

On Salafī Islam

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1. *Definitions*
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1. Definitions: What is Salafī Islam?

What exactly is ‘Salafism’? In the absence of a unanimously agreed upon definition, I propose to elucidate the modern Salafī phenomena via an outline of its beginnings, an assessment of its particular characteristics, manifestations of it in various contemporary groups, and a discussion of its positive and not so positive contributions to Islam and our global society.

Within the context of our modern World, or to be more precise over the last half a century, the term ‘Salafī’ has come to designate an Islamic methodology, the aspirational objective of which is the emulation of the Prophetic example via the practices and beliefs of the earliest generations of Islam. This is because the first three Islamic generations, in being closest to the era of Muḥammad (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam) and the period of revelation, are understood to best embody the Prophetic Sunnah, and thus a pristine Islam.

Inasmuch as the term refers to a methodology, it would be fair to say that it does not specify any one particular or distinct community or group of believers. The generic nature of this term is further illustrated by the fact that more than a dozen distinct groups either identify themselves as Salafī, in that they believe themselves to be on the Salafī *manhaj* (methodology), or they do not object to the term being ascribed to them even if they themselves do not use it. Whilst saying this however, it is worth noting that every one of these groups considers the correct application of the term exclusive to itself, alleging that all other claimants are not representative of ‘true Salafism’. This being the case, an outline of the various points of agreement and disagreement amongst the multiple strands of Salafī Islam is a prerequisite to a comprehensive understanding of ‘Salafism’.

1.1 Points of consensus among Salafi movements

There are some general characteristics that are present in all manifestations of Salafism, without exception. In particular:

- 1) they consider themselves alone as correctly espousing the teachings and beliefs of the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ*. In particular, they affirm the theological creed that was narrated from them (typically called the ‘*atharī*’ creed’)
- 2) they categorically reject any possibility of metaphoric or symbolic interpretation of the Divine Names and Attributes (*tawḥīd al-asmā’ wa’l-ṣifāt*), a hallmark of the sects such as the Mu’tazilah and the Ashā’irah
- 3) they absolutely affirm God’s exclusive right to be worshipped (*tawḥīd al-ulūhiyyah*) and refute anything that may compromise this directly, or lead to its being compromised. Hence, syncretic practices of certain Sufīs (e.g., extreme saint veneration, intercession of the dead, etc.) are condemned.
- 4) they oppose all reprehensible innovations (*bid‘a*) and dissociate from those who ascribe to them (*ahl al-bid‘ah*). There is especially staunch opposition to Shī’ism, particularly because of the Shī’ite doctrine of dissociating from most of the Companions.
- 5) they respect and take recourse to the legal and theological opinions of Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya (d. 748/1328). It is important to note, however, that Ibn Taymiyya cannot, and is not, considered a progenitor for the modern Salafi movement, as they view themselves as having no one single founder after the Prophet Muḥammad (*ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*).

1.2 Points of contention among Salafi groups

While there is general agreement on the above, there are numerous issues in which disagreement abounds, and each point of contention is manifested in a spectrum of opinions. Foremost amongst these issues are:

1. Position with respect to the validity and necessity of following one of the jurisprudential schools (*madhāhib*):
The numerous Salafi strands hold conflicting positions with regard to the ruling on adhering to a particular *madhhab*, so much so that it has been a source of tension amongst them.

- a. *Impermissible*: opposition to the canonization of the schools of law was historically a feature of the *Zāhirī* school (of Ibn Ḥazm, d. 456H). The modern revival of this ‘anti-*madhhab*’ trend can be traced back to Muḥammad Ḥayāt al-Sindhī (d. 1163) who influenced al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 1182), al-Shawkānī (d. 1250), Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1307),¹ and, most recently, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 2000). All of these individuals were decidedly anti-*madhhabist*.
 - b. *Discouraged but not invalid*: some Salafī movements permit the lay person to follow a *madhhab* in times of necessity, obliging him to go with the *dalīl* (stronger evidence) when it is made known to him.²
 - c. *Permissible*: By and large, Sunnī Islam has considered adherence to a *madhhab* recommended or obligatory for a lay Muslim, and this is also found in some strands of Salafī Islam. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206),³ champion of the ‘Najdī *da‘wah*’ was influenced by al-Sindhī in theology but remained a committed follower of the Ḥanbalī school of law, considering the practice of Islam’s rites and rituals within the paradigm of a *madhhab* to be both valid and praiseworthy.
2. Dissociation from *ahl al-bid‘a*.

Theoretically *all* Salafīs dissociate from religious innovations and those who adhere to and propagate them. However, the scope and method of how this dissociation is implemented at the practical level varies from group to group and from scholar to scholar.

Those with the strictest stance on this issue inevitably cast a wide net of ‘guilt by association’: if person B associates with known deviant A, then person B is declared deviant. If person C then associates with deviant B, now he too becomes a deviant, *ad infintum*, *ad nauseum*. The unfortunate, though predictable, product of such disaffiliation and judgment is the precipitation of further division and splintering within this brand of the Salafī community.

This methodology is the defining group of the ‘Madkhalīs’ (students of the Saudi Shaykh Rabī bin Hādī al-Madkhalī), who legitimise this practice by considering it an extension of the science of *al-Jarh wa’l-ta’dīl* (the science of ‘ḥadīth criticism’ whereby Ḥadīth specialists deem narrators to be reliable or

¹ Ṣiddīq H. Khan was the inspiration for the *Ahl-e-Hadees* movement of the Indian subcontinent.

² This can have the rather unfortunate effect of thrusting such lay individuals into the arena of adjudicating religious verdicts (*tarjīh*) while lacking even the most rudimentary tools necessary to engage in such an endeavor.

