Part 6: Salafism; An ideological precursor to violent extremism?

Academic and journalistic discourses regarding Salafism continue to further the notion that its ideology acts as a precursor to violent radicalisation and extremism. Up until relatively recently – particularly from an outsider perspective – theories purporting this went largely unchallenged.[1] This paper will examine Salafism in light of such discourse. Discussion of extremist origins, and the traits that are characteristic of violent extremism, will provide a contextual basis upon which to determine whether Salafism's ideological and methodological mosaic accords with emerging profiles of movements that advocate violence and terrorism today. The import of this paper is to introduce an alternative narrative to the existing discourse; however, from an insider perspective. This, therefore, serves to widen the existing discourse by distinguishing other movements that, while possessing similar doctrinal aspects to Salafism, differ in rudimentary aspects of both ideology and practice. Reference should also be made to the delineation between belief-related (ideological) and deed-related (behavourial) components of extremism in order to highlight areas of demarcation between Salafism's ideological foundation and practice and that of the other formerly distinct movements now being equated with it within recent academic typologies. Such differentiation is necessary in view of particular academic observations suggesting that:

> *"Radical interpretations do contain similarities with 'Jihadi' [extremist] discourse, using the same vocabulary…and often even the same religious terminology. This fact may explain the connection many young people perceive between wahhabism and jihadism."* [2]

Further support is garnered from research that observes:

> *"Even though it does not incite terrorism directly, Salafi doctrine does provide the same religious framework that is used by radical groups such as al-Qaeda."* [3]

Other observations insist:

> *'It is obvious that the spread of Salafism…contributes to the increase of takfirism, for Salafism is the ideological parent, root and base of takfirism.'* [4]

Oliveti's work in this field ends up being a rather unsophisticated polemic against Salafism and cannot, therefore, be considered in the same realm as other existing academic attempts to explore the movement or its ideology; however, such work illustrates the increasing importance for insider perspectives on this area of research in order to effectively counter the misconceptions expounded therein. In order to illustrate

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[1] Lambert, R: 'Salafi and Islamist Londoners: Stigmatised minority faith communities countering al-Qaida,' Crime Law Soc Change (2008) 50:73-89

[2] Cesari, J: 'Muslims in Europe an d the Risk of Radicalism,' cited from 'Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge in Europe', Chapter 8, p.100, Ashgate Publishing Company, Edited by Coolsaet, R. 2008

[3] Ibid, p.98

[4] Oliveti, V: 'Terror's Source: The Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its Consequences,' Amadeus Books, 2001, pp. 77-78

this necessity, Oliveti's oversimplification of Salafism simply need be cited. He summarises Salafism to be the following:

i.   It is literalist

ii.   It is anti-reason and anti-philosophy

iii.   It is anti-culture (or at least 'high anti-culture' [inferring backwardness[5]])

iv.   It is anti-nomian (that is, it refuses to accept traditional authority)

v.   It is internally unstable (it has no internal safety mechanisms or 'checks and balances') and;

vi.   It is aggressive and repressive.[6]

He provides a more extensive category of tenets perceived to constitute the Salafi ideology and in doing so exposes the bias that permeates his entire research. For the sake of brevity, these categories will not be explored in this chapter. His conclusion, after the above-mentioned summation, should be referred to as indeed, it is paradoxical to his main assertion of Salafism being a violent extreme methodology: *'Wahhabi-Salafism as such is not, however, murderous.'* [7] He next proceeds to attribute violent/terrorist (and "murderous") characteristics to, who he categorises as, *'Salafi-Takfiris'.*[8]

I would argue that jihadi/extremist thought actually adopts established Islamic lexicology/terminology in an attempt to promote itself as being the most authentic and the correct interpretation of the religion and therefore, in order to achieve legitimacy to these claims, *attaches* itself to Salafism. This is because of the fact that Salafism has the closest ideological affinity to their 'jihadi' way of thought. In support of this assertion, Lambert highlights:

> *"The fact that al-Qaida terrorists adapt and distort Salafi and Islamist approaches to Islam does not mean that Salafis and Islamists are implicitly linked to terrorism or extremism."* [9]

Before proceeding to examine Salafism in more detail, it is important to outline existing academic and journalistic impressions of the movement in order to provide a premise from which the ensuing examination and counter narrative can systematically develop. Reference has already been made to Oliveti's work on Salafism that concludes the

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[5] The suggestion in parenthesis in this instance is the author's.

