

# **The Elevation of Salafi Thought into an Ideology**

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## Preview

Many cultures throughout history have contributed to the development of philosophy and knowledge, which has enriched human thought by promoting coexistence and dialogue between cultures, and many researchers have devoted themselves to the study of comparative cultures. Indeed, culture is a key element in shaping identity and the best way to know about the members of a culture is to learn about the culture itself. Culture has overlapped with religion, and religion in turn has become part of culture to the extent that it has become identified or even confused with it.

Despite the fact that there are many communities in any given society, the division of societies into a majority that is eager to dominate and an apprehensive, oppressed minority has kept human societies divided culturally and religiously, separated for a long time by barriers of language, geography, race, fear, and sometimes hatred.

However direct contact between populations, increasingly widespread since the beginning of last century, has meant that knowledge of other cultures, once the domain only of those who wanted to acquire it, has become a necessity. The other has become very close; barriers have started to collapse. The other has become a tourist you might encounter, an immigrant who might live near you, a merchant you buy from, a colleague you study with, or work with, or a neighbor with whom you share facilities in your block. You must know who you are dealing with, and the limits set by their culture.

One person might look on certain issues as simple from their cultural prospective, but another might view these same issues as sensitive and critical, so dealing with them lightly will cause hostility, which we as a society can do without.

If we accept that religions and philosophies in general have all called for the same human values, we inevitably come to an understanding that the differences and disputes between their followers are because of a misunderstanding of their own beliefs, a perversion of the basis and purpose of those beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

We can infer this by showing the disputes that divided the world into East and West, between the monotheistic religions Islam, Christianity and Judaism and other non monotheistic religions,<sup>2</sup> have known no limits.

In fact, among these religions we can now find numerous groups that disagree among each other and regard their co-religionists with hostility, often with more hostility than they regard others.

In this context, we will try to identify Islamic Salafism. We have divided the following study into five sections and a conclusion, as follows:

## Chapter one: Defining Salafism:

### I. What is Salafism?

In Arabic *Salaf* carries a prior meaning, our Salaf are those who came before us, our fathers and grandfathers. The opposite of this word is *khalaf*, those who come after us, that is our children and grandchildren. We are salaf for our khalaf and khalaf for our salaf.

The concept, however, has developed over time and it now refers to a group of people with their own particular ideas and a particular program. This new concept did not come into existence fully formed, but rather gradually developed as an idea. The views adopted by any group over the passage of time form its malleable identity.

It is not easy to determine in exactly which period these changes happened. It is easier to link the changes to individuals whose entry in that group marked a significant change and gave it a new direction. Through the writings of these individuals, or from the events in their lives, we can find indicators of those changes. The different names that have been given to this group over the years permit a better understanding of the ideas that dominated each period of the group's existence.

Let us shed light on a number of ideas and situations that form the common denominator of what have been called Salafist ideas, and can consequently be considered as a definition:

1. Following the Quran and Sunna (the collections of the speech and deeds of Prophet Mohamad - PBUH) rather than clerics.
2. Accepting the obvious meaning of the Verses of the Quran and Hadith and rejecting interpretations or inferred meanings.
3. Following the Salaf and refusing all later innovations added to the original religion.
4. Dogmatism and absolute certainty in thinking, as they consider their views to be absolute truth, and those who hold different opinions as refusing the obvious truth of religious scripture.
5. Refusing to seek blessings from the prophets and the righteous after their death, considering this to be a type of polytheism and idolatry.
6. A stress on the outward manifestations of worship and the Sunna, from long loose-fitting black robes for women, short flowing white robes and long beards for men, and carrying sticks for cleaning teeth.

## II. How did Salafism get its name?

The meaning of the term Salaf has changed over history. First, it was used linguistically to refer to the first generation of Muslims who believed in Prophet Mohamad (PBUH), but later the meaning expanded to cover the two generations after the Prophet.

When Islamic ideas became more diverse, the group of scholars who lent towards the textual school of interpretation and affiliated themselves with the Salaf were known variously as Salafis, *muhaddithoun* or *ahl al-hadith* (the narrators of the Prophet's hadith) and *alathariyoun* (those who follow what has been inherited from the prophet and his companions). Among them, the Salafis have tried to gain legitimacy and promote their project by reiterating that they follow closely the teachings of prophet's hadiths and those of his companions, the good Salaf. Consequently, they were known by these names and embraced them.

The strict way Salafis deal with Quranic verses and the Hadith (the collected sayings of the Prophet), their persistence in rejecting any interpretation of the Quran and they regard anyone who compares the Creator to what has been created as their enemy and call them *al-Hashawiyah* and *al-Mushabbiha*.

*Al-Taymiyah, Wahhabis, and Najdis.* Among the scholars of this school is Ibn Taymiyah, whose followers took the name of al-Taymiyah, and Mohamad Ibn Abdulwahab, who gave his name to his followers. Najd is the province in Saudi Arabia where the school flourished and after which the Najdis are named.

## Chapter Two: Modern Salafism

### I. Salafism after Abdulwahab

Salafism after Mohamad Ibn Abdulwahab, changed dramatically. Salafi teachings had been limited in the Muslim world. Its enemies were the clerics in official positions in the judiciary, education and as Imams and prayer leaders, most people in Muslim countries were Sufi. However, when the Al-Saud family<sup>4</sup> adopted Salafi doctrine, it became the official doctrine of a kingdom floating on a sea of oil. The state used clerics and its financial resources to spread Salafism. Institutions were established for this purpose, preachers were recruited and an mutually beneficial relationship between the kingdom and the Salafi doctrine was created such that Saudi Arabia and Salafism became inseparably linked.

