

Chapter 9 – WHY THE SALAFIS ARE NOT A TERROR PROBLEM

Siraat

Siraat is a Muslim community action and research team in Europe that is actively working to prevent and counter violent extremist thought and terrorism.

Within the “war on terror” scenario the *Salafī da’wah* and tradition has been seen as a methodology which is the main cause, thrust and impetus for terrorism and political violence and as even promoting such radical views. A large body of research has been authored which seeks to claim that the *Salafī* way is indeed an extremist radical belief system which eventually manifests itself with political violence and terrorism. A number of papers by Mitchell D. Sibling, Arvin Bhatt (2007), Jocelyn Cesari (2008), Marc Sageman (2004), Vincenzo Olivetti (2001), Anne Sofie Roald (2004) and Stemann (2006). Even though they aimed to understand the process by which Muslim youth become attracted to more extreme understandings and interpretations of Islam, it fell far short of doing the subject any justice and greatly misunderstood much in this regard as normative practices within Islam was denoted as in some way seen as subversive.

One of the evident problems with such analyses is that the *Salafī* methodology is seen as being the main catalyst for terrorism and then examples are sought to present what they consider to be ‘Salafī’. Here is where the problem lies, as the two analysts Silber and Bhatt, make reference to samples which are not ‘Salafī’ in the slightest and are rather *takfīrī*, *militant jihādī*, *ikhwānī* (i.e., followers of the Muslim Brotherhood), *Qutbī* (i.e., adherents to the ideology of Sayyid Qutb) and even at times *Tablighī*. Yet all of it is placed under their inadequately defined category of ‘Salafism’.

This study hopes to critically assess some of the claims about Salafism found within the literature and explore the reality of the *Salafī* way in regards to issues related terrorism, political violence and extremism. Let us begin with a basic definition of what *Salafī da’wah* is: the Islamic preaching which emphasizes a return to understanding Islām as the early generation understood and practiced it. Then let us actually quote from the leading and well-known *Salafī* scholars themselves, who the *Salafis* hold to be their reference points – in order to assess the assertion that adopting *Salafī* Islām leads to political violence and terrorism. As a result, it will be evident that the *Salafī da’wah* and methodology is one of the main barriers to the spread of terrorism among Muslim believers in the world today [1]. Indeed, the more stricter and serious the *Salafī*, the less likely the person will fall into radicalisation or terrorism:

Ironically, this means that the most “radical” of the salafis are the most immune to jihadist teachings, and the more “moderate” Muslims are those more open to other militant streams of thought and who may provide slightly more fertile recruiting grounds for the militant jihadis [1].

These are for the following reasons:

- Strict *Salafis* are primarily religious and not at all entrenched in political activity, political involvement and rhetoric; let alone terrorism. Politics is not their first port of call, their first priority is rather to educate and cultivate Muslims upon *tawheed* (Islamic monotheism) and adhering to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad (*sallallāhu ‘alayhi wassallam*) along with purifying the beliefs of Muslims is their focal emphasis.
- *Salafis* frown upon forming political parties and groups which are based on partisan loyalties.
- *Salafis* criticise clandestine meetings in order to put into place a strategic political plan, these are disliked according to the classical and traditional scholars. Umar ibn Abdul-Azeez, considered by some as being the fifth rightly guided Caliph, stated: “If you see a people meeting secretly regarding (matters of) the religion to the exclusion of the common people then you should know that they are misguided.” [2]

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- *Salafis* frown upon pledging allegiance to heads of organisations, groups and political parties. This is due to the biased partisanship and bigotry which is involved with such groups and because allegiance should only be given to the Muslim head of state or leader.
- *Salafis* hold it to be un-Islamic to stage a revolt or rebellion against the leader of a Muslim country regardless of how unjust and oppressive that leader is, and especially if the Muslims do not have the ability to remove a particular leader from power.
- *Salafis* are supposed to take into account the benefits and harms of any action which is done in the name of advancing the religion and do not endorse harming other Muslims nor creating chaos.
- *Salafis* do not agree with the targeting of civilians and non-combatants in warfare based on the evidences from the Qur’ān and Sunnah.
- Those who claimed to be *Salafi* and then began adopting the methodology of Sayyid Qutb were those who eventually avoided referring to themselves as being ‘Salafi’ and rejected its well known principles. Unfortunately then, these individuals did end up leaving the *Salafi* way and some began to support erroneous ideas of jihad which the *Salafi* scholars did not endorse whatsoever.

