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The Development of British Salafism

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The popularity of Salafism in the UK is attributable to the convergence of the globalization of Salafi discourse, the search for religious identity among second generation British Muslims seeking "pure" religion, and the competition for recruits between rival Islamic currents. British Salafism has become diversified to such an extent that it is no longer recognizable as a single movement, with the development taking unexpected turns that belie popular monolithic representations.

British Muslim communities comprise a diverse range of traditions, in which four major tendencies are identifiable: the largest numbers of followers come from the Barelwi tradition, followed by Deobandi, then Jamaat-i Islam inspired institutions, and finally the Ahl-i-Hadith network. All of these are theological and ideological trends imported into the UK with the arrival of the early South Asian settler communities in the 1960s and 1970s. The remainder of British Muslims tend to be organized around ethnicity. Only a handful of mosques openly identify themselves as Salafi; key among them are institutions like the Green Lane Mosque in Birmingham, Salafi Institute, Birmingham, Masjid Ibn Taymiyyah in Brixton, and the Islamic Centre of Luton. Pinpointing the precise entry of Salafi ideas into the UK is speculative at best, but it is thought to have occurred towards the late 1980s.[1]

The Emergence of British Salafism

The instrumental organization for the spread of Salafism in the UK was the Jamiyyat Ihya Minhaj as Sunnah, "The Society for the Revival of the Prophetic Way" (JIMAS).[2] Its leader Manwar Ali, also known as "Abu Muntasir," is credited by many as being the father of "Salafi dawah"(proselytizing) in the UK. He is largely responsible for the spread of Salafism among young people through his delivery of countless "study circles" at mosques, community centres, and universities across the country. Furthermore, replicating global patterns, the spread of Salafi interpretations of Islam in the UK was underwritten by the financial investment into religious institutions and distribution of literature from Saudi Arabia and the return of religious studies graduates from Saudi Arabia's two main universities.

Methodologically, Salafism relies upon scriptural literalism and revolves around a set of binary opposites: *tawhid* (oneness of God) and opposition *shirk* (all forms of divine association-ism), loyalty to the *sunnah* (prophetic example) in matters of belief and religious ritual as opposed to *bid'a* (innovation), an emblematic respect for the pious first three generations of Muslims, and general loss of confidence and interest in subsequent phases of Muslim intellectual history, and rejection of *taqlid (*adherence/loyalty to one school of Islamic law) in favour of literalist approaches to Islamic jurisprudence.

The early 1990s was the defining era for second-generation Islamic activism; indeed this decade was perhaps the most intense for its identity politics. Adherents to Salafi perspectives were drawn mainly from second generation male and female South Asian Muslims with a significant number of black and white converts. The average age of followers was between eighteen and thirty years; they were geographically located most often near the mosque communities already mentioned. Membership to religious organizations provided opportunities for the creation of communities of shared meaning and strong friendship networks important to younger people wanting to feel part of something bigger than themselves.

Muslims tired of what they saw as "cultural Islam" found in the Salafi perspective an approach to religious commitment which seemed to be intellectually rigorous, evidence-based, and stripped of the perceived corruptions of the folkloric religion of the Barelwis, or the "wishy washy" alternatives offered by rival Islamic tendencies such as Young Muslims UK or Hizb ut-Tahrir. Adopting a Salafi identity was in effect a process of exchanging and re-routing religious language and symbols. For subscribers to Salafism, the messages of other groups were not seen as convincing due to their lack of scholarly reference points and perception of compromise with *kafir* (heathen) culture. British Salafis could also frequently cite the senior scholars of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Baz (d. 1999), Ibn al-Uthaymin (d. 2001), and the hadith specialist al-Albani (d. 1999), to buttress arguments from authority and silence those with an inferior command of scholastic frames of reference.

Towards the middle 1990s, Salafism as an alternate religious paradigm became well established through mosques, networks, publications, media, and a large body of literature available on the Internet. Joining the Salafi dawah meant acquiring membership into a multi-ethnic, supranational identity which offered a revival of "pure" Islamic practices that were seen as lacking in other Islamic trends. These communities of meaning provided an intellectual as well as physical refuge from readings and practices of Islam that were judged to be inauthentic, inferior, or deviant. In comparison to other Muslim groups, the Salafi trend seemed to offer a cohesive iden-

Still from JIMAS website

WWW.JIMAS.ORG

tity option that young people could purchase which might explain its relatively greater attraction for converts seeking "a 'rationalized Islam', one already stripped of the niceties and ambiguities of juristic reasoning, the complexities of theology, and the subtleties of Sufism."[3]

Rise of the "Super Salafis"

The development of British Salafism reached a critical juncture in 1995 when tensions that had been simmering for a year or so between factions inside JIMAS eventually caused the organization to rupture and leave an ideological split that remains to this day. Ever since the first Gulf War in 1991, Salafi scholars have been divided over the presence of US troops in the heart of the Muslim world. The origins of this division started within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia when a faction of younger scholars began questioning why its rulers had invited the Americans to fight another Muslim country, and worse still, establish military bases. Ideologically they were led by Salman al-Audah and Safar al-Hawali who gained prominence for their rebellious stances against the government.

Quintan Wiktorowicz provides a helpful typology in differentiating three main global trends that were identifiable as a result of this emerging intra-Salafi factionalism; purists, politicos, and Jihadis.[4] The "purists" remain loyal to the principles of Salafi *'aqida* (creed), and the Saudi state and therefore resisted any attempt to challenge the authority of the rulers. Their priority was peaceful preaching—reform and correction of Muslim belief and ritual practice. The "politicos" agreeing to the importance of the Salafi creed nevertheless argued that the reform *manhaj* (methodology) had to include a consideration of the complex and changing social-political realities taking place in the world, which need to be addressed in addition to the concerns of the Salafi dawah. The Jihadis, on the other hand were impatient of the status quo, had participated in theatres of conflict like Afghanistan and wanted to take direct action, using violence to affect social change. All three tendencies share the Salafi positions in matters of theology but differ in their analysis of problems in the Muslims world and on how they should be solved.

