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Salafism in the Islamic World: Origins, Branches, and Intellectual-Social Impacts

Introduction

Salafism is one of the most influential intellectual currents in the Islamic world, with roots tracing back to the early centuries of Islam and efforts to return to the authentic teachings of the religion. Outwardly, this movement sought to reform both the Muslim individual and society based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), criticizing innovations and superstitions while striving to revive the core values of early Islam.

It is noteworthy that Salafism, in its early forms, existed prior to the emergence of Wahhabism in the 18th century CE. Historical reformist movements emphasized a return to the "righteous predecessors) "*Salaf al-Salih* ,(namely the first generations of Muslims, aiming to purify Islam from historical distortions and diverse theological interpretations. Over time, differences in the interpretation of Qur'anic verses and the proliferation of legal schools (madhhabs) led to the emergence of various branches within Islam, sometimes resulting in disputes and even religiously motivated violence.

In the contemporary period, under the influence of social, political, and geopolitical conditions, Salafism evolved from a reformist religious current into a multifaceted and global movement, occasionally serving as a tool for foreign

political objectives. Today, Salafism manifests in educational, political, and jihadist forms and has left profound impacts on Muslim societies.

The purpose of this article is to examine Salafism independently, analysing its origins, branches, and effects, thereby providing a foundation for understanding subsequent extremist movements, including the Taliban.

Definition and Key Concepts of Salafism

The term “Salafism” derives from the Arabic word *salaf*, meaning “predecessors.” Conceptually, it refers to adherence to the *Salaf al-Salih* — the earliest generations of Muslims, including the Companions) *Sahaba*, (the Followers) *Tabi‘un*, (and the Followers of the Followers) *Taba‘ al-Tabi‘in*. (This movement emphasizes returning to the Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him) while avoiding innovations and religious superstitions. Its goal is the moral and social reform of both the individual and the broader Muslim community.

Despite the ideological links between Salafism and Wahhabism, significant differences exist. Wahhabism developed within the political framework of the Saudi state and was geographically confined to the Arabian Peninsula, whereas Salafism has evolved into a global, multifaceted, and diverse phenomenon.

Contemporary Salafism can be categorized into three main branches:

- 1. Academic (Scholarly) Salafism:** Focused on education and religious interpretation without engaging in political activity or violent action.
- 2. Political Salafism:** Aims to influence governments and societal structures based on Salafi principles.
- 3. Jihadist Salafism:** An extremist orientation that pursues objectives through armed struggle and violent means.

All branches share a core commitment to the Qur’an and Sunnah, rejection of innovations, and efforts to reconstruct an Islamic society. This framework forms the intellectual foundation for many contemporary Islamic movements.

Historical Roots and Connection with Wahhabism

The historical roots of Salafism lie in early Islamic reformist currents that sought to restore the original teachings of Islam. Although often localized and sporadic,

these movements shared a common spirit: opposition to theological deviations, blind imitation, and religious innovations.

In the 18th century CE, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the Arabian Peninsula founded a reformist movement emphasizing “pure monotheism) ”*tawhid* (and the rejection of shirk (polytheism) and superstitions. With political support from the Al Saud family, this movement laid the foundation for the Saudi state and the Wahhabi school of thought. While ideologically close to Salafism, Wahhabism remained geographically and politically confined.

Over time, Wahhabi teachings, disseminated through educational networks, religious media, and scholarly channels, inspired the development of modern Salafism, which expanded beyond the borders of Arabia. Contemporary Salafism has grown in various Muslim-majority countries and manifests in scholarly, political, and jihadist forms.

The primary distinction between Salafism and Wahhabism lies in scale, diversity, and global reach. Wahhabism remained closely tied to the Saudi state, while Salafism transcended local boundaries to become an international movement. Nonetheless, both emphasize pure monotheism, the rejection of religious innovations, and the importance of doctrinal reform.

Jihadist Branches and Extremism

One of the most notable developments in contemporary Salafism is the emergence of the jihadist branch, which evolved from reformist teachings but took a path toward extremism and violence. Unlike scholarly and political Salafism, jihadist Salafism seeks societal transformation not through education or civil activism but via armed struggle.

This branch operates under the belief that current Islamic governments lack legitimacy and must be overthrown through jihad to establish systems based strictly on Sharia. Consequently, jihadist thought has acquired a political-ideological dimension beyond its original religious framework.

Social and historical conditions — such as state weakness, inequality, foreign occupation, and political crises — have facilitated the growth of this branch. Groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other extremist movements claim to be the true inheritors of the *Salaf al-Salih*, although their violent and takfiri approaches sharply diverge from the original reformist ideals of Salafism.

Thus, jihadist Salafism has become a model of extremism, exerting significant influence on regional developments and global security.

Conclusion

At its core, Salafism is a reformist and revivalist movement rooted in the early Islamic period, aiming to purify religion from innovations and restore the teachings of the first Muslim generations. Over time, under the influence of Wahhabism and socio-political developments, it has evolved into a global, multifaceted phenomenon.

From academic to political and jihadist forms, all branches seek to reconstruct Islamic society. However, jihadist Salafism, by neglecting modern realities, human rights concepts, development, and international relations, has adopted a violent and takfiri approach. Historical analysis shows that while Wahhabism remained confined to a specific political framework, contemporary Salafism has become a global, multidimensional phenomenon. Understanding it is essential for analysing today's extremist currents, particularly the Taliban and similar groups.

A precise understanding of Salafism requires examining three interrelated dimensions: intellectual-religious, political, and jihadist. Future research can further illuminate the connections between key figures involved in the development of the Muslim Brotherhood, Wahhabism, Salafism, and the Taliban, revealing historical and ideological linkages among these movements.

It is also important to recognize that one of the principal objectives of emerging sects within the Salafī spectrum is to awaken awareness and enlighten people, ensuring that the pure and spiritual essence of Islam is not confused with the distorted political agendas of certain regimes. These regimes, often in collaboration with external powers driven by geopolitical and economic ambitions, have historically manipulated religious beliefs to justify worldly objectives. In reality, their actions reflect neither genuine faith in Islam nor respect for its moral principles; their primary aim lies in securing short- and long-term gains through exploitation and control.

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