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Citation

Koning, M. de. (2007). Salafism as a Transnational Movement. *Isim Review*, 20(1), 64-64.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17199>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17199>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Salafism as a Transnational Movement

MARTIJN DE KONING

In September 2007, Roel Meijer and Martijn de Koning of ISIM and Radboud University Nijmegen organized a conference on "Salafism as a Transnational Movement." This conference brought together international experts on Salafism to explore the ways in which Salafi movements have been successful in maintaining and disseminating their global message while adapting to the local. Twenty-one papers were presented before an audience of sixty, mostly, journalists and policymakers. The first day focused on the concepts of Salafi transnationalism and a critical debate on the works of Salafi activists, which highlighted the contribution of the intellectual dimension of Salafism to its success. Thomas Hegghammer's presentation critically analyzed the term "Jihadi Salafism" proposing a new typology of militant Islamist actors to capture the different political behaviours of the different Salafi movements. Contributions dealing with Salafism in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Gulf region emphasized the local context.

On the second day, an examination of the expansion of Salafi movements in the West Bank, Gaza, and Palestinian camps in Lebanon showed that the flexibility of Salafi movements in merging the universal message of Salafism with local circumstances was critical in their proliferation in different areas of the world. The paper presented by Hugh Roberts revealed the importance of being critical of voices ascribing specific political manifestations to Salafism, as local regimes often manipulate these movements for their own political ends. Presentations on Salafism in sub-Saharan Africa, the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, Ethiopia and Tanzania expounded the interplay between Salafi thought, ethnicities, and local politics and culture. This interplay results in pluralism that is intensified through the role of the Internet that is instrumental in the successful spread of Salafi movements, as became all too apparent in Reuven Paz's contribution.

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On the third day, presenters again emphasized the importance of local and regional contexts and dynamics—documenting the competition between different Salafi movements as well as rising tensions within those movements over legitimate representation. Discussing the case of Indonesia, Noorhaidi showed that these tensions can lead to fragmentation of Salafi organizations. Another scenario unfolded in Pakistan where, as Miriam Abou Zahab pointed out, the Deobandi and Ahl-e Hadith partly merged with local movements. The rivalry between movements at the local and global level also brought about a competition for constituency as apparent in the French case. Again the Internet plays an important role, as Ruud Peters showed in his analysis of the Dutch case of Theo van Gogh's assassin who, despite a limited knowledge of Arabic, was able to spread and justify his violent interpretation of Salafism.

Questions such as why Salafi movements are successful cannot be understood from the perspectives of the religious and political authorities of these movements or the political and societal circumstances alone. Experts showed how Salafists in the UK, France and the Netherlands actively create their own notion of what the correct Islamic beliefs and practices are and how they engage with global and local Salafi doctrines. Martin van Bruinessen closed the conference by summarizing the main themes of the conference and by bringing forward that the deliberation seemed to revolve around the relationship between the global and the local. The importance of the local context and the various ways in which individual Salafists engage with the different movements rendered the discussions on conceptualizing "Salafism" into a complicated matter that merits expansion.

A selection of the papers will be published by Hurst Publishers. The programme of the conference can found on the ISIM website.

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Encyclopaedia of Islam ^{THREE} 2007-1



- June 2007
- ISBN 978 90 04 15017 1
- Paperback (x, 198 pp.)
- List price EUR 109.- / US\$ 153.-
- Price for subscribers to the series EUR 99.- / US\$ 139.-