In contrast, the influence of the opponents of Salafism retreated with the advance of Secularism in Modern Turkey after the Ottoman Empire, which naturally limited the clerics' role and authority.

Still, we cannot claim all Salafis today agree or think along the same lines. Their condemnation of following the interpretations of a trusted source of Islamic interpretation (Fiqh) and their view on jurisprudence (ijtihad) played a role in weakening a unified doctrine among them. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that if it were not for the link between Saudi Arabia and Salafism, Salafis might have been divided into different schools without any recognised common religious authority. The differences that exist between Salafi sheikhs today are certainly much smaller than the differences that would have existed without Salafism's ties to Saudi Arabia.

It is remarkable that small differences about minor scholastic issues such as how to place the hands during the prayers quickly became a fiery argument in which sheikhs hurled accusations and abuse, stigmatising each other as ignorant and mislead.

The reason behind is is the dogmatism with which they treat the religious texts, which leads them to believe that whoever opposes their views is in fact contesting God's texts or the Hadith of Prophet Mohammed (PUBH). But there are also other factors, which psychologists might attribute to the desire to be recognised as superior, and which sociologists might attribute to the competition for benefits and power, especially because of the close ties between Salafism and the Saudi regime.

## **II. Schools of Modern Salafi Thought:**

At present, Salafi thought can be divided into three major schools:

### **1. Scientific Salafism:**

Its two major wings are the Najdi wing (this refers to Najd, a province in Saudi Arabia), which forms its stronghold, and the general wing, which emerged outside the kingdom. The Najdi wing is supported by the Saudi state. It is in continuous disagreement with other interpretations, and resembles the second phase of Salafism, which adopted an aggressive discourse against its ideological opponents. Most of the leaders of this wing are located in Najd, which gives this trend a prominent regional geopolitical dimension. The other wing of Scientific Salafism exists mostly outside Saudi Arabia. It does not adopt the same aggressive discourse towards those who do not agree with it, and looks largely like Salafism in its first phase, which rejected the interpretation of texts and Greek philosophy as an element foreign to Islamic culture. This school is characterized by calmness and decency and has good relations with the clerical school, even though it opposes it. It has also a peaceful relationship with the Sufi School, gently criticizing it, though it does not consider Sufis nonbelievers. The scholars of this school studied in Salafi schools, but their cultural roots go back to other clerics and Sufi schools, which meant they did not seek to undermine those schools and engage with them politely.<sup>6</sup>

### **2. Dynamic Salafism:**

This is a movement that as a principle rejects any interpretation of the doctrine, and most of its adherents belong to the Hanbali School of jurisprudence, strongly influenced by Ibn Taymiya.<sup>7</sup> It is also very close to the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Saudis are

not comfortable with even though the differences between them are not great. However despite this, the Saudi authorities do sanction the Brotherhood's efforts outside Saudi Arabia.

### 3. Jihadi Salafism:

The Salafist movement has supported Islamic causes as part of its media strategy. It has issued calls that have elicited widespread popular support, though these calls have also caused people to ask what could have been done to further these Islamic causes. The Afghan War with the Soviet Union meant the United States gave the green light to Jihadi Salafism. Many Muslims came together to fight the Russian bear, and arms brought together what ideas had divided. Salafis from the Gulf known as "the Arab mujahideen," among them Abdallah Azzam and Bin Laden, allied with the Afghan people from different Islamic schools: Hanafis, Sufis, Shi'a. Before long, the Russian bear was defeated, and the allies began to argue as though they had been waiting for that moment to fall on one another, quarrelling over power.

The struggle for power was soon reflected in ideological differences, which until then had not created significant misunderstanding. Contrary to the Arab saying "differences in views will not change good relations," in Afghanistan it did.

Jihadi Salafism is a natural development of Salafi thought. Two things clearly explain this. First, the way jihadi Salafi movements built upon the old Salafi schools; second, since it was established, the Salafi School relied on violence as a means of advancing their ideology and discrediting their opponents' ideologies. This can be clearly seen in the fatwas of Ibn Taymiyyah and Mohamad Ibn Abdulwahab, as well as in the discourse of the Salafi movements today and their adherence to the doctrines of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Abdulwahab.

Saudi political support for this Salafi discourse cannot continue as it is at present, despite the support and the praise lavished upon it. The pressing question now is whether it is time the intimate relationship between the Saudi state and Wahhabism should come to an end, or whether Saudi Arabia has decided to embrace only one strand of Salafi Islam while discarding or even suppressing the others, particularly after Salafists returned from Afghanistan. Still, there are yet other questions: has Salafism become too big for Saudi politics to contain? Is the Salafi current more ambitious than the position within the Saudi state it has been allocated?

## **Chapter Three: The diffusion of the Salafi thought and the Position of scholars on Salafism**

### **1. The spread of Salafi thought**

There have been times when Salafi thought spread and other times when it receded. I propose it has gained from the crises that affected Muslim societies and withered during eras of stability. For example, Salafism flourished from the mid-second century on the Islamic calendar (about 8th century CE) until the end of the fifth century on the Islamic calendar (about 13th

century CE). It then shrunk for about a hundred years before flourishing again until the mid-eighth century (about 14th century CE). From the mid-eighth century until the twelfth (about 18th century CE), Salafism dried-up, only to enjoy a resurgence with Shokani<sup>9</sup> and later Mohamad Abdulwahab.

Before Abdulwahab, the call for Salafism was based on individual efforts, mobilising a number of supporters and followers who found Salafism suited their character and way of thinking. Some people look for ideas within themselves; others try to find themselves in the ideas of others.