[6] Oliveti, V: 'Terror's Source: The Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its Consequences,' Amadeus Books, 2001, pp. 43

[7] Ibid,

[8] Ibid, pp.43-48

[9] Lambert, R: 'Ignoring Lessons of the past' Criminal Justice Matters, Issue 73, September 2008, p.23, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

movement's ideology is the 'parent' of *takfirism.*[10] Subscribers to this view have often relied on research that regards Salafism as a new, alien concept ignoring recent academic discourse that has attempted to provide a more historically accurate portrayal of the movement and its ideology.[11] In fact, Salafism or, as it is often pejoratively termed, Wahabbism, is considered the precursor to violent radicalisation.[12] Roald defines Salafism as one of the extreme movements among Scandanavian converts and identifies well known extremists, like Osama bin Laden and Abu Hamza al-Masri, as Salafis, despite their well known beliefs of takfeer against fellow Muslims and terrorism - positions contrary to established Salafist doctrines.[13] She is not alone in making this distinction and, in fact, it is hardly surprising that such conclusions are reached, especially when an element of extremist protagonists themselves affiliate their ideologies and practices with Salafism.[14]

More recent attempts to define Salafism from a non-Muslim perspective can be observed in academic works like those of Wiktorowicz[15] and perhaps, to a degree, papers like the Combating Terrorism Center's executive report on militant ideologies. The latter research paper attempted to differentiate and map the array of movements perceived as influential to extremist thought and development.[16] Despite my reservations regarding the typology of Salafis developed by Wiktorowicz, and the overall import and conclusions of the Combating Terrorism Center's (CTC) executive report, some of their respective findings provide a platform upon which a *Muslim* insider's perspective can emerge to enable a comprehensive and, arguably even more accurate piece of research that contrasts or, at the very least, complements existing work in this field. Although the CTC report concludes the '*jihadi*' ideology to be a 'subset' of the Salafist ideology,[17] their depiction of this can be modified to illustrate the *positioning* of Islamic movements amongst wider Muslim populations. Their theoretical mode illustrates four Muslim *constiutencies* - *Muslim, Islamist, Salafis* and *Jihadis* - as respective subsets of one another, suggesting a shift away from shared core beliefs, with the '*jihadi's*' being the most marginalised.

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[10] Oliveti, V: 'Terror's Source: The Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its Consequences,' Amadeus Books, 2001.

[11] Hamed, S: 'The Attraction of "Authentic" Islam: Salafism and British Muslim Youth', in Meijer, Roel, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's new Religious Movement.* London: Hurst, forthcoming, 2009. p.10

[12] Moussaoui, A S: 'Zacarias Moussaoui: The Making of a Terrorist,' Serpent's Tail, 2003.

[13] Roald, A S: 'New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts,' Brill, 2004, pp. 150-161

[14] Oliveti, V: 'Terror's Source: The Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its Consequences,' Amadeus Books, 2001.

[15] Wiktorowicz, Q: 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement: Studies in Conflict & Terrorism' Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 29: 2006

[16] McCants W, Brachman, J and Felter, J: 'Militant Ideology Atlas' Executive Report, November 2006, Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy

[17] Ibid, p.10

Empirical evidence provides a strong argument for an alternative understanding of their model. Instead of each constituency being solely a subset of the other, (as intimated in the CTC report), an alternative depiction can be given, highlighting the *embedding* of movements among particular communities or groups. Saggar's findings also support an alternative theoretical basis for the CTC model. In his lecture, entitled, '*The One Per Cent World: Managing the Myth of Muslim Religious Extremism*,' he identifies a '*circle of tacit support*' amongst some Muslims in Britain for violent extremism.[18] He further identifies violent extremists as the:

> *"…tiny element [the 'red dot' at the centre of his concentric circles diagram] in a much larger sea of non-violent moderation."* [19]

His isolation of violent extremists further reinforces the author's suggested alternative understanding of CTC's model; namely, the embedment and marginalisation of the extremist, takfeeri groups among larger Muslim groups or communities. It is important to note that this positioning or embedment can be a deliberate strategy of particular extremist communities or groups and is either covert or overt, depending on the prevailing socio-political climate affecting the communities they are positioned among at any given time. That said, the explanation supporting the CTC's depiction of constituencies remains relevant and should not be completely discounted due to their legitimate observation that:

