any differing thought as "other," Salafism always carries a latent potential for social-political collapse and even overt violence.

The third challenge arises from the "one-dimensional" and "self-righteous" thinking of the Salafis. Over the past century, Salafism has not remained merely an intellectual and missionary movement; it has sought to implement its principles in society through jihad. This occurred at a time when models of Islamic governance were already being realized in some Middle Eastern countries. Declaring these governments as un-Islamic and considering only themselves worthy of the title "Islamic government" not only failed to lead to Muslim power and prestige against the West, but it also diminished their cohesion.

The division of the world into Dar al-Kufr (the realm of unbelief) and Dar al-Islam (the realm of Islam), and the transformation of the concept of Dar al-Kufr into Dar al-Harb (the realm of war), on one hand, and the extension of these concepts from a governance level to individual perceptions and duties of every single Muslim, on the other hand, placed Salafi followers in a state of conflict with anyone who does not think like them. This situation severely reduced the possibility of peaceful coexistence for Muslims and provided the necessary pretext for Islamophobia. After this, the presence and actions of Muslims and Islamic states around the world faced serious challenges.

The final serious challenge of Salafism is the portrayal of a distorted and unrealistic image of Islam in the eyes of the public. While the Salafi movement, at its most optimistic, is only one of the active movements within Islamic societies, and there are other powerful movements, such as religious revivalism and Islamic intellectualists, which present more contemporary and rational interpretations of religion, the noise created by the Salafis is louder

than others. Most non-Muslims come to know Islam through the lens of Salafi ideas and actions, which has led to the marginalization of more rational readings of the religion. Equating all Muslims with the image of Salafi behavior and thought is a mistake stemming from a lack of proper understanding of Islamic movements. While the intellectual foundations and positions of religious revivalists and Islamic reformists provide a broad basis for interaction with modernity and peaceful coexistence for Muslims, reducing Muslims to a small group with specific views of Islam does not seem accurate.

Conclusion

It seems that the Salafi movement, especially in its jihadist interpretation, has distanced itself from its original starting point and objectives. Today, rather than being viewed as a religious-intellectual movement, it has transformed into a political group. Despite its numerical minority, it has made a significant noise, and with the amplification of their actions by some media outlets, the process of Islamophobia has been set in motion. This article aims to highlight that, while examining the origins of the three movements—Salafism, religious revivalism, and Islamic intellectualism—and listing the intellectual foundations of Salafism, it should be emphasized that Salafism is only one of the interpretations within the Muslim world. Despite its small number of supporters and serious weaknesses in its interpretation of religious texts, it has generated considerable attention. Meanwhile, rationalist Islamic movements, organized within the frameworks of religious revivalism and Islamic intellectualism, which include a wide range of elites and members of Islamic societies, are less visible in the global perception of Islam.

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