³ The term ‘Wahhābī’ is a label that is sometimes used by the detractors of the movement. It is considered to be derogatory and is used as a slur, hence it is avoided in this article. Additionally, it is not befitting for Muslims to coin a derogatory term from one of the names of Allah (*viz.*, *al-Wahhāb*).

not). While in recent years the popularity of the Madkhalī strand has waned considerably, many non-Madkhalī Salafīs continue to adopt a hardline attitude on this point, refusing even to invite persons of different viewpoints to their conferences and gatherings.

However, some Salafī scholars and groups adopt a more lenient stance in this regard, and are willing to allow co-operation with some non-Salafī communities (for example, allowing cooperation with Deobandis, but not Shī'īs).

3. Theological position on 'īmān' (faith) and whether actions constitute a requisite part of *īmān* or are subsidiary to it.

The discussion of *īmān* and what it connotes is a relatively modern question, one that arose in the latter part of the 90s when Sh. al-Albānī stated that he did not consider actions to be a necessary part of *īmān*.⁴ The standard Salafī position prior to this, and the explicit position of Ibn Taymiyya and the scholars affirming *Atharī* theology, was that certain actions are a necessary requirement of faith and the absence of such actions contradicted the presence of *īmān*.

4. The level of allegiance and obedience toward an Islamic ruler (*ṭā'at walī al-amr*), and the amount of political activism allowed.

This point is a vast and convoluted one, and perhaps the most obvious issue of disagreement to those outside of the movement. The levels of political activism and political dissent, and the necessity of allegiance and loyalty to the Muslim rulers, and the 'Islam' of an illegitimate ruler, are theological 'grey' areas that various Salafī scholars have attempted to negotiate in today's ever-volatile political climate. The positions can be summarized as follows:

- a. Criticizing a legitimate ruling authority is doctrinally prohibited tantamount to sin and deviation. Some Salafīs, in particular the

⁴ This issue became highly controversial, especially after a refutation was written against al-Albānī by the 'Ṣaḥwa' scholar Shaykh Safar al-Hawali, entitled *Dhahirat al-Irjā'*, in which he charged al-Albānī with inclining towards the heretical position of the Murji'a (a theological sect of early Islam that excluded actions from the definition of faith). This caused a huge rift in two strands of Salafism in the late 90s: the mainstream Saudi strand and the Jordanian-Albānī strand, headed by Shaykh al-Albānī. This rift has still not fully healed, although it is not as significant as it was a decade ago.

The term *Ṣaḥwa* comes from a word that denotes 'activism', and is used to describe a more politically active strand of Saudi Salafism that emerged after the contentious political events of the early 1990s and the first Gulf War. *Ṣaḥwa* scholars strongly opposed the War and the intervention of the Americans, thus causing a rift between the mainstream Saudi clerics who wished to follow the ruler's decision to invite the troops.

The Madkhalīs are at opposite ends of the Saudi Salafī spectrum to the *Ṣaḥwa* scholars, and derogatorily label this group as 'Qutbis', in reference to the political thought of Syed Qutb, and his brother Muhammad Qutb, who was an advisor to Safar al-Ḥawālī (someone who can perhaps be viewed as the 'founder' of the *Ṣaḥwa*).

- ‘mainstream’ Saudi Salafīs and Madkhalīs, are extremely pro-government.⁵
- b. Questioning and advising the ruling authority is an extension of *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'l-nahy 'an al-munkar* (‘advising the good and forbidding evil’). Some Salafīs view voicing opposition to government policy as a legitimate and necessary extension of the Islamic notion of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil, and equate it with the Islamic principle of attempting to prevent an oppressor from committing his oppression. Examples of this are the *Ṣaḥwa* scholars of Saudi Arabia, who will be discussed below.
 - c. Questioning the legitimacy of all rulers of Muslim lands. There are some Salafī groups who consider all the rulers of Muslim lands (or: only those who do not rule by the Sharīah), to be illegitimate and regard them as disbelievers, whose legitimacy should be contested, perhaps by force.⁶
5. The issue of *takfīr* (deeming the belief of a Muslim to be invalid) and in particular *takfīr* of the rulers who don't judge by the laws of the Sharīah (*al-ḥukm bi ghayr mā anzal Allah*).⁷

Once again, there is a spectrum of opinion⁸:

- a. rulers of Muslim lands who judge by secular laws are believers. Some scholars, such as the previous Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Bāz (d. 1999) and Shaykh al-Albānī, held the view that a ruler who judged by secular laws is still a believer (unless certain conditions, difficult to verify, exist). They argued that this is a sin that does not in itself expel them from the fold of Islam.

⁵ Many outsiders don't understand the rationale behind this and claim that this is because the Saudi government ‘funds’ them. While funding no doubt played a role, most of the non-Saudi Salafīs who follow this position have not benefited from Saudi oil money. Hence, to be fair to this movement (and with the disclaimer that I find this view religiously untenable and morally repugnant), this view is based on the classical Sunnī doctrine of ‘obeying the legitimate ruler’. This doctrine has been extrapolated to implicate even *criticizing* a legitimate ruler in public. Additionally, there is an overt sentiment present in most group members that despite all of its flaws, the Saudi monarchy in particular ‘protects *tawḥīd* and defends the Sunnah’ and hence all other faults should be overlooked in the face of attacks against it. Hence, critics of the government are taken to be critics of protectors of *tawḥīd*.

⁶ This theological position logically results in *takfīr*, the next point of contention.

⁷ I delivered an academic paper that expounds on this point in some detail. It is available online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZoAzlnpIgk>

⁸ Each of these views (and scholars) has nuances and caveats for the positions that they champion. I am well aware of these nuances and have not intentionally left them out; however, this article is not a dissertation and hence is not the place to go into conditions and details and exceptions. The goal here is to present a simplistic overview; interested readers are asked to look into the nuances of each of these views.

- b. such rulers are treated as Muslim, and obeyed for the greater good of the community, but their action of ruling by other than Allah is major *kufr*. This is the view of many middle-of-the-road Salafīs, such as Shaykh Muḥammad b. Sāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn (d. 2001).
 - c. rulers of Muslim lands who rule by secular laws have fallen into *kufr*, and their rule is illegitimate and their belief negated; hence allegiance to them is null and void. This group consists of the hard-liners, represented by figures like Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī and Abū Mus‘ab al-Sūrī, whose writings inspire the *jihadist*-Salafi movements, which leads us to our next point.
6. Position with respect to *jihād*. Whilst the majority of groups championing Salafism are pacifist, there are minority voices within the overall ‘Salafi movement’ who adopt a more ‘militarist’ position. They consider a military *jihād* a binding obligation, either on some segments of the Ummah, or on all eligible members of the Ummah. They focus on either or both of the following:
- (i) removing secular rulers from Muslim lands.
 - (ii) maintaining perpetual conflict against non-Muslim governments that have militarily intervened in Muslim lands.

Typically, and understandably, the last three points (i.e., the question of ruling by other than Allah, challenging the belief of the Muslim non-*Sharī* ruler, and the issue of *jihād*) are intrinsically interconnected. Those holding the harshest views on the legitimacy and belief of a ruler who judges by other than the law of God inevitably adopt the most radical position in pronouncing *takfīr* and thus lay the foundations for necessitating military *jihād*.

1.3 Some prominent Salafi Groups⁹

1. Mainstream Saudi Salafism. This is the largest and most prominent of the Salafi groups, as exemplified by the majority of Saudi clerics. These clerics typically adhere to a *madhhab* (almost always the Ḥanbalī one), are pacifist, and loyal to their rulers. This group, as represented by the Saudi scholarly community, avoids blanket *takfīr*, and remains vocally critical of extremist *jihād* groups.

⁹ A disclaimer here is necessary: these groups, and their positions, are not completely distinct or isolated; there can be some overlap between these positions, and a particular person or scholar can exhibit characteristics from multiple sub-groups.

2. Shaykh al-Albānī's Jordanian strand of Salafism. Another significant group in terms of adherents, they are extremely anti-*madhhabist*, and advocate for a strictly *dalīl*-based jurisprudence. Politically, they are quietest, actively avoiding anything to do with rulers or *jihād*ist Salafīs, although perhaps their revocation of the latter is not as pronounced as that of the first group. This group also tends to be the most literalist in *fiqh* and strict in its application of the concept of *bid'ā* to practices that most other Salafīs would view as innocuous (for example, giving *adhān* inside the masjid, or having marked rows on the carpets, or having other than three steps on the *minbar*, and so forth).
3. The *Ṣaḥwa* movement of Saudi Arabia has been involved in peaceful political reform, without calling for overthrowing the rulers. Clerics like Shaykh Salman al-Oadah, and Shaykh Safar al-Ḥawalī before him, are representative of this trend. For the most part, this group has proven to be politically savvy and extremely active on social media; as a result of this, they have garnered some measure of mass appeal amongst the more educated youth. Their concern for Muslims has been manifested in their active involvement in fighting the social problems in their societies.
4. The Madkhalī trend is a smaller sub-sect of the Saudi Salafīs. They are a unique strand and more of an exception to the general Salafī trend. Their methodology is inherently the most divisive. This trend tends to almost exclusively concentrate on other individuals and whether those individuals are on the correct Salafī path or not. The Madkhalīs are continuously splintering amongst themselves, based on who in particular is currently 'on' or 'off' the *manhaj*. In terms of relevance, they are a dwindling community, as evidenced in the shrill desperation of their hysterical refutations and the minimal impact these refutations make.¹⁰

¹⁰ The Madkhalī strand of Salafism has waned considerably due to a number of factors: Firstly, their brand of Salafism proved so intolerable and caused such tangible damage to the entire Salafī movement that most other Salafī clerics not associated with the movement (and even some associated with it) were forced to clarify the extremism inherent in it. Secondly, many who jumped on the Madkhalī bandwagon themselves left either this sub-movement, or Salafism, or even religiosity; this practice became so widespread that a term was coined to describe it: 'Salafī burnout'. Lastly, Madkhalism was, for a period of time, championed and promoted by the Saudi government (this was during the late 1990s and early 2000s), because of its strong pro-government stance. However, when the detrimental side-effects of the movement increased, the government itself subtly withdrew its promotion of the clerics of Madkhalism, and it eventually only remained alive and active in non-Saudi Western ethnicities, typically converts or non-practicing immigrant Muslims of lower educational backgrounds who found comfort in suddenly having the 'power' to challenge more reputable clerics.

5. Egyptian Salafism – also representing a wide spectrum of views – has, for the large part, been in some disarray since the Arab Spring. Typically, Egyptian Salafīs have been most influenced by the Jordanian-Albānī branch, and hence are extremely literalist in *fiqh*. There is also a Madhkhalī equivalent amongst Egyptian Salafīs. One also finds, as in all countries, that they have radically different political orientations. The most significant branch, the Noor Party, has adopted a staunchly pro-Sisi position, while others remain apolitical, and some have come out criticizing the current regime. We are currently witnessing a huge overhaul in Egyptian Salafism, and it is too early to fully assess the various positions being adopted and the nuances that will emerge.¹¹

6. *Takfīri* Salafīs: These typically emphasize *takfīr* issues, in particular making *takfīr* against non-*Shar'ī* rulers, but do not call for *jihād* against them since (from their perspective) the time is not right and the conditions are not appropriate. This group characteristically highlights the travesties of Western foreign policies against the Muslim people and their lands and the hypocritical positions of Muslim authorities. There is an overarching preoccupation with the notion of *walā' wa-l-barā'* (loyalty and disloyalty), which is manifested most in their defense of all Muslim groups who fight against the West, regardless of the legitimacy of their tactics. Their frequent and casual resort to *takfīr* has often resulted in their leveling the charge of hypocrisy (*nifāq*) and disbelief (*kufūr*) on their critics. This group shares much with the Madkhalīs in terms of manners and harshness but remains staunchly opposed to them because of their difference of opinion on Muslim governments. Some contemporary personalities subscribing to this particular strand of Salafism include Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī and Abū Muṣ'ab al-Sūrī; they have a small yet dedicated following in the West (primarily composed of young men¹² influenced by the

¹¹ I have not listed other countries here and used Egypt as an example. A similar spectrum of movements can be found in almost all countries, including Western lands, where political stances of Eastern Salafīs become important for their Western counterparts. It is not uncommon to sometimes come across two American converts heatedly arguing over the correct theological stance to take regarding a Saudi political decision, for example.