> *"These constituencies can be envisioned as a series of nesting circles. Each constituency is responsive to leaders in the broader constituencies of which it is a part, but each has its own set of thinkers that are best positioned to influence their base. The largest constituency is comprised of Muslims…This includes Sunnis…and Shi'is…and ranges from secularists to fundamentalists."* [20]

Wiktorowicz is perhaps one of the few researchers who first attempted to obtain *primary* data that accurately reflects a Salafi's (Salafist) perspective on Salafism. Aspects of his research in Amman, Jordan during the late 1990's involved interviews with renowned senior students of knowledge and scholars.[21] Whilst highlighting this point, it is interesting to note that, up until recently,[22] he continued to maintain positions similar

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[18] Saggar, S: 'The One Per Cent World: Managing the Myth of Muslim Religious Extremism,' University of Sussex, Lecture 16th March 2006. Transcript, pp.11-12

[19] Ibid

[20] McCants W, Brachman, J and Felter, J: 'Militant Ideology Atlas' Executive Report, November 2006, Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, p.5

[21] An example of this can be witnessed in his research conducted in Jordan with individuals like Shaikh Alee Hasan Abdul Hameed in 1997, later published as Wiktorowicz, Q: 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement: Studies in Conflict & Terrorism' Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 29: 207- 239, 2006

[22] During informal discussion between the researcher and Wiktorowicz in Oxford (2008) during the Demos, GFF and UK Cabinet Office's 'Responding to Radicalisation' Conference, he indicated that a more precise categorisation of Salafism that departed from his earlier typology could be used. This categorisation would be singular in describing Salafism and could possibly be phrased 'Salafiyyah Wasitiyyah' - The balanced or 'middle' Salafism. Despite the above mentioned encounter, the researcher has not established whether Wiktorowicz has developed this strand of thought further in his subsequent academic writings or discourse.

to Roald et al. who considered extremists like Osama bin Laden to be adherents of Salafism. That said, he does however, acknowledge:

> *"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."* [23]

I propose, in light of these observations, that Wiktorowicz's research, at that particular stage, was inconclusive as indeed, had it been concluded, he is likely to have reached the conclusion that Osama bin Laden was indeed one such individual who could be described as *'claiming the Salafi mantel'*[24] while not belonging to the movement due to his declared extremist takfeeri beliefs.

One of the most significant areas of Wiktorowicz's informative research, which has since found resonance with Muslim and non-Muslim academics and practitioners alike, is his delineation of Salafism into three distinct strands; *Salafi-purists, Salafi-politicos* and *Salafi-jihadis*.[25] He refers to the discord that arose between junior and senior clerics in Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War as the period when Salafi movements fractured into the three factions constituting his present typology.[26] I submit that such delineation fails to effectively take into account the historical and ideological origins and causes of extremism discussed in the previous chapter. A historical consideration in this instance is necessary if an understanding about earlier fractious movements, such as the Khawaarij and Shia etc, and their relationship to contemporary counterparts, are to be understood. Additionally, emerging movements and groups themselves have sought to unequivocally demarcate their respective ideological, political or violent revolutionary affiliations.

Salafi-purists/quietists would, in this instance, attribute to themselves an ideological orthodoxy and astuteness in their religious practice, whereas the '*politico*' and '*jihadi*' strands would make similar claims whilst sitting comfortably under the remaining political and violent revolutionary affiliations that are synonymous with the Ikhwan al Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood) and takfeeri movements respectively. Evidence in support of the aforementioned demarcation between Salafis, Ikhwan al Muslimeen and takfeeris is evident from the work of leading protagonists of the former, like Syed Qutb. His political beliefs and template or 'roadmap', 'Signposts' is a classic example. This work, as Kepel illustrates, outlined a revolutionary strategy to implement Allah's Lordship (*Haakimiyyah*) in what he considered, a disbelieving Egyptian society.[27] In their most sedate form, Qutb's ideas espoused the political ambitions of the Ikhwan al Muslimeen movement of that era and, in their more extreme manifestations, they

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[23] Wiktorowicz, Q: 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement: Studies in Conflict & Terrorism' Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 29: p.207, 2006

[24] Ibid

[25] Ibid, pp.217-228

[26] Wiktorowicz, Q: 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement: Studies in Conflict & Terrorism' Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 29: p.232, 2006

[27] Kepel, G: 'The Roots of Radicalism', Saqi, 2005.

expounded the justification of takfeer upon every society, including Muslim, which failed for any reason to completely establish Tawheed al-haakimiyyah as the sole source of legislation. These two positions reflect both the political and takfeeri spheres against which Salafism has been polemical up until very recently; particularly as it relates to the political sphere.

