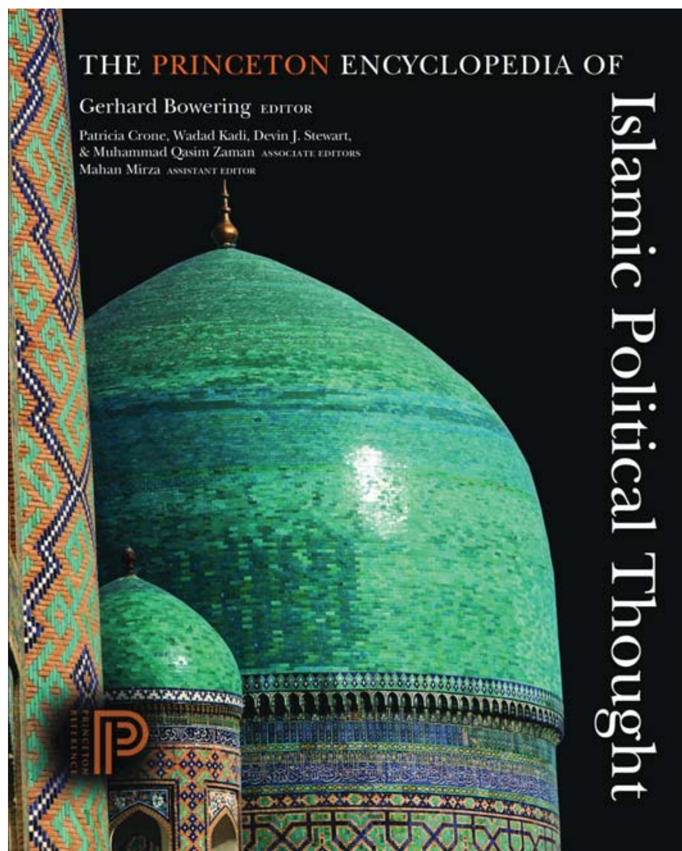

Salafis

The Salafi designation is contested in the scholarly literature as well as among some Muslims, and because of this there is considerable confusion about to whom it applies and the nature of its doctrines. A historically grounded definition maintains that Salafis adhere to a literalist theology that rejects allegorical interpretation and reason-based arguments and claim to be faithful to the teachings of the theological Hanbalis or the *ahl al-ḥadīth*. Salafis insist that their beliefs are identical to those of the first three generations of Muslims, *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* (pious ancestors), from whom they take their name. Their attention is directed at convincing other Muslims of the superiority of Salafi teachings and of the need to abandon reprehensible innovations (*bida'*) allegedly not rooted in Islam, such as superstitious beliefs and the intercessionary practices associated with the

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cult of dead saints. Sufis and Shi'is in particular are the target of Salafi polemical attacks for partaking in forms of unbelief (*kufr*) by not being faithful to a strict conception of God's oneness (*tawḥīd*). Salafism's most prominent premodern authorities are Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), and a number of reformist scholars who followed in their footsteps, such as Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) and Muhammad al-Shawkani (d. 1834), among others. Because Salafis are concerned with theological purity, they engage in exclusionary practices that can attain the level of excommunication (*takfīr*) of fellow Muslims, and embedded in this is the potential for direct action against individuals or institutions.

In legal matters, Salafis are divided between those who, in the name of independent legal judgment (*ijtihād*), reject strict adherence (*taqlīd*) to the four Sunni schools of law (*madhāhib*) and others who remain faithful to these. All Salafis, however, claim that an *ijtihād* based on a probative proof text (*dalīl*) that contradicts an established school's opinion is to be accepted as superior. Moreover, they insist that the canonical hadith corpus, which provides the vast majority of proof texts, is to be considered unconditionally authoritative. In the realm of politics, Salafis do not adhere to any particular ideology—some are quietists whereas others are activists. A commitment to a distinctive creed is Salafism's most characteristic and unifying marker of identity in addition to its followers' effort to reform the beliefs and practices of other Muslims.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the label Salafism was applied to a group of modernizing and rationalist scholars, such as Afghani (1838–97) and Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905). These scholars, however, did not share the literalist theology of the premodern Salafis and were engaged in a project of uplifting Muslim society from a state of decay by finding the philosophical resources that would accomplish this. Legal reform through *ijtihād* formed part of this effort, but not the puritanical theology that lies at the core of Salafi teachings. Furthermore, while the relationship with the West that Afghani and 'Abduh expressed was rivalrous, it also involved adopting and learning from the West's intellectual and scientific achievements.