¹² I have dealt with the angst of both the Madkhalīs and the *takfīri* Salafīs personally; hence obviously I am not a neutral writer regarding these movements. Nonetheless, I do say to these Salafīs of the latter category: while as a rule you have more intelligence, and more *īmān*, than the Madkhalī strand, you lack wisdom in understanding the long-term effect of your actions and support, and you share with the Madkhalīs the quickness and harshness in judging others who happen to disagree with you. Just because a person disagrees with your tactics does not imply that he is siding with an enemy of Islam. Also, it would be wise for you to see the age, collective maturity, experience and wisdom of those in your own ranks. Why is it that one rarely finds older, more mature people in your movement – people in their 40s, 50s and 60s who have dedicated their lives to Islam and whose faith and services cannot be doubted? Do you really believe that a teenager or a young man in his early twenties is more qualified to chart a course

American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who was assassinated by a targeted US drone attack in 2012). While most members of this group do not actively engage in *jihād* themselves, their writings lay the foundations for the position of the next group.

7. Radical *jihād*ist Salafis: Encompassing radical theological and political positions, this ‘strand’ of Salafism includes militant organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS. While I have differentiated between these last two categories, many would correctly point out that they are a continuum, without a clear dividing line separating them. It is worthy of mention, here, that though they may espouse some strain of the Salafi methodology in their theological positions, they are typically condemned by all other Salafis on account of their militancy. Additionally, these groups emphasize issues that most other Salafis don’t (such as their version of *jihād*) and ignore issues that mainstream Salafis would discuss. (For the record, it should be noted that these groups originated from a union of splintered sub groups of the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Salafism in the early 1980s – hence, technically, they are not of ‘pure’ Salafi origin).

The cursory and incomplete list above demonstrates the problem in attributing the term ‘Salafi’ to any one of these designated groups. The existence of so much disagreement between the various strands of Salafis highlights the very real problem of describing as ‘Salafi’ any of the above issues as one collective whole: none of these individual groups is representative of Salafism in its entirety.

II. Positive Aspects of Salafism

Salafism, in representing a methodology espousing the aspiration toward a pristine Islam, has been a positive force. There was a time in the 90s when the Salafi methodology, as represented by popular international English-speaking clerics, attracted large segments of Western youth.

Some positives of the Salafi movement are:

forward for the Muslims living in the West than those double or triple in age? Lastly, be careful of reading your prejudices and preconceived notions into other people and clerics, for it is very possible that you criticize in a person a flaw or opinion that does not actually exist and will have to answer to Allah for your false allegations. It is foolish to create enemies of people who are not your enemies, and it will be harmful to you in this world and possibly the next.

- 1) Primacy of the Sacred Texts. The Salafi methodology of taking recourse to the Qur'an and Sunnah challenges Muslims to approach the Sacred Texts for guidance and understanding, and not just spiritual blessings. This is in stark contrast to some other traditionalist schools that discourage their adherents from deriving any meanings or rulings for fear of misunderstanding them, so much so that some Muslim sects claim that *ḥadīth* books should never be read except by specialists and perhaps even discourage an active and academic study of the Qur'an.
- 2) Encourages critical engagement with modern customs and cultures in light of the Qur'an and Sunnah, with a marked emphasis on solid evidence, as opposed to what Shaykh so-and-so said or what one's forefathers practiced. As such, Salafism appears to be *liberating* from the confines of 'cultural Islam', offering an avenue toward an unadulterated universal Islam that transcends time and place, and is true to that practiced at the time of revelation.
- 3) It eschews the syncretism of superstitious practices prevalent in folk-versions of Islam, such as the unfounded veneration of saints or the invoking of other than God for one's needs. In this regard, it can be said that Salafism aims to offer a pristine, unmolested framework within which the rituals of Islam ought to be practiced.¹³
- 4) *Ḥadīth* authentication. An undeniable effect that Salafism has had across most Islamic movements is an awareness of the necessity to verify the authenticity of *ḥadīth*. Even those who oppose Salafism are now more precise and exact when quoting *ḥadīths* in their books, and verifying them with verdicts of classical and medieval scholars. This is an extremely positive contribution, and one that can be credited as a legacy of Shaykh al-Albānī and his writings.
- 5) A general and more comprehensive awareness of the branches of academic Islam. An average Salafi would be cognizant of the role of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, the importance of *muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth*, the basic structure and scope of *'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, and so forth. It is safe to say that an average follower of Salafism is more aware of the academic disciplines underpinning Islam than an average follower of *any* other tradition.

¹³ In many ways, Salafis wish to do with Sufism and folk-Islam what the Protestant Reformation aimed to do with Catholicism (with obvious dissimilarities as well of course).

- 6) Salafīs have an enviably pure theology. Any objective researcher will find that the *Atharī* creed is the earliest documented Sunnī creed, pre-dating the *kalām*-based creeds of the Ashā‘irah and Māṭūrīdiyāh.¹⁴ This is manifested in numerous theological treatises that still exist from the late second and early third Islamic centuries (some of which predate ‘*Aqīdah al-Ṭaḥāwīyyah*). The *Atharī* creed was the dominant strand of Sunnī Islam in the fourth and fifth Islamic centuries,¹⁵ and although it came to be limited to the Ḥanbalī School of the sixth century as a result of political changes, it received a reviving boost from the ever-phenomenal Ibn Taymiyya, from whom it still continues to receive vigor.¹⁶
- 7) Dispersal of Islamic knowledge and the revitalization of the Islamic libraries. Salafism has contributed immensely to research via the mass printing of thousands of edited manuscript works, on all sciences of Islam. Even detractors of Salafism take recourse to books printed at Salafī publishing houses, and academics continue to benefit from their online Islamic search engines, electronic repositories, and forums. Any Islamic library in the world today will have a good percentage of works edited and printed by Salafīs because Salafism concerns itself with the classical tradition of Islam.