The spread of Wahhabism remained relatively, and understandably, modest. The increased influence at certain times was connected with political, social and scientific retreat. When these factors disappeared, the appeal of Salafism immediately faded.

Ibn Taymiyyah managed to transform the scattered thought of Salafism into an ideology; however, this did not help diffuse Salafism as a dominant doctrine.

Only after Abdulwahab made it into a movement did the language of the sword and domination triumph, sweeping aside dialogue and discussion. The spread of Salafi thought was hardest in Najd and Hijaz because of the number of victims killed and the long wars fought from the establishment <sup>10</sup> of the Saudi Kingdom until the present.

At this stage, we need to differentiate between scientific Salafism, an ideological doctrine that does not require its followers to engage in any violent activities or take any risks, and Jihadi Salafism, which is more like semi-military organizations whose followers expose themselves to serious risks that may include the loss of their lives.

Scientific Salafism spread outside Saudi Arabia after the oil windfall, which was used to recruit preachers and pay money to spread the Salafi message - books were printed and distributed for free, alms were paid to the poor. It is natural for people to love those who are good to them, to imitate without thinking those more powerful than they are, and in our age money is the most important source of power.

The Kingdom also received vast numbers of students who came to study Islam in Saudi universities, offering them Scholarships, post-graduate funding and other facilities. On returning to their countries, those graduates became ambassadors for Salafi thought to their respective countries, where many established religious institutions and colleges to spread Wahhabi thought. Other ideologies, which were not supported by a wealthy state or other institution, did not hold the same appeal, and this helped Wahhabi missionaries in their work.

A good example is what King Faisal Bin Abdulaziz did when he wanted to crown himself as the King of Muslims to counter the rising status of Gamal Abdul Nasser among Arabs and Muslims in general. King Faisal used the issue of al-Quds (Jerusalem) and the Aqsa Mosque and made them into a rallying cause for the Arab and Muslim nations. Faisal also called for an Islamic league as a rival to the Arab nationalist association Nasser led, which was seen as a threat to Saudi and American interests in the region. The result was the Muslim World League (MWL<sup>11</sup>),



established after a series of conferences on Jerusalem. The MWL soon revealed its true identity and mission, and uncovered the true goals and ambitions behind its establishment.

However, the League was not the only institution established to further Saudi religious political aims. The world has had enough of institutions that foster Salafi thought, in which the al-Shaikh family – the decedents of Mohamad Bin Abdulwahab – are the ideological partners of the Saudi royal family. The al-Sheikhs are allocated personal salaries and other payments to assist them in spreading Salafi doctrine, which unfortunately are not effectively supervised and so it is left to the individuals to spend them any way they like, in whichever way suits their fancy.<sup>12</sup>

Saudi Arabia defused the crisis of a frustrated, affluent and pious young generation disenchanted with the official political stance of its government and all other Arab and Muslim governments. The Saudi state cleverly managed to direct the activities of these young men against what they saw as injustice and repression of Muslims, but outside Saudi Arabia. Thus, Saudi Arabia exported its internal problems, packaged into "solutions" for others. These young Muslim activists mobilized a number of their poor coreligionists, inside and outside the kingdom and employed them as fuel for extremism.<sup>13</sup>

Jihadi Salafism benefited from the spread of all forms of Salafi thought, especially as Salafi thought generally criticises scholars who disagree with it and discourages the public from following an established teacher. This means individuals targeted by Salafi preaching face it alone. They do not trust scholars in their countries anymore, even if they were previously followed them. This is an ideal situation for the spread of the new doctrine. Many of the sons of famous Sufi leaders or other doctrines' scholars who studied in Saudi Arabia returned home with different views, and some even became hostile to their parents.

The transmission of ideas is usually affected by the context in which they are established and spread, either positively or negatively, individuals who adopt a certain ideology have the right to use all their capabilities to serve that ideology. However, it remains weird that anyone can adopt a thought that pushes them to attack other humans and exposes them to risks.

Humans, by nature, are social animals. They interact with their surroundings to achieve common interests. Human societies have long witnessed this process of cooperation and coordination. Nevertheless, human history is full of unpleasantness, one man antagonizes another, fights with him, even kills him, and justifies this by saying that the other is competing with him for authority. This is one thing, but to base an entire ideology on hostility and hurting others is something else altogether, and difficult to understand. If it does happen, it will only be within a narrow circle of criminals and sadists, who will be rejected by society.

Most philosophies and ideological currents have called for moral values that serve and enhance human existence. Some of them have deviated to perform an opposite role, and turned into murderous groups that justified their hostility towards others, accusing them of being hostile, thereby creating an endless, vicious circle.

In a world full of conflicts, injustice and inequality, it is easy to employ ideas like human values, justice, combating injustice and feelings of injustice to stir up feelings of hatred, envy, and abhorrence toward others perceived to be the cause of this injustice.

When humans are convinced they are being treated unfairly, that they are fighting for the oppressed, and that the means they have at hand will not work, they might overturn normal values and standards. Thus, fighting customs and traditions becomes praiseworthy in the eyes of extremists, as does robbing the rich and the <sup>14</sup>oppressive state and distributing money among the poor, the way Robin Hood did.<sup>15</sup> A person who detonates car bombs to kill the occupiers – even if these people are women, the elderly or children – becomes a hero, a martyr; blowing up civilians in their own countries becomes revenge on their arrogant government - legitimate, even praiseworthy. The result, then, is to counter harm with harm and increase the vicious circle of pain, death, injustice, hatred and loathing.

All violent religious groups have one common point of departure: the mistakes of society. Their game is to justify their mistakes by reference to other mistakes. Any attempt to stop the violent currents must start by taking this weapon from them. In return, any solution the authorities try to impose based on repression will only enhance the strength of these groups and increase people's sympathy for them.