In view of the above, consideration of three distinct movements – Salafism, Muslim Brotherhood and Takfeeris/Kharijites - as being distinct strands of existing Salafi typologies serve to obfuscate and unnecessarily complicate the precise reality of each movement today. In fact, when considering the Ikhwani ideology against Wiktorowicz's delineation, their discourse fluctuates between political and takfeeri/revolutionary concepts. This becomes apparent when considering some of the Ikhwan al Muslimeen's publications. These are unequivocal in the movement's demarcation from Salafism. In fact, there is an assertion that aspects of Salafism, in its contemporary form, emanated from the Ikhwan al Muslimeen.[28] Another aspect of Salafism is, according to Eleftheriadou, (a contributor to the Ikhwani publication referenced here), the '*Salafi-Jihadi*' trend. Both 'trends' according to her observations, have '*politico-philosophical*' approaches that lack concise theoretical distinctions.[29] The inference to a political impetus in Salafism can be countered by evidence pointing to the contrary. For example, Wiktorowicz acknowledges Salafi-purists as being apolitical; *"Purists do not view themselves as a political movement; they in fact often reject reference to Salafis as a harakat (movement), because this carries political connotations."*[30] DEMOS research findings also confer with this observation.[31] The Ikhwani methodology and their resultant emphasis on politics is avidly captured in their own words:

> *"Dawa (Islamic propagation) is legitimate but what is to be done in the meantime[?][32] ...Al Banna advocated the postponement of the shift from educational to political work for only after the entire society endorses the Muslim Brotherhood's message. However, with the passing of time the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt and beyond, had to find a way to deal with the regime politically."*[33]

The Ikhwan al Muslimeen's declared political intent is thus clearly underscored by this statement and, based upon their disassociation from Salafism, should not be considered *Salafi-politicos* as intimated in Wiktorowicz's typology. A subsequent counter argument may be proffered stating Wiktorowicz's typology refers specifically to the factions that

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[28] Eleftheriadou, M: 'Muslim Brotherhood Vs Salafi-Jihadi Islam: Confronting the "Black Sheep" of Political Islam,' Center for Mediterranean & Middle Eastern Studies, January 2008 ; Issue 9, pp.2-8

[29] Ibid, p.2

[30] Wiktorowicz, Q: 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement: Studies in Conflict & Terrorism' Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 29: p.218, 2006

[31] Briggs, R. Fieschi, C. Lownsbrough, H: 'Bringing it Home: Community-based approaches to counter-terrorism,' DEMOS, 2006, p.62

[32] Bold italics are the researcher's emphasis

[33] Eleftheriadou, M: 'Muslim Brotherhood Vs Salafi-Jihadi Islam: Confronting the "Black Sheep" of Political Islam,' Center for Mediterranean & Middle Eastern Studies, January 2008 ; Issue 9, p.6

arose following the 1991 Gulf War. The importance of referring to the earlier, more classical period of Islam is essential in order to provide a comprehensive context of when the emergence of similar factitious groups began. Wiktorowicz is correct in highlighting the causes of the split between senior and junior clerics, and the resulting aspersions cast on those who dissented from the main body of Ulema. They were labeled Khawaarij, due to their beliefs that were considered synonymous with Syed Qutb's. In fact, clerics such as Safar Hawali were subsequently labeled *'Qutubis'*.[34] Cesari also supports the argument for delineation between Salafism and the Ikhwani ideology and practice when observing:

> *"Pan-Islamist movements should not be constructed as monolithically reactionary or defensive. A distinction must be drawn between the wahhabi/salafi and tablighi movements on the one hand, and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other."* [35]

Similarly, the *jihadi*/takfeeri extreme is underscored by unequivocal declarations made by its adherents such as Osama bin Laden, Ayman Zawihiri and their associates who, by the very nature of such statements, dissociated themselves from Salafism, both ideologically and methodologically.[36] In fact, extremist protagonists, such as Abdullah el Faisal, have proceeded so far as to categorically pronounce takfeer upon Salafis, highlighting the permissibility of killing them.[37] When compared to Salafi doctrines and practice that are underpinned by the ideological as well as historical import and an understanding of the Companions of the Prophet, the inclinations of the above mentioned individuals are those of a Kharijite, takfeeri nature. The author therefore, suggests that consideration of the above mentioned Ikhwani and takfeeri perspectives, together with the proposed theoretical framework discussed, highlight the difficulty surrounding attempts to categorise the three particular constituencies or movements discussed as one broad movement. Their respective ideological and methodological delineations, although similar rudimentarily, have evolved to such a degree that they now remain distinct from each other in particular doctrinal and methodological approaches. To generally categorise them as belonging to one and the same broad spectrum is – to reiterate – obfuscate distinct theological and political differences between movements that have historically been separate.