¹⁴ This is the view of almost all non-Muslim academics who specialize in Islamic theology, from Ignaz Goldziher to Richard M. Frank, George Makdisi and Joseph van Ess. While it is true that most of these names are *dismissive* of the *Atharī* creed because they view it as being overtly simplistic, they acknowledge that this trend of proto-Sunnism pre-dates the *kalām* trend of Ash‘arism.

Some modern Ash‘arites, despite all evidence to the contrary, continue to paint an incorrect picture of this reality, in which it is alleged that Ibn Taymiyya ‘founded’ a new understanding of Islam. In my own personal library, as I write these lines, I can see around a dozen theological treatises in my bookshelf written before al-Ash‘arī, all of which affirm Allah’s Attributes completely and unconditionally, and refute *kalām*. One may disagree with Ibn Taymiyya, but one cannot historically deny that the general creed that Ibn Taymiyya preached pre-dates him by at least five centuries.

¹⁵ My doctoral dissertation at Yale, which was an analytical study of Ibn Taymiyya’s *magnum opus* entitled *Averting the Conflict Between Reason and Revelation*, began with an introductory chapter of around a hundred pages in which I documented the rise of the Asharite school. In it, I clearly demonstrate that the school began as a small, outcast movement, was initially persecuted by other movements, and due to historical reasons (which I delineate there in detail), eventually manage to supplant the dominant *Atharī* creed and become the official creed of the Seljuqs and later Islamic dynasties. The claim of modern Ash‘arīs that they have always been the dominant understanding of Sunnism is historically untrue.

¹⁶ It has been my contention that if Allah had not blessed the *Atharī* creed with someone of the caliber of Ibn Taymiyya as a defense lawyer and public advocate, it would have long dwindled into a miniscule movement. On a personal note, the towering personality and sharp insights of Ibn Taymiyya have had a profound impact on my own thought as well, and I consider him to be one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, intellectual minds that our Ummah has every seen. Sadly, almost all Salafīs suffice in *reading* Ibn Taymiyya (while they themselves are not qualified to understand some of his own writings, particular those sections that deal with Hellenistic thought and *falsafa*), but don’t dare *follow* Ibn Taymiyya’s footsteps. Had Ibn Taymiyya been alive today, he would not have written the works that he did; rather, he would have paid attention to the intellectual threats the Ummah is currently facing. Ibn Taymiyya wrote in response to the challenges of *his* day; modern Salafīs are, for the most part, unwilling to venture outside of the territories and ideas that Ibn Taymiyya wrote about seven hundred years ago and face the challenges of *our* day.

- 8) Avoidance of most *shirk* and innovations in rituals. No matter what its faults, as a whole, the Salafī movement has avoided falling into most categories of *shirk*, and its over-cautious vigilance against innovations has safeguarded for it an enviable purity in the rituals of Islamic worship. Erring on the side of extreme caution (while no doubt problematic in its own light) saves the Salafī creed from the more egregious examples of heresies that most other movements suffer from.

In all of this, Salafism is a *dynamically oriented* movement that aims to *empower* individual Muslims *via direct access* to the Qur'an and Sunnah, and thus equips its adherents with knowledge to *challenge* authoritarianism, *question* blind-allegiance, and *correct* the corruption of cult-leaders. No wonder then that Salafism, as a methodology, appeals to the rational and inquisitive mind, and sits comfortably with the human *fiṭrah*.

III. Some Criticisms of the Movement

The Salafī movement, like any other, is as fallible as the people who adhere to it. The abstract notion of 'Salafism' (as a Platonic Universal) does not exist outside of the very real and tangible world that humans inhabit; and since all humans are prone to error, the Salafī movement has also manifested some errors and inconsistencies in its claim to follow the earliest of generations.

The understanding of the *Salaf* includes many fundamental issues that are completely neglected or even contradicted by contemporary Salafī groups. Additionally, there is a methodological flaw in attempting to extrapolate a *salafī* position (meaning: a position that the *salaf* would hold) about a modern issue that the *salaf* never encountered. The 'Salafī position' (meaning one that is held by some scholars of the modern Salafī movement) with respect to questions on citizenship in nation-states, democracy, the role of women in today's society, the permissibility of voting, and the issue of *jihād* in the modern world, etc., are merely personal opinions (*fatāwā*) of the scholars who pronounce them and cannot be representative of the views of the first three generations of Islam.

An important disclaimer before I begin my list. As I list these points, I stress that for *each one*, one can find plenty of exceptions on an individual level, and even in some strands of Salafism. ***When I list these points, I am speaking on a holistic level, fully realizing that there are inherent problems associated with such sweeping***

generalizations. While the positives that I listed in the previous section abound in all strands, **these negatives that follow are not as universal, nor, for the most part, are they explicitly encouraged.**

Nonetheless, I stand by what I say: that the criticisms that follow are observable trends in the movement as a whole, and exceptions (and they are plenty) are because those individuals that are free of them have managed to overcome these problems in manners that the movement as a whole does not embrace or teach.

I must also state that of the primary reasons in listing these criticisms is so that Salafīs themselves may reflect on them, and eventually work to minimize them. I pray that a time comes when these generalized criticisms become the exceptions to the rule; however, as I write these lines, these criticisms are prevalent and symptomatic of most strands of the movement.