In the Arab and Muslim world, the authorities' mistakes have increased to the extent that people sympathize with any ideology the authorities oppose and attempt to suppress. In addition, the international community's mistakes have increased, especially the United States, as it has adopted double standards towards basic values such as justice and equality. These states emphasize the importance of these values inside their own borders, but when it comes to the third world they ally with the symbols of oppression and corruption. Many people in the East have the profound conviction that the West is the enemy of the people and the supporter of tyranny. Violent currents have manipulated this conviction to avoid the necessity of constructing an ideology with broad appeal, and they win public sympathy by confronting the West and local authorities. The fact that the public have experienced and suffered from the oppression of the authorities only made it easier for radical groups to expand. This has been compounded by those ready to fund these groups and arm them, enabling them to set off on their journey of revenge. Unfortunately, their education and knowledge will mean they are not able to contain their violent tendencies before they hurt others.

This explains why the violent thought spreads easily in the poor and oppressed societies, or in communities that do not have real knowledge of Islam, whether they were original Muslims or new converts in Europe and elsewhere. In fact, these Muslims do not know much about Islam other than what radical groups teach them. They cannot be taken out of the circle of violence except by making them understand the correct teachings of Islam, which are far removed from the resort to violence. The latter focuses on certain points in the peripheral culture of Islam, employing them as it sees fit, and ignoring all other points and issues.

This imposes a huge responsibility on the West, if it wants really to combat violence and further the principles of humanity. The authorities in the East are repressive; repression produces extremism, and extremism produces violence. The West has dealt with the situation in the East with shortsighted pragmatism: it sided the strong and ignored the weak. None were far-sighted enough to deal with the problem of extremism, but left this mission to those obsessed with the thought of their own supremacy, who did not seem to realize their approach would only fuel the fire. Ideas can only be confronted with ideas. If the far-sighted people in the East and West fail to mobilize their efforts to deal with this problem, the extremists on both sides will continue to complicate this problem.

## II. The position of contemporary scholars on Salafism

Salafism split into schools, as did other Islamic currents. The position of the scholars on Salafist thought was based on these divisions. The Jurisprudence school criticised and warned against Salafi thought, because of what they saw as a misrepresentation of Islamic jurisprudence, but also in retaliation to Salafi scholars' continuing attacks on them.

The conflict with the *al-Kalam* (discourse) School, was stronger and more ferocious. The scholars of *Kalam* considered the Salafi School to be based on the idea of *Tashbih* (analogy or comparison), which would leave the movement outside of the orthodox mainstream and open to charges of heresy. In return, Salafism considers the al-Kalam School's interpretations of the Quran and Hadith invalid. These differences resulted in disputes and conflict that unfortunately was not restricted to paper.

The Salafi movement persisted in its hostility to the Sufi School, attacking its symbols and leaders, describing them as innovators, heretics, and apostates. Sufis would not go into the same detail in their criticism of Salafis, only defending their symbols and employing the arguments of the Kalam School against Salafis. It is difficult for Sufis to engage in a discussion about the differences between Sufism and Salafism, as Sufism is profoundly enriched with symbolism while Salafism just floats on the lexical surface.<sup>16</sup> It is very difficult, therefore, to initiate a dialogue between these two ways of thinking. To do so one needs first to expend a considerable effort to define the concepts and unify the terminology.

Salafists harshly attacked the Shi'a school's doctrines, accusing them of interpreting the Quran and Islam esoterically. This schism has widened dramatically, with Shi'a criticised for all aspects of their life: ideological, religious, social and political. Naturally, Shi'a scholars countered, employing the same rhetoric. The dispute between the two groups was extremely heated, both parties using all available arguments against the other, generalizing mistakes, distorting texts and attacking each other on a personal level.

Most of these disputes between Salafis and others were monologues rather than serious dialogues. The Salafis have a strong, well-organized media presence, while their opponents, not supported by states or institutions, could raise only isolated voices against them. The Islamic world lacks cultured, well-versed scholars. Indeed, why would a scholar face an ideology

supported by a state, when all the other Islamic currents lack similar support? In the absence of a political and religious authority, who can tell who is a scholar and who is a pretender, who espouses opinions properly grounded in Islamic science? The views of both scholars and pretenders will be taken seriously.

The success and spread of any idea does not depend on how coherent it is and how sound its proofs are so much as it relies on the efforts of its followers to spread it and get people to follow it. This is why there is a dialectical relationship between any idea, the way it is disseminated and, indeed, protected. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, its Salafist opponents lost their protector: they lost the political cover that allowed them to speak about their views freely, the financial support which enabled them able to devote their time to their theoretical work and research, and respond to criticism, and of course, the military power that shielded them from any harm their opponents could do them.

When Salafi thought found a supporter and protector in Saudi Arabia with all its capacity and resources, other Sunni schools, whether Sufi or Jurisprudence, found themselves orphaned and alienated. The regimes that divided the Ottoman heritage among themselves could not have cared less about disagreements among the Islamic schools and did not choose to support one against the others. However, when they had a direct interest or saw an immediate benefit, they would interfere to their advantage. These regimes often played schools against each other to contain any that became too strong or influential.

In all cases, not only did the Sufi and Jurisprudence schools remain without a political umbrella to protect them, but the authorities also suppressed them. This led to deterioration in the discourse of both schools, and the number of scholars and students declined. As a result, these schools lost their ability to communicate with various layers of society. The inevitable result was that the piecemeal efforts of the few individual scholars were ineffective and could not effectively counter an institutional effort supported by a rich state. These one-sided debates were not able to deal with the Salafi question in any depth.