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[34] McCants W, Brachman, J and Felter, J: 'Militant Ideology Atlas' Executive Report, November 2006, Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, p.10

[35] Cesari, J: 'Muslims in Europe and the Risk of Radicalism' cited in Coolsaet, R: 'Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge in Europe' Ashgate, 2008, p.97.

[36] Osama bin Laden stated in response to an interview question from Hamid Mir of Lahore's 'Dawn' daily newspaper (7th November 2001), regarding the murder of innocent civilians: *"This is a major point of jurisprudence. In my view, if an enemy occupies a Muslim territory and uses common people as human shields, then it is permitted to attack the enemy...America and its allies are massacring us in Palestine, Chechyna, Kashmir and Iraq. The Muslims have the right to attack America in reprisal... The American people...pay taxes to their government, they elect their president, their government manufactures arms and gives them to Israel, and Israel uses them to massacre the Palestinians. The American Congress endorses all government measures and this proves that [all] America is responsible for the atrocities perpetrated against Muslims..."* Cited in: Kepel, G: 'The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West,' The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, pp.124-125.

[37] Refer to el-Faisal's lecture 'The Devil's Deception of the Saudi Salafis' and other sermons of similar import.

Hegghammer and Lacroix introduce a delineation of Salafism which is, perhaps, more accurate in its specificity so far as it relates to Saudi Arabia's political climate during the 50's and 60's.[38] Particular characteristics that emerge from this delineation, later on in their research, find possible correlation with those discovered amongst a few British Salafi communities in the UK today, as will be seen shortly. Hegghammer and Lacroix describe the emergence of two types of Islamism, (one of which has already been highlighted by Wiktorowicz) – the "Islamic Awakening" (*al-sahwa al-Islamiyya*) and a more, *"…isolationist, pietistic and low-class Islamist phenomenon, which can be termed "rejectionist" or "neo-salafi.""[39]* Both strands have coexisted for more than thirty years, each possessing distinct ideological approaches with the former being more politically orientated. Hegghammer and Lacroix's summation of the *al-sahwa* movement is significant insofar as it reintroduces the symbiotic relationship highlighting the movement's ideological affinity and practice; *"Ideologically, the Sahwa represented a blend of the traditional Wahhabi outlook (mainly on social issues) and the most contemporary Muslim Brotherhood approach (especially on political issues)."[40]* The initial phase of the '*rejectionist*' movement can be described as apolitical with an:

> *"…extreme social conservatism, strong emphasis on ritual matters, as well as…scepticism toward the state and its institutions."* [41]

These descriptions accord, to a greater extent, with the UK Salafi position. Interestingly, Hegghammer and Lacroix's observe a particular trend that is symptomatic of group radicalisation:

> *"…whereby a small faction breaks out of a larger and more moderate organisation after a process of politicisation and internal debate. After the break, the behavior of the radicalised faction is more determined by ideology and charismatic leadership than by structural socio-economic and political factors."* [42]

Hamid points to a similar occurrence when Abu Khadeejah and his followers dissociated themselves from Jami'at Minhaj As-Sunnah (JIMAS) and went on to form OASIS and, subsequently Salafi Publications. [43] Ironically, Abu Khadeejah's dissociation was, according to him, due to JIMAS' politicisation of Islam and not visa-versa as observed in Hegghammer and Lacroix's research of Juhayman's rejectionist movement.[44]

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[38] Hegghammer, T and Lacroix, S: 'Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-'Utaybi Revisited,' Cambridge University, International Journal of Middle East Studies (Vol. 39, no.1, 2007, pp. 103-122); http://www.cambridge.org/journals/mes)

[39] Ibid, p.3

[40] Ibid, p.4

[41] Ibid, p.14

[42] Ibid, p.13

[43] Hamid, S: 'The Attraction of "Authentic" Islam: Salafism and British Muslim Youth', in Meijer, Roel, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's new Religious Movement*. London: Hurst, forthcoming, 2009. p.10

[44] Inge, A: 'Salafism in Britain: The New Generation's Rebellion,' unpublished MA dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2008