The most significant ‘problems’ that the Salafī movement suffers from are:

1. Its relegation of theology to the mainly abstract and theoretical doctrines tangential to the message of Islam, to the point that abstract theology and man-made creeds eclipse each and every other aspect of Islam.
Salafīs will regularly categorize other Muslims at the cost of far more important issues. The goal of the *Atharī* creed is to develop a strong relationship with Allah. *Tawhīd* of Allah’s Names and Attributes should not primarily be about debating whether Allah has a *yad* or what the nature of the Throne is – it is about increasing in our remembrance of Allah, glorifying Him more, worshipping Him correctly and sincerely, and focusing on the *actions* these beautiful Names and Attributes should inspire in us. Mere affirmation of the proper *theoretical* doctrine does not necessarily imply a more righteous Muslim. We would do well to remember that Allah will not question the lay-Muslim about abstract issues of theology, but He *will* take him to task for the obligatory actions of religiosity and levels of spirituality.
2. An unfounded hesitation in embracing *tazkiya al-nafs* and little interest in spiritual development. It is an undeniable reality that, as a whole, the Salafi movement has failed to emphasize proper spirituality, or *tazkiya al-nafs*. Yet, this is a Qur’anic concept, one that has unanimously consensus over – for what exactly is *ihsān* in the famous *ḥadīth* of Jibrīl except *tazkiya al-nafs*? The Salafi preoccupation with advanced sciences such as *jarḥ wa-l-tadīl* over the basic need of spiritual purification explains the phenomenon of ‘Salafī-burnout’, an

observable trend of Salafīs forsaking Salafism and either adopting another Islamic trend (typically Sufism, which shows what they were ‘missing’ from Salafism), or leaving practicing Islam altogether.

3. A characteristic harshness evidenced in its treatment of other, non-Salafī, Muslims.

Salafīs believe in their salvific exclusivity.¹⁷ Such an attitude clearly breeds a level of arrogance and conceit amongst lay-Salafīs, and is reminiscent of (but not identical to) religious conceit manifested in the Khārijīs.

This also explains the disproportionate focus on identifying deviants and deviation, which has led to an absurd result of some Salafī laymen knowing more about deviant beliefs than correct ones. The Madkhalīs are the quintessential example of this: any recent convert to Islam from amongst them will be able to recite a list of names of scholars ‘on’ or ‘off’ the Salafī *manhaj*, but will be hard-pressed to mention as many names of Companions; they will know the ‘ruling on greeting a deviant’ but remain ignorant of the *adhkār* for the morning and evening. Unfortunately this is not exclusive to the Madkhalī-Salafīs. The question the movement needs to ask itself is: Is Islam about obsessively investigating the errors of others, or is it about becoming a role model for the promotion of good? “Fortunate is the one who is busy with his own defects, rather than those of others” (*Musnad al-Bazzar*).

4. Many Salafī trends adopt an extremist position regarding *bid‘a* and *mubtad‘is*. This has led to them being mocked by other Muslims – even lay-Muslims recognize that it is ultra-literalistic to consider carpets with prayer lines in the mosque a religious heresy!

Another issue is the treatment of a ‘person of deviation’. Salafīs take statements of the *salaf* regarding treatment of heretical groups as they would the Qur’an and Sunnah. Yet, the treatment of innovators that some of the *salaf* exhibited is something that must be understood in light of the Sacred Texts, and in the context of their times. The rights of Islamic brotherhood, as outlined by our Prophet (*ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*), trump the statement of any one particular scholar, and the treatment of those opposed to the truth varies according to time, place, individual, precise deviation, and context. The religion of Islam does not in and of itself preach guilt by association. The *salaf*’s verdicts need to be

¹⁷ I have spoken at length about the topic of understanding the *ḥadīth* of the seventy-three groups, and explained that it has been misunderstood by many groups. You can find one such lecture here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fDXifZ5jnY>.

understood as their *ijtihād*, applicable and valid in their circumstances. Modern Salafīs need to understand that 21st century America (or England – and yes, this includes Birmingham as well!) is not 7th century Baghdad, and it is unwise, and un-Islamic, to misapply *fatāwa* of the *salaf* in preference to the explicit text of the Qur’an and Sunnah urging Islamic brotherhood. It is an unfortunate fact that Salafīs have a reputation of dividing many communities, making blanket *takfīr* on specific sects, and dissociating from any who disagree with them.

5. Mistaken priorities. The Prophet Muḥammad (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam) said, “Focus on that which benefits you!” For some Salafīs, success is tantamount to refuting ‘deviants’. They revel in writing lots of refutations against people, warning people from associating with ‘deviants’ and using aggressively harsh language to correct people.

The challenges facing the Ummah are no longer about the misinterpretation of Allah’s Names and Attributes or the validity of celebrating the *mawlid*.¹⁸ No doubt, some people, at some level, do need to discuss the reality of the *mawlid*, and the Attributes of Allah and other aspects of faith. **But these are not the problems of our time, nor do they present major challenges to the faith of our young men and women.** These are controversies of a bygone era: the Salafīs and the Ash‘arīs can go on debating such aspects amongst themselves, and I too as a theologian will be glad to participate in such debates, in appropriate forums, in front of appropriate audiences. But the vast majority of our youth couldn’t care less about such abstract non-tangible theoretical discussions. They are struggling to retain faith in their religion, problematizing Darwinism and secularism and post-modernism and humanism and liberalism and a thousand other ‘isms’, while Salafīs (and Deobandis, and Ash‘arīs, and Sufīs) still debate in their circles matters that only concern the 0.1 %.

Islam is witnessing unprecedented ideological attacks from radical secularism; these attacks seek to render Islam in particular - and religiosity in general - anathema to modern society. New atheism and scientism are increasingly in vogue amongst public intellectuals. Modern culture reeks of materialism, hedonism, pornography, and sexual exploitation. Extreme ideologies, including radical-feminism, abound. Quite frankly, rare is it to find a Salafī scholar who is even qualified to discuss these issues, much less refute them; and when one does find such a scholar, it is not *because* of his Salafī training but *in spite* of such training that he is able to take on such challenges.