These disputes have failed to deal adequately with Salafism in its social and political context. No wonder, as the majority of the individuals who engaged in these disputes were religious scholars and approached Salafism from a religious perspective. To effectively engage with Salafist thought would require experts in sociology and politics, with the assistance of clerics. I can shed light on some of the social dimensions of this issue. I can shed light on some of these points in Salafi thought, which is a danger to society:

1- An insistence on belittling theology and scholars of theology, except for Salafi scholars. An excessiveness in belittling the significance of scholarship and scholars with the exception of Salafi scholars.

2- Assassination of religious and social symbols. They are more skilled in this practise than the dictators who through assassinating symbols, also kill the reasons people come together.

3- Lack of respect for other people's experience and opinions.

## Chapter Four: In Politics

### I. Salafi thought and its political agenda

The alliance between Mohammad Abdulwahab and Mohammad Bin Saud in 1744 was a landmark in religious thought. It shifted the emphasis toward politics and gave the Wahhabi movement its geopolitical dimension. Early last century, Abdulaziz Al Saud's determination to expand his authority limited his political connections to the regional power, Great Britain, which armed him. He militarized his call to dominate the areas of Najd, Hael, and the Hijaz.

To achieve this, he used both ethnic and religious ideologies. His starting point was the identity of his opponent, the Ottoman empire, which ruled the Arabs; he wanted Arabs to rule themselves. He considered the Ottoman state as a unIslamic state as he believed it had abandoned Islamic teachings in its culture and attitudes, insisted on strange habits, and violated orthodox religious teachings. Hence, his call was to unite the tribes to drive away the occupying forces and force the non-believers out of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>17</sup>

The collapse of the Ottoman state meant increased influence from the West, including Abdulaziz's allies the British, which was an embarrassment to his ideology. Furthermore, a new Islamic ideology emerged at that time, represented by Muslim Brotherhood, which had sympathized with the Ottoman state in theory and publicly opposed Western influence in the region. There was no fundamental ideological differences between it and the masses, unlike Salafism. This helped the Muslim Brotherhood play a bigger role as a political movement, and pushed Wahhabism into a subordinate role, though the Saudi state's efforts to prevent the masses engaging with political issues after it secured its rule over the Hejaz also played a role in this.

One does not need to be a specialist in political science to realize the political programs the Muslim Brothers and most other Islamic movements followed were not successful, mixing policy with rhetoric and allusions to the utopia they seek.

It is enough to review the religious rhetoric these movements developed to see the new terminology added to the lexicon of politics, such as "milestones,"<sup>18</sup> "the separation of wrong from right," "alienation from society," "converted societies," "loyalty and renunciation," "the infidel state", and "excommunication and exodus." Such terminology increased the gap between members of society and made reaching a mutual understanding a more difficult process. It is evident that this is an anti-political approach.<sup>19</sup>

Those who claim to be 'Islamist ideologues' inherited this terminology and its use persisted as a requirement for Islamic political endeavor . This <sup>20</sup> confusion was a result of the lack of understanding of the idea that political thought is constantly evolving and developing.

Ideologues in this field need to understand this and benefit from experts in it, unlike the experience of “political Islam”<sup>21</sup> led by the Muslim Brotherhood. This experience reminds us of Rembrandt's masterpiece<sup>22</sup>, which shows a blind man leading another blind man. Al-Kushairi expressed that well in a verse he wrote:

If seventy blind people  
Meet at a certain place  
And choose one of them leader  
They all will fall in the well<sup>23</sup>

## II. The Political Agenda

In the age of the media invasion, pioneers, or those supposed to be pioneers, have become more dependent on the media to obtain their knowledge. Instead of leading the nation with ideas developed through contemplation and study, from their souls and their empathy for people's troubles and sufferings, they themselves were swept along by the tide.

In these circumstances, both political thought and a political agenda are absent. Some may believe we exaggerate when we say the ideology of political Islam in general, and Salafi ideology especially lacks a clear political agenda. Politically active Salafis are graduates of the Muslim Brotherhood School, their broad, general slogans can only convince the emotional masses. The slogans repeated on every occasion are interpreted in different ways by different people. We, in the East, have been afflicted by political parties and movements that champion the values of justice, equality, and development; however, when these movements achieve power, they inflict all forms of injustice on their citizens. What we fear now is that the mediaeval ideologies that do not acknowledge values and only slowly respond to base popular sentiment will follow similar practices and ignore the key values of justice and equality. In my opinion, there are no true liberals in the east, no true Muslims, and no true socialists. What we have instead are opportunists whose appearance and actions resemble each other. They raise banners they do not read; they raise these banners to attain power, not to fulfil the empty slogans inscribed upon them. Their ultimate goal is power.

Islamic political parties in our countries claim that they want power to raise the flag of Islam, but they raise the banner of Islam to attain power.

The Salafism emerging in Egypt today might be a good example of what I explained above. Egypt's Salafi Party, el-Nour, associated itself with the Muslim Brothers and borrowed their slogans for almost a century, even outdoing the Brothers at their own game. But when the Muslim Brothers' were held to account and plunged into a crisis, the Salafis disassociated themselves, disowning them and blaming them for the very wrongs they jointly commissioned.

I believe that their promotion of youth was not due to their belief in the importance of the role of youth in the party but merely because the older generation was sunk in fossilized rhetoric out of touch with the party's current interests.

If we were able to see the contradiction in the political experience of the Salafi movement, we would note that Jihadi Salafism, though more principled than political Salafism in general, is not in better shape. It dodges its principles and focuses only to its narrow interests. In fact, the two schools were born from the same womb: the differences between them are only because of different circumstances in different countries and one time and another. It is all circumstantial.