The confusion arises between mainstream Salafis and the militant *jihadī-takfirī* extremist narrative that has adopted established Islamic lexicology and terminology in an attempt to promote itself as being the most authentic and correct interpretation of the religion. As a result, in order to gain legitimacy to these claims, such violent extremist narrative ascribes itself to Salafism. This is why we find references to the ‘Salaf’ (the righteous predecessors) and ‘Salafi’ (one who takes his example these early righteous generations) replete within the discourse of Abū Qatāda, Abū Muhammad al-Maqdisī, Abū Mus’ab as-Sūrī, Ayman adh-Dhawāhirī and many others. This has been noticed by Salafi scholars themselves; for instance Shaykh ‘AbdulMālik ar-Ramadānī al-Jazā’irī, a contemporary Algerian *Salafi* scholar, stated about the Algerian *takfirī* group known as the ‘*Salafi Group for Da’wah and Combat*’:

How can, with all of this, making permissible the blood of the police and killing them be clean (i.e., permitted)? Then they live on stolen monies which have been ransacked from people by force and they destroy the souls of the Muslim soldiers ... As a result, we do not however absolve ourselves from ‘Salafiyyah’ as it is the truth, yet we absolve ourselves for Allāh from the ‘Salafist Group for Dawah and Combat’ and from all those who grasp weapons today in our country against the system or the people. I say this so that the creation know that the ascription of those revolutionary groups (i.e., the GSPC) to Salafiyyah is a distortion of Salafiyyah, just as how ascribing deviant Muslims to Islam is also a distortion of Islam, blocking the true path of Allāh and causing people to flee from the victorious ones (Firqat un-Nājiyyah). However, Salafiyyah is Salafiyyah, just as Islām is Islām, even though it is distorted by the deviants [3].

This has been highlighted by Wiktorowicz who emphasized that in “many cases, scholars claiming the Salafi mantel formulate antipodal juristic positions, leading one to question whether they can even be considered part of the same religious tradition.” [4]. This in many ways is similar to how extremist white supremacist groups claim Christianity yet devise views which are so radically different from mainstream Christianity that such interpretations render the movement as a different belief system in totality. It is, perhaps, pertinent to cite Shaykh ‘Alī Hasan al-Halabī al-Atharī’s definition of Salafism (Salafiyyah) in order to capture a comprehensive but concise view about the mainstream Salafi movement and its adherents:

I will present example of this with three types of people who utilize the term without due right:

First: Whoever ascribes to Salafiyyah (Salafism) methodologies which oppose what the ‘Ulama and seniors of the Salafi da’wah traverse, not to mention oppose their proofs and evidences. Such as some of the violent armed groups in Algeria and the likes. I wish to suffix that the reason for those (violent armed) people falsely ascribing themselves to Salafiyyah is only due to the fact that they want to distinguish themselves from other older partisan groups present, such as *Ikhwān ul-*

Muslimeem [Muslim Brotherhood], *Hizb ut-Tahreer* and others. The evidence of this is: many of them changed their ascriptions and their skins as soon as they had the opportunity to! Another point to mention is that: Salafiyyah is not a *hizb* (partisan political group) that has a legislative structure which is difficult to penetrate, rather it is an academic and proselytising methodology which all are able to be a part of, not to mention be covered in its dust and hide behind its door. Therefore, the real affair of one who covers himself, with the gowns of Salafiyyah, is only exposed by the level of his agreement with the manhaj of the Salaf us-Sālih in: the *Usūl* of understanding and *istidlāl* (deriving rulings); and respect for the people of knowledge who have carried the manhaj throughout every time and place. Respect of the ‘Ulama is *taqdeer* (holding them in high estimation) and not *taqdees* (veneration) of them. As for what is inside a person, who ascribes himself to Salafiyyah, then we defer his case to the Lord of the Worlds as He knows better about us and him [5].