¹⁸ I have spoken about this issue in more detail [here](#).

Age-old social ills that Islam came to eradicate continue to plague the ‘Muslim world’. Societal problems are rampant, domestic and sexual abuse, violation of worker’s rights, racism, bribery, and so forth are becoming increasingly prevalent, yet, almost *all* of these issues are sidelined. It is inexcusable for jurists to passionately propagate their personal opinions on the prohibition of women driving, or incessantly criticize the celebration of the *mawlid*, for instance, all the while sidelining the widespread and endemic mistreatment of foreign laborers, sexual exploitation of female servants, the problems of bribery and *wāsiṭa* (having a ‘friend’ in an appropriate place to help you), and other well-known trends in their own societies.¹⁹

Any Islam that does not concern itself with the rights of the oppressed and downtrodden is far from the Sunnah of our beloved Prophet (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam), whose very last words urged us to fulfill the rights of the weakest members of society.

6. The Salafī treatment of women. By and large, the modern Salafī movement relegates women to a level that might justly be considered inhumane. A simple manifestation of this is the fact that the mere mention of the name of your wife or your best friend’s wife is censurable.²⁰ If the *name* of a woman is considered taboo, what then of her actual role in society? The Muslim community is in need of intelligent, articulate, sisters capable of explaining the reality of this religion in the face of extremist feminist interpretations.

The treatment of women is not just manifested in, say, prohibiting Saudi women from driving (which, unbelievably, most Saudi Salafī clerics still prohibit as a part of the religion to this day). Sadly, some segments of Western Salafism became infamous for serial marriages and divorces, single-mothers were taken advantage of, children were sired and abandoned, and fornication itself became rampant. To be clear, this was in a small strand, within particular demographics of American and British Salafism, and manifested a reality that no cleric would ever justify Islamically. Nonetheless, these symptoms were so common that

¹⁹ The odd and rare *khuṭba* here and there on these topics does not mitigate the fact that addressing such issues are not *central* to the Salafī call, despite the fact that these issues are *rampant* in those societies. This is not meant only as a criticism of Saudi clergy: the same goes for all other societies as well.

²⁰ This understanding of seemingly attempting to erase the very existence of women clearly has no precedent in the lives of the *salaf*: the Companions, men and women, knew each other’s names very well and conversed with one another if there was a need to do so. Again, this is not to deny the very real Islamic etiquette that direct interactions between the opposite genders should be minimal, for a legitimate need, and with proper decorum. But once again, as with theology, Salafīs take a concept that might have some legitimacy and then pervert and distort it to an exaggerated level.

they could not be ignored, and illustrated an underlying problem about Salafi views on women, and a general lack of proper *tarbiyya*.

7. Unquestioning allegiance to a group of ‘senior scholars’ that serve as final arbiters on all matters. For a movement that claims to champion free-thinking and eschew blind-following, it is sad that most Salafīs are sectarian and narrow-minded about following the ‘*Kibar*’ (senior scholars). The fact that the ‘*Kibar*’ are all typically of one particular nationality, and government appointed, is rarely brought up in polite conversation. The religion of Islam, and even the *Atharī* creed, does not have specific human guardians whom Allah has appointed as Divine Representatives of His will on earth. Disagreeing with a group of scholars, no matter how ‘senior’, is not tantamount to disagreeing with Allah and His Messenger.

Our Prophet (*ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said, “Scholars are the inheritors of the prophets.” I am not, God-forbid, disputing the importance and need of Islamic scholarship itself. Nor am I claiming that minor students of knowledge are allowed to unconditionally trump scholars who are more learned. What is being disputed is limiting scholars to a particular, like-minded, homogenous group of one nationality. Scholars of Islam are plentiful, and are found from all ethnicities, and Salafīs should be broad minded enough to take from each scholar his specialty.

Salafīs would do well to remember that amongst the most vocal critics of Ibn Taymiyya himself during his time were his fellow Ḥanbalites (i.e., the ‘*kibār*’ of eighth century Damascus), who could not understand why he would want to change the style of writing and method of teaching they were accustomed to.

8. A severely handicapped understanding of the modern political arena. One wonders how anyone who claims to follow Ibn Taymiyya, and reads first-hand how frequently he challenged the rulers publicly, can then adopt such a quietist servile obsequious attitude towards rulers whose crimes far exceed anything the rulers during Ibn Taymiyya’s times did.

I am not arguing for these scholars to call for civil war, but I *am* saying that a middle ground needs to be demonstrated, where public violations from the rulers are publicly criticized. Islam demands that scholars keep the rulers in check, not the other way around. As it is, the mainstream position of most Saudi Salafīs is that *any* criticism of the current rulers is tantamount to a theological deviation. As I write these lines, specific policies enacted by the ruling family of

that region towards the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters, and the silence of the scholars in the face of this blatant injustice, is deafening. As for the stance of a mainstream faction of Egyptian Salafis, as represented in the Nour Party of Egypt and its support of the Sisi regime, it is too pathetic to even warrant refutation. And the list of such stances goes on and on.

IV. Conclusion

Rashid Rida (d. 1935) was the first scholar to popularize the term ‘Salafī’ to describe a particular movement that he spearheaded. That movement sought to reject the ossification of the *madhhabs*, and rethink through the standard issues of *fiqh* and modernity, at times in very liberal ways. A young, budding scholar by the name of al-Albānī read an article by Rida, and then took this term and used it to describe another, completely different movement. Ironically, the movement that Rida spearheaded eventually became Modernist Islam and dropped the ‘Salafī’ label, and the legal methodology that al-Albānī championed – with a very minimal overlap with Rida’s vision of Islam – retained the appellation ‘Salafī’. Eventually, al-Albānī’s label was adopted by the Najdī *da‘wah* as well, until it spread in all trends of the movement. Otherwise, before this century, the term ‘Salafī’ was not used as a common label and proper noun.²¹ Therefore, the term ‘Salafī’ is a modern term that has attached itself to an age-old school of theology, the *Atharī* school.