Salafi thinkers tend to refuse centralization and most excel in repositioning themselves, disowning the very opinions they recently held. However, some Salafis do stick to their beliefs no matter what. The proof is seen in how they may vote for someone, then vote him out; or how they split from allies and quickly associate with others.<sup>24</sup>

### III. The Position of Salafism on Revolutions and Salafis' Roles in them

When ideology is absent, it is little wonder that confusion dominates the political scene. Islamic currents in general and Salafis in particular have held contradictory positions on the uprisings in the Arab world. These inconsistencies, exposed quickly and without shame, reveal both naivety and cunning at the same time. The quick response of those who spoke on behalf of political Islam, without learning benefit from other peoples' experiences or even their own, showed naivety,. Their first response was to belittle the uprisings, ban them, and criminalize those who stood behind them. No sooner had they called on people not to be "misled by such carelessness, they changed their discourse, they blessed the "carelessness".

They built great expectations on it and ordered people to participate in it, denouncing those who failed to "support rightful causes."<sup>25</sup>

Their rush to issue superficial judgments stems from their shallow understanding of theology, but it is an inheritance from the old days. During the Islamic dark ages, Jurists used to rush to condemn any novelty in religion and life, but soon would issue contradictory judgments without reviewing their previous ones or apologizing for them. There are many examples of this. During Parliamentary elections in Lebanon in the 1990s, clerics were divided between three groups: the first banned participation in the elections; the second said participation was possible; the third said participation was imperative. Some years later, the jurists forgot their divisions and joined the rest of the nation in the elections. The same mistakes were repeated during the Arab revolutions. Many jurists forbade participation in the elections in those countries, but they soon changed their verdicts and considered elections permissible, in the belief that short memories meant they would never be held to account or criticised. The parties in Lebanon against participation in consecutive governments justified their decision in religious terms then changed its position and now does not accept any government formed without it.

This is not restricted to politics. It also happens in issues of jurisprudence for instance relating to housing loans provided by Banks to those who want to buy houses at low interest rates and

repay them through over the longer-term. Muslim scholars banned this type of loan as they considered it usury, which is forbidden. People were ashamed to take these loans until the cost of forgoing a loan to buy a house became clear. They ignored the scholars and took out the loans. People later expanded the range of loans they took out, in total disobedience of the scholars and their talk of usury. Scholars have kept silent about this and have not issued a clear statement on this issue. A similar case is traditional scholars' rejection of loans from the International Monetary Fund to some countries on the basis that these loans are usury. When the Muslim Brotherhood took power in Egypt, respected Muslim scholars kept silent on the issue of usury.

Some Muslim scholars recognised the confusion and contradictions of their colleagues' rulings, and at least tempered their initial rulings to make an alteration or change of their rulings easier later, but they never retracted and never learned from the experience of others.

To those Muslim scholars, I ask where they stand on the verse: "And do not take a position on that of which you have no knowledge." <sup>26</sup> The Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) said: "Whoever gives a ruling without knowledge, he shall have a seat in hell," <sup>27</sup> and I would like to remind them of a saying by the Imam of el-Madina, Malik Bin Anas al-Asbahi<sup>28</sup>: "Whoever says I do not know, that is a ruling."<sup>29</sup>

I would like to raise another question: Why don't you admit that politics is not a legitimate subject of Shari'a rulings, but a certain way of understanding reality and an attempt to balance interests? It should not be restricted to religious scholars alone, and there may be traders, politicians, or businessmen who are more capable and knowledgeable than they are in this field.

If cleverness is knowing how to deal with reality flexibly, and the ability to dodge past statements through verbal dexterity, we should reassess the way in which the pious attempt to portray themselves as principled and honest. We should ask how principled are they, and how honest? And how are they principled, and honest?

I say that the views of Salafis and other Islamists are expedient and unprincipled, and those who sympathise with them justify and excuse their pragmatic inconsistencies. But do they accept such contradictions from the others? Do they offer excuses for them? Or is this tolerance and forgiveness only restricted to those who play the religious card to cover themselves?

This brings to mind what Imam al-Shafie said on this issue:

"Satisfied eyes are blind to every defect, but discontented eyes see only those defects."

One needs to be pragmatic to work in politics or the public interest, because it is necessary to make concessions to achieve goals. When some see concessions as justified, even required, and others consider the very same acts as a kind of weakness and a violation of principles, this sets the stage for an intractable dispute framed in terms of moral absolutes.

The question is when does pragmatism become hypocrisy? When does pragmatism challenge principles? And how can we believe those who do not believe in democracy and consider it to



be paganism could yield to the choice of the people and agree with election results when they are inconsistent with their interests?

Islamists joined the revolutionary movements of the Arab Spring early, but this was their personal choice, not the decision of the leadership of their movements. After this poor start, however, they did participate and the numbers and organisation they brought to the protests made them appear as a main force of the revolutionary movement, and transformed them into an electoral bloc able to hold the balance of power.

### The Future Role of Salafism

Whenever revolutionary currents begin to emerge in any social setting, Salafism is pushed to the fore by the Islamic sentiments of the masses, their feelings of frustration and the sting of defeat.