This definition of Salafism, from an insider perspective, is in stark contrast to outside perspectives on the Salafi movement. When examining much of the existing material on Salafism, especially that which blames the Salafis for terrorism, there is clearly a paucity of primary evidence from the scholars of Salafism themselves [6].

Moreover, much of the academic writing constantly mention the word ‘Salafi’ and claim that certain terrorists subscribed to the *Salafi* way yet many researchers have neglected any reference whatsoever to the well-known *Salafi* scholars over the last decade and their stances on terrorism and extremism. *Salafi* scholars such as Imām ‘Abdul’Azeez Bin Bāz, Imām Muhammad Nāsiruddīn al-Albānī, Imām Muhammad bin Sālih al-’Uthaymeen, Imām Muqbil bin Hādī al-Wadī’ī and other contemporaries such as Shaykh ‘Abdul’Azeez Āli-Shaykh, Shaykh ‘AbdulMuhsin al-’Abbād al-Badr, Shaykh Rabī’ bin Hādī al-Madkhalī, Shaykh Sālih al-Fawzān, Shaykh AbdulMuhsin al-’Ubaykān, Shaykh AbdulMālik ar-Ramadānī, Shaykh AbdusSalām as-Sihaymī, Shaykh Khālid al-Anbarī, Shaykh Ali Hasan al-Halabī al-Atharī, Shaykh Mashhoor Hasan Āl Salmān, Shaykh Saleem al-Hilālī, Shaykh Sālih Āli-Shaykh, Shaykh ‘Abdul’Azeez bin Rayyis ar-Rayyis, Shaykh AbdusSalām Burjis and many others – are regarded as the heads of the *Salafi* methodology and tradition. They are all well known for their stances against terrorism, extremism, political agitation and the like; we will mention some of their statements later. Yet many academics have not referred to these *Salafi* scholars whatsoever and merely equated the *Salafi* tradition with terrorism and violence – this is inappropriate. Writers should therefore be more careful in their studies before labeling, as it is rather simplistic to merely say that something is “Salafi” when in fact such an organisation for example does not even refer to itself as being “Salafi”. So for example, Silber and Bhatt referred to “Salafi NGOs” when in fact such “NGOs” belong to the *Qutbī* ideology. Kumar Ramakrishna states in his paper *Delegitimizing Global Jihadi Ideology in South-East Asia* states:

A brief exposition of terminology is called for. Islamic fundamentalism (or Salafi Islam) is not all monolithic. Salafi Muslims, who take the injunction to emulate the Companions of the Prophet very seriously, may express this piety simply in terms of personal adherence to implementing shariah-derived standards of worship, ritual, dress and overall behavioural standards. The majority of Salafi Muslims, in fact, may be considered as “neo-fundamentalists” who possess “neither a systematic ideology” nor “global political agenda” [7].

First of all it is important for us to look at the efforts of the bona-fide Islamic scholars of the Salafi tradition in opposing extremist ideologies which have been responsible for the misconceptions about Islām today. The Salafi scholars have been the most vocal in their condemnations since the mid-1990s when many people had not even heard of the likes of Bin Lādin! The former *Muftī* of Saudi Arabia, Imām ‘Abdul’Azeez ibn ‘Abdullāh ibn Bāz (*rahimahullāh*) one of the main Salafi scholars, stated in the late 1990s in regards to Usāmah Bin Lādin, Muhammad al-Mas’arī and Sa’d al-Faqeeh:

These publications from al-Faqeeh, al-Mas’ari or other callers to evil, *bātil* (falsehood) and division must be totally destroyed and no lenience should be shown to them. It is incumbent to

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advise and guide them to the truth and warn them from this *bātil*. It is not permissible for anyone to co-operate with them in this evil, they must be advised and referred back to (true) guidance. And leave this *bātil*. And my advice to al-Mas'ari, al-Faqeeh, Ibn Lādin and all who traverse their way is that they leave off this dangerous path, to fear Allāh and be warned of His Wrath and Anger, to return back to (true) guidance, to repent to Allāh from they have done before [8].