Salafis are closely identified with the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia because of a shared theological orientation and because the Wahhabis have claimed to be Salafis from the early 20th century, if not before. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia adheres to a Salafi interpretation of Islam, and its promotion and defense have been a source of legitimacy for its ruling family since the mid-18th century. From the 1920s Saudi monarchs regularly patronized Salafis in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, South Asia, and elsewhere and subsidized the publication of this movement's books. Independent of the Saudi connection, Salafis have also had an autonomous history and presence in several countries where they formed associations to promote their respective projects, which tended to focus on religious reform rather than an activist political agenda. In India, for example, the Salafis established the Jam'iyyat Ahl-i Hadith (1906), whereas in Egypt they established the Jama'at Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya (1926). Similar Salafi organizations exist in a number of other countries, including in the West.

The development of a distinctive Salafi political ideology has been in progress since the mid-20th century and has yet to coalesce into a dominant current. This began with the government of Saudi Arabia's promotion of Pan-Islamism against the ideologies of communism and Arab nationalism that threatened its legitimacy while also funding institutions and programs that spread globally a Salafi interpretation of Islam. New self-declared Salafi groups emerged in the 1970s, some of which combined Salafi theology with tenets of the Muslim Brotherhood to form new hybrid ideologies and programs for political action. The more radical of these groups argued on the basis of their interpretation of Ibn Taymiyya that it is permissible to engage in *takfīr* against individuals and groups and, if necessary, to rebel against a state that is not ruling in accordance with the shari'a. From the Muslim Brotherhood, especially the works of Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), they obtained a conceptual framework and organizational strategies with which to launch attacks on governments that do not base their rule and laws on Islamic foundations. In Egypt, one such group was the Islamic Jihad (Jama'at al-Jihad al-Islami), which was established in 1979 by Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Faraj (d. 1982, author of *The Neglected Duty* [*al-Farida al-Gha'iba*]). In Saudi Arabia, Juhayman al-'Utaybi's group, al-Jama'a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba, was formed in 1975 and led a millenarian revolt that included the brief seizure of the great mosque in Mecca in 1979. Since then a plethora of Salafi political groups has been formed, including al-Qaeda and its various affiliates.

Not all Salafi groups preach violent action. Most, in fact, reject the forms of violence advocated by al-Qaeda, and Salafism can best be described as politically fragmented. Three streams can be distinguished in terms of political engagement: (1) the Salafi jihadists, who advocate direct action against the dominant order, including specific states, and wish to re-create the historic caliphate (al-Qaeda exemplifies this tendency); (2) the activists (Harakis), who engage in nonviolent political activism in order to advance specific goals (the Ahl-i Hadith in India and the "Awakening Islamists" in Saudi Arabia [Sahwis] are typical of this stream); and (3) the traditionalists (Taqlidis), who, as quietists, shun all forms of overt political action and argue for obedience to Muslim rulers in order to avoid civil strife (*fitna*). Most Salafis tend to belong to the last group, seeking to transform society through the purification and education of individuals and not through the toppling of the established political order.

See also 'Abduh, Muhammad (1849–1905); Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad (1703–92); Pan-Islamism; Saudi Arabia

Further Reading

David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, 2006; Johannes J. G. Jansen, *The Neglected Duty*, 1986; Malcolm Kerr, *Islamic Reform*, 1966; Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism*, 2009; Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation*, 2006.

BERNARD HAYKEL

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