Because of the rout the Islamic world suffered, rational discourses that claimed to acknowledge the bitterness of reality, and the sober and rational assessment of what needed to be done were set aside. Simplistic emotive discourses proclaiming "Islam is the solution" for every problem have gained wide acceptance, at a time when calm reflection and the recognition that there are no ready-made prepackaged solutions are required instead. Jihad is seen as the only path forward, enemies are the reason for our backwardness, and the weak and the doubters among our own people are more dangerous than our enemies, because they spread fear and defeatism... These are grand words indeed but unfortunately they are meaningless, empty of any objective validity. But they have soothed desperate people. This reminds me of the contemporary philosopher Bertrand Russell's <sup>30</sup> saying: "The fundamental cause of trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cocksure, while the intelligent are full of doubt."<sup>31</sup>

With increased feelings of oppression, violence became an accepted means of seeking redress, to the point where it now seems to be part of the cultural heritage. We should not blame Salafism alone for promoting violence, abuse, oppression, revenge killings and an obsession with domination; but Salafism is the perfect vehicle for such an inheritance, whether in terms of its unflinching conviction it is right, its determination to brand difference as deviance or its reduction of scholarly religious debate to a moral contest in which insulting or assaulting those who think differently is permitted.

Consequently, violence is consistent with Salafi preaching, loyal to its approach and methods. It is the natural result of an intolerant ideology.

On the other hand, Sufism, as an ideology and a pattern of behavior has refused to respond to opposing views with violence no matter how fundamental the disagreement. Violence has historically been denounced and condemned by Sufi schools, regardless of the circumstances that led its practitioners to embrace it.

When a Shi'a misuses power and commits an injustice, he violates his history and heritage. He is burning down a millennium and almost four centuries of tradition nurtured by suffering, patience, tolerance and the triumph of ideas over swords in the hell of hatred and oppression.

The progress or retreat of violent ideologies depends on a collection of factors that we should fight to weaken this kind of thought.

However, if we treat this process as if it is inevitable, then the Salafis will only become stronger and have negative effects that cannot be contained. This will start with feelings of injustice and later develop into hatred and resentment, and - in the end - might not end with a quest for redress or even revenge. Politics will become not the place to look for solutions to problems, to make life easier for people, but the quest for crises to incite conflicts that can nurture regressive empty political discourse and give an excuse for the shedding of blood.

## **Conclusion**

The value of religion is that it respects all things, in all their forms. This is why it prohibits violence against oneself and others, whether they belong to the same religion or a different one. The problem is that violence is usually defended by the argument of "defending against aggression, real or expected" and sometimes by "revenge for an earlier attack."<sup>32</sup> These justifications are what led us to partially or totally overturn our ban on violence, and put humanity in a dilemma that cannot be resolved unless we take real steps toward prohibiting violence in all its forms, even if it is only employed as a response to violence. All those who commit violence today find justification for it. But there is no justification for violence, no excuse for violating another human being's dignity.

It is true that religion legalized retribution, but the main goal of this was to protect lives. However, retribution and the right of self-defense became an excuse to destroy others, a source of never-ending bloodshed, and this completely contradicts the teachings of religion and what human sensibility should accept.

## **Summary**

It must be recognized that radicalism has always been associated with religion. No matter how much religious people try to pretend they are liberal, most will fall short and be exposed at the first real test. When we ask the religious to be liberal, we should lower our expectations. Few can liberate themselves from their beliefs to the extent that they can critically examine them and reach a better understanding of them. To be fair, all ideologies suffered from the same dilemma, and witness the same crisis. One can see how a Bolshevik and a Nazi, who cannot tolerate the other, are very similar in terms of radicalism to the pious who also cannot accept the other.

I chose the level of acceptance of the other and the way we see the other as a criteria to measure both liberalism and radicalism, because this is an essential criteria and therefore can serve as a test to distinguish between radicals and liberals. Radicals are steeped in an inherited ideology they defend at all costs and cannot even constructively discuss, whereas liberals own the ideas, not the opposite. Liberals can set themselves free from the burden of their heritage and deal with it freely if they need to do so, as befits time and circumstances, and in response to proofs, arguments and statements.

Only those who truly embrace their humanity can pass this test, the measure of this test being those who consider humanity as the common denominator that unites them with others. They see others as humans above all else, humans whose ideas do not push them into angry confrontations with others, or to resist all criticism. They are the outsiders. This does not, however, mean they do not have their own opinions, but that they are not captive to any idea or affiliation.

To be flexible in dealing with the other, there are two important intellectual prerequisites. The first is accepting the possibility one can be wrong and the other right; the second is respecting others' opinions even if unconvinced.

A person may show toleration, flexibility, and acceptance when dealing with others, but the real test is when this person is in a powerful position.

Many people pretend they are wise and patient, but when they obtain power and are in a position to make decisions for others become tyrannical and oppressive. This is the art of lying to the other and even lying to oneself. It may give us an incorrect idea about how intolerant an ideology is; but the true test of any ideology is how it responds to the test of power. Those who show stubbornness and intolerance when they are weak are more honest than those who show tolerance when weak but hide their real intentions until they are powerful.

While we are discussing ideologies and intolerance, we should also recognise that there are individuals who may be tolerant but hold repulsive views, and those who are repulsive but hold liberal views.

The strictness of the Salafi school gives us cause for concern about the way in which they deal with their rivals, not perhaps at the present time when they are powerless, but when Salafis hold power and reveal their true face. Jihadi Salafism holds views obviously hostile to others and imposes its will on them through the power of the weapon. However, it tries to adapt to the circumstances it finds itself in by crafting new methods to handle the other and pretending to be considerate.

Human culture is based on the accumulation of experiences from the starting point our ancestors bequeathed to us. I refuse the possibility that a group of people, supposedly theorists, could develop their ideas in such a way that they can advance society yet persist in repeating the same historical mistakes and errors.

If people do not recognize the fact that experiences accumulate and this is how culture develops, if the quest for a fair secure society that respects all individuals without exception is abandoned, if media and religious scholars keep people away from knowledge and spread intolerance, and if we do not understand a little knowledge can be more dangerous than ignorance, we will continue to walk aimlessly in circles.