These shifting currents had direct consequences on the UK Salafi scene as JIMAS and individuals associated with them made direct links with Salafi figures in Saudi Arabia. The split similarly started appearing in Britain with the pro-Saudi government position member, Abdul Wahid, also known as Abu Khadeejah, leading the polarization of positions within the group. He challenged Abu Muntasir and those who were sympathetic to the anti-Saudi government stance, causing a process of fragmentation over a period of one year. Despite attempts by senior figures within the UK Salafi community, the rift became irreconcilable with the Abu Khadeejah faction eventually breaking away and taking a significant number of people with them to form OASIS (Organization of Ahl al Sunnah Islamic Societies), the precursor to Salafi Publications, and associated websites.[5]

This faction then established the Salafi Institute and became known for their intolerant and polemical attitude to former colleagues and other Muslim groups. A form of theological Inquisition was initiated where people were condemned for not being Salafi enough. The details of these differences between various protagonists are a labyrinth of theological argument, counter claims, accusations and rebuttals, a flavour of which can be sampled by visiting their main websites. This mindset eventually led Abu Khadeejah and his followers to be derogatorily labelled by moderates as the "Super Salafis," because of their ruthless witch-hunt tactics of non-conformist Salafis who refused to capitulate to their version of correct Salafi belief and methodology. People were accused of being "Hizbiyyah," "Qutbiyyah," "Sorouri," pejorative terms referring to ideas and figures deemed beyond the pale, which resulted in a form of religious McCarthyism. The term Hizbiyyah would imply that someone was influenced by movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, while Qutbiyyah refers to the Muslim Brotherhood's ideologue Sayyid Qutb; Sorour was a prominent Salafi figure based in the UK for two decades until the late 1990s. Black lists, boycotts, and character assassinations continue to divide British Salafis to this day. This dark period had other impacts on the relationships between peoples and their families, with some people becoming socially estranged, couples divorcing, and individuals suffering what became known as the "Salafi Burnout," when individuals suffered a dramatic loss of faith and religious practice.

The counter attack of "traditional Islam"

Another major factor in the evolution of Salafism in the UK has been the increasing appeal of "traditional Islam," an activist and scholarly form of Sufism, which was initially popularized by charismatic American convert scholar Hamza Yusuf.[6] He seemed to mesmerize audiences with the depth of his knowledge of Islam and apparent polymathic command of subjects as diverse as music, literature, and science. Prominent moderate Salafis at the time, though privately in awe of his learning, publicly dismissed him as Sufi. The traditional Islam trend in effect appropriated some of the authority from the Salafi scholars, resulting in a reduction of some of the aura of knowledgeability from British Salafis and offering a broader, richer understanding of Islam that emphasized the spiritual dimensions of religion. The impact of Hamza Yusuf's message was reinforced and echoed by two other prominent convert scholars, the English Abdal Hakim Murad (b. 1960), a Cambridge professor of Islamic Studies, and the American Shaykh Nuh Keller (b.1954) who is based in Jordan. The three figures spearheaded a strategy of discrediting the politicized readings of Islam found in the literature of the reformist Islamists and deconstructing the claims to textual orthodoxy of the Salafi groupings. Especially Abdal Hakim Murad has been prolific in this regard; his writings consititute one of the most popular resources for "traditional Islam."[7]

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The influence of Salafi trends on British Muslim communities has been larger than its numerical presence among communities; their influence is disproportional as a result of the effectiveness of their literature distribution and web presence. Today, people that subscribe to Salafi perspectives can broadly be described as either those that gravitate to the outlook of the "Super Salafis," or feel more comfortable with the JIMAS approach; those whose religious praxis is what could be described as a "methodological Salafism"—a literalist reading of scripture but which is not aligned with any particular group or institution; or those who might be described as "post-Salafi." Leading British Salafis such as Abu Aliyah, Abu Muntasir, and Usama Hasan are not obsessed with defining themselves as Salafi. More complex hybridized identities are emerging where, for example, Usama Hasan goes as far as to refer to himself as a Wahhabbi–Sufi! In an interview with the author, he argued that some of the categories used by analysts miss the complex, evolving nature of contemporary British Salafi trends. Leading Salafi activists are now trying to bridge the sectarian divides once thought impossible. In the aftermath of the Iraq invasion and resulting intra-Muslim violence, there have been high profile attempts to reconcile opposing theological trends, through initiatives such as the Amman Message[8] and the Sunni Pledge,[9] a pledge of mutual respect and cooperation between Sunni Muslim scholars and organizations. These developments challenge the nuance-lacking representations of Salafism in recent times as well as indicate the dynamic and organic nature of religious identity formation.

Notes

1. The entrance of Salafi ideas is mapped by Jonathan Birt, "Wahhabism in the United Kingdom: manifestations and reactions," in *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf*, ed. M. Al-Rasheed (London, 2005).
2. See http://www.jimas.org.
3. Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (New York: Islamic Publications International, 2002), 52.
4. Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006): 207–239.
5. See http://www.salafipublications.com/sps; http://www.salafitalk.net/st; http://www.salafimanhaj.com.
6. See http://www.zaytuna.org.
7. See http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/default.htm.
8. See http://www.ammanmessage.com/index.php?lang=en.
9. See http://www.yahyabirt.com/?p=99.

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