I believe that the Salafī movement is a *human* movement, like all other movements of Islam.²² That is because Allah did not reveal the ‘Salafī movement’; rather He revealed the Qur’an, and sent us a Prophet (*ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*). The Salafī movement is as human as the people who are a part of it are, which means its mistakes will be the mistakes of humans. This also explains why there is no ‘one’ Salafī movement, but rather a collection of miscellaneous movements that all can be gathered under the rubric of Salafism. I believe that no one movement can claim to be *the* exact understanding of Islam, and while some no doubt are closer to the truth in some matters than others, *every movement is human and fallible*. I do not believe any one sect, group or theology has a monopoly of the truth.

The Salafī movement as a whole has some noble ideals that it strives to achieve, but one cannot ignore its many faults as well. Someone might ask, “Is it not possible to divest

²¹ Yes, it does exist in a handful of descriptions in classical and medieval Islam, but it is undeniable that the term was not in vogue, nor did it have the connotations it does now.

Salafism of these negatives, retain its positive elements, and redirect it in a better course?” Indeed, that is what many within the movement seek to do, and in all honesty I support such efforts, in Salafism and in all trends in Islam. However, the question becomes: when so many methodological mistakes and negativities are associated with a label, and the label itself no longer reflects what it originally aspired to, then why continue to identify oneself with it? This is especially the case when one realizes that this label has no intrinsic religious value and was in fact popularized only very recently in Islamic history.

Because of this, I no longer view myself as being a part of any of these Salafī trends discussed in the earlier section. For those who still wish to identify with the label, I pray that you recognize the faults listed above and work to rectify them. Those who choose to abandon such a label have every right and excuse to do so as well. Islam is broader than any one label.

While after more than two decades of continuous research, I do subscribe to the *Atharī* creed, and view it to be the safest and most authentic creed, ***Islam is more than just a bullet-point of beliefs***, and my ultimate loyalty will not be to a humanly-derived creed, but to Allah and His Messenger, and then to people of genuine *īmān* and *taqwa*. Hence, I feel more of an affinity and brotherhood with a moderate Deobandi Tablighi Maturidi, who might differ with me on some issues of *fiqh* and theology and methodology, but whose religiosity and concern for the Ummah I can relate to, than I do with a hard-core Salafī whose only concern is the length of my pants and my lack of quoting from the ‘*Kibār*’ that he looks up to. Such a moderate Sufī, as well, will see me as a fellow believer in Allah and His Messenger, with trivial differences, whereas the standard hard-line Salafī will have already pigeonholed and classified me based on his pre-conceived perceptions, and his only concern will be to ‘warn against me’. And while I might agree with the hard-core Salafī that Allah has indeed *istawā ‘alā al-arsh* (risen over the Throne) in a manner that befits Him, his myopic narrow-mindedness of the problems facing the Ummah, and self-righteous arrogance, and his cultish mentality, will be major turn-offs for me personally, and harmful to the Ummah as a whole. Hence, I do feel more of an affinity with a moderate Sufī who reads more Qur’an than I do and is more conscious of his earnings being *ḥalāl* than I am, than I do with a fanatic Salafī from whom no religiosity is seen other than quoting creeds and refuting ‘deviants’. That doesn’t make the Sufī ‘right’ in his theology; it is merely an indication that Islam, and Islamic allegiances, are broader than some issues.

One last point, and an important disclaimer.

Those who have long held grudges against the Salafīs will, understandably, use this article to cast further aspersions against the movement. That, in essence, translates into *all* other trends in Islam: from the progressives and modernists to the Shī'ites and Sufīs and Ash'arīs. The fact that someone like myself, who was for a time associated with the movement, is pointing out mistakes that these other groups verbalized will naturally cause them to rejoice. For all of those who wish to exult, realize that my theology is still the same as it was two decades ago, and that your movements are just as human as Salafism.

In other words, I believe that *each and every* movement of Islam is a *human* one, with positives and negatives, and while some movements are closer than others to the Prophet's Sunnah in some areas, no one movement with its human scholars can ever claim to be *the* representative of our Prophet (ﷺ), and officially represent *the* religion of Allah, on earth. Amongst all the movements, the Salafīs do have some great contributions in the area of creed, but that does not make them the champions of truth in each and every area of Islam. We should take the good from them, and correct their mistakes whenever possible, in a wise and gentle manner. And whoever wishes to reform the movement from within, my prayers and thoughts are with him, but we all have our niche, and I find myself more useful and enthused benefitting the broader Ummah.

As for the disclaimer: I shall always retain respect for a movement that has shaped me immensely, and whose scholars I benefitted from and genuinely admire, even if I disagree with some methodological issues. Therefore, if anyone feels that there is undue harshness at places in this article, I do sincerely apologize for that, for it is not my intention to insult or malign. Perhaps, if harshness is felt, it may be attributed to the fact that I expected better from a movement that claims to follow the *salaf* of this Ummah, but that I feel falls far short of that noble goal. It is my earnest desire that the Salafi movement in particular, and in fact all movements of Islam in general, live up to the pure ideals that our religion calls for, and our Prophet (ﷺ) demonstrated.

In the end, the best speech is the Speech of Allah, and the best guidance is the guidance of His Messenger; and all righteous and sincere Muslims, Salafīs and non-Salafīs, are attempting our best to understand and implement, to the best of our abilities, the best of all Speech, and the best of all guidance.

A note to my detractors: It is un-Islamic to quote one sentence from this article and portray it as representative of my entire opinion. Context is crucial, otherwise even the Qur'an and Sunnah can easily be misunderstood. Feel free to differ, but please link to the entire article, and let educated readers decide my views for themselves as they read the complete article, and see my praise alongside my criticisms of the movement, and the disclaimers in the end.