### **End notes**

1 For more details about this point, see our paper "A bright introduction toward an existential humanizing" published on the website: [www.lb.boell.org](http://www.lb.boell.org)

I call here for new terminologies for religion. I call the monotheistic religions "positive 2 religions" and nonmonotheistic ones "natural religions."

3 Son of a judge and a Hanbali jurist, Mohammad Ibn Abdulwahab was born in the village of Uyayna in Najd in 1703. He adopted the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah, which brought him into conflict with the scholars and people around him. He had to leave his village for al-Dar'iyah, another town in Najd, where he was introduced to Mohamad Ibn Saud, the founding patriarch of the Saudi line. Ibn Saudi agreed to support Wahhabism; in return, Mohamad Ibn Abdulwahab acknowledged the Imamate (political leadership) of Ibn Saud. This agreement, known as al-Dar'iyah agreement of 1744, was the base of the division between political and religious power between the Saud Family and the Abdulwahab Family, which came to be known as Al-Sheikh Family. They agreed jihad against whoever opposes them is legal if conflict could not be solved by dialogue. They described their opponents as mushrikin, disbelievers. After years of armed struggle and thousands of deaths, the Salafist call spread through the Arabian Peninsula, which became known as Saudi Arabia, after the founding Saudi family. Citizens became known as Saudis; the Salafi call became known as Wahhabism. Mohamad Abdelwahab died in 1791.

4 An Arab family that established what is known today as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For more details, see Madawi al-Rasheed's "A History of Saudi Arabia."

5 I am using this expression to match the old translators' terminology. This philosophy is now known as Hellenistic Philosophy, which first appeared in Greece and matured in Athens between the Sixth and the fourth centuries BC.

6 ,For instance Ben Badis in Algeria and Zein Al-Abidine in Tunisia and Jamal al-Deen al-Kassimi in Jableh, Syria, and Bahjat Bitar in Damascus, Syria and Saadi Yassine in Beirut.

7 Ahmad Abdulhalim Ibn Taymiyyah was born in 1236 in Harran, Syria, and died in a Damascus prison (the citadel) in 1328.

8 Such as Zuheir al-Shaweesh in Damascus.

9 Mohamad Bin Ali al-Shokani, a Salafi scholar born in 1760 (lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> Hijri Century) in Yemen, grew up in Sanaa' and was in charge of the Judiciary. He died in 1834. See Al- Aalam, Zarkali, p.6 to 298.

10 See "al-Futouhat al-Islamiyah," by the Shafii Mufti in Mecca Mohamad Zeini Dahlan.

11 See Touma, Emile, "al-Amaliyah al-thawriyah fil Islam" (The revolutionary process in Islam), pp 50-61. The book is considered a very good document written by a contemporary leftist writer who was an eye witness of events.

12 We do not deny that after 9/11 the Saudi government started surveillance for American political reasons; however, the current developments in the region have contributed to a relaxation of this strict policy, in the new strategic security environment we witness emerging today.

13 It is evident societies suffering from social-economic and cultural crises not only offer a favourable environment for religiosity but also provide one that endorses and exports extremism.

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See Amin, Ahmad: "Tarikh al-Saalakah," (History 14 of guttersnipes.)

15 I am not trying to equate what Robin Hood did in the past and what terrorism is doing today; however, a moral justification means the party that adopts violence may attract a sympathetic audience, which enables them to divide society, which I deem to be unjustifiable.

16 To give a better idea of the depth of Sufism, Qushair writes in his Paper on Rozbahan al-Baqli, "Our science is mere indication, if we express it by words it will disappear."

17 Mohamad Rasheed Rida dedicated a full edition of his review "Al-Manar" entitled, "The Collapse of the Tyranny" to celebrate the defeat of the Ottomans by Great Britain.

18 Ma'alim fi'l-Tariq (Milestones), a famous volume by Sayed Qutb, a leading Muslim brothers' scholar who was born in 1906 and executed in 1966. I chose this book as an example because it is one of the most popular books among young practitioners, and many subsequent books were based on this book and reproduced its ideas.

19 Abu al-Ala al-Mawdoudi's influence on Sayyed Qutb and the Muslim Brothers, in addition to all the other fundamental groups that have been born from the lust for power.

20 Mohamad Amarah, for example.

21 Olivier Roy wrote a good volume on political Islam entitled, "The Failure of Political Islam," but the publishers of the Arabic version published it under the title "The Experience of Political Islam."

22 Rafael, 1483-1520, is a great Italian painter known for his elegant style.

23 Tafsir al-Qusheiri? Volume 3, p 307.

24 Clear examples of this are the Afghan and Chechen phenomena and their child, Arab Jihadism and its descendants, al Nusra and ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

25 See Al-Kadidmi, Nawaf: "Al-Islam and Rabea ak-thawrat" (Islam and the Revolutionary Spring).

26 Quran: 17:36

27 Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith #53, Volume 1. Compare it with "al-faqeeh wal mutafaqih" (The true jurist and the learner) volume 2, p 155, by Al-Baghdadi al-Khatib.

28 Malek Bin Anas, the Imama of al-Madina and a colleague of the Caliphate Abu Jafaar al-Mansour. He was born in 712 and died in 795.

29 Al-Thaalibi al-Tunisi, "al-fikr al-sami fil fiqh al-Islami" (The history of Islamic jurisprudence).

30 Bertrand Russell 1872-1970

31 Russell, Bertrand: "The Triumph of Stupidity", 1933, published in "Mortals and Others", 1935.

32 We must recognize that aggression may not be merely physical.