Imām Bin Bāz also stated this in the Arabic newspaper *al-Muslimūn* and also reported in *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, on 9 Jumadā al-Ulā 1417 AH corresponding to 21 September 1996 CE. It can be heard in audio where Imām Bin Bāz further emphasizes that no co-operation should be made with the likes of Usāmah Bin Lādin due to their harms for safety and security, this was way before any 'investigative report' or 'think tank into global tolerance' even cared about the likes of Bin Lādin. Imām Bin Bāz also stated:

From that which is known to anyone who has the slightest bit of common sense, is that hijacking airplanes and kidnapping children and the like are extremely great crimes the world over. Their evil effects are far and wide, as is the great harm and inconvenience caused to the innocent; the total effect of which none can comprehend except Allāh. Likewise, from that which is known is that these crimes are not specific to any particular country over and above another country, nor any specific group over and above another group; rather, it encompasses the whole world. There is no doubt about the effect of these crimes; so it is obligatory upon the governments and those responsible from amongst the scholars and others to afford these issues great concern, and to exert themselves as much as possible in ending this evil [9].

Imām Bin Bāz also stated with regards to the terror attack in Riyadh in 1416 AH/1995 CE that:

There is no doubt that this incident is great evil which is based upon causing major corruption, major evil and serious transgression. And there is no doubt that this incident can only be done by one who does not believe in Allāh or in the Last Day, with correct and sound faith, performing such a criminal and filthy act which has brought about great harms and corruption. Only those with filthy souls filled with hatred, envy, evil and corruption, and devoid of (sound and correct) faith, would do the likes of such actions. We ask Allāh for well-being and safety and to help the people in authority in all that will affect those people because their crime is severe and their corruption is huge. There is no power or movement except with Allāh! How can a believer or a Muslim perform such a serious crime which is based upon such huge transgression, corruption and destroying lives and injuring others without due right?

He further stated:

I exhort all who know anything about these (terrorists) to convey that info to the relevant people. It is upon all who know about their condition and about them should convey that about them, because this is from the avenue of co-operation in order to prevent sin and transgression and in order to secure safety of the people from evil, sin and transgression; and to establish justice from the transgressions of those oppressors ... There is no doubt that this is from the greatest of crimes and corruptions on the earth and those who commit such actions are more deserving to be killed and restrained due to the heinous crime that they have committed. We ask Allāh that He makes them fail and that He shackles them and their likes and that He saves us from their evil and the evil of those like them and that He totally destroys their plots, indeed He is Lofty and Majestic, Generous and Kind [9].

Therefore there is a clear delineation between such politically violent orientated groups and Salafism. As for movements which over emphasize politics, rebellion and upheaval then their declared political emphasis should not be considered as "Salafi-politicos" as Wiktorowicz had initially coined. In acknowledgement of this, McCants, Brachman and Felter recommended the following as a means of reducing the popularity of Jihadis amongst Salafis:

Label the entire Jihadi Movement “Qutbism” in recognition that the Jihadis cite Sayyid Qutb more than any modern author. Muslim opponents of the Jihadis (including mainstream Wahhabis) use this term to describe them, a designation Jihadis hate since it implies that they follow a human and are members of a deviant sect. Adherents of the movement consider “Qutbi” to be a negative label and would much rather be called Jihadi or Salafī [10].

To generally categorise Salafis as belonging to the same broad entity as the violent *Jihadi-takfiris*, the overly political-inspired *Qutbīs* and other similar movements obfuscates the clear parameters between movements that have been polemical in their opposition to violent extremism and those seeking to justify it.

9.1 REFERENCES

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