

# Saudi Arabia and the expansion of Salafism

By Laurent Bonnefoy

## ■ Executive summary

Due to the specific history of Saudi Arabia, the export of religious ideologies has long been seen as an important tool of Saudi “soft power”. Through a variety of institutions and actors, only some of which can be linked to Wahhabism or even to Islam, interactions between Saudi Arabia and the world are complex and diverse.

While mechanisms aiming to export a conservative interpretation of Islam that have been labelled Salafism may be manifest, this policy brief intends to question the efficiency of such mechanisms for the dissemination of religious ideologies. In order to do so, it will first define Salafism. It will then highlight the diversity of this concept, in particular when it comes to its relations with the Saudi monarchy. Finally, it will conclude by highlighting some changes triggered by the “Arab Spring” uprisings that affect the relationship among Salafi movements in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia.

## What is Salafism?

“Salafism” is a contentious label. While it emerged in public debate in the West after the attacks in the U.S. of September 11th 2001, the branch of political Islam that it aims to describe has deeper historical roots. Contemporary Salafism has for long remained ill defined. It can nevertheless be depicted as an attempt to reform Sunni Islam, building in particular on the teachings of Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) and Muhammad al-Shawkani (1759-1834). These religious scholars sought to purge Islam of a number of unwarranted innovations (*bid‘a*) and to return to the practice of the pious ancestors (*salaf al-salih*), i.e. the first three generations of Muslims.

Contemporary Salafi thought was formalised in the course of the 20th century, mainly through the influence of Muhammad al-Albani (d. 1999, originating from Albania and Syria) and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz (d. 1999, originating from Saudi Arabia), who picked up the reformist project and encouraged a focus on matters of creed (*‘aqida*) and worship (*‘ibada*) rather than Islamic law and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The Salafi movements, which encompass Wahhabi

institutions, but are not limited to these, can broadly be defined through their quest to reassert Islamic authenticity. Such an ambition has a number of theological implications. Firstly, it implies that these movements emerged in reaction to a number of other groups who in the eyes of the Salafis were deviating from the righteous path, in particular the Sufis and the Muslim Brotherhood; the latter engage in party politics (*hizbiyya*) and allegedly place worldly matters above purely religious ones.

Building on these principles, a variety of contemporary Salafi movements have emerged, each with its own leading clerics and its own internal dynamics and debates. Three major trends developed across the Muslim world in the course of the second half of the 20th century and are currently in intense competition with one another.

The first and most visible is the jihadi Salafi movement, which is an important component of the leadership of the al-Qa’ida network and its local franchises. It is specific because it puts strong emphasis on violence as a legitimate and efficient way to confront the internal and external enemies of Islam.

The second is the quietist Salafi movement, which is also labelled scholastic (*'ilmi*). It calls for loyalty to the Muslim ruler in order to preserve the community from strife and disorder (*fitna*), and has favoured strong links between the movement and a number of governments, particularly that of Saudi Arabia. As such, although radical in terms of creed and doctrine, its allegedly apolitical stance appears as rather moderate.

The overt rejection of political engagement and the criticism of governments by the quietist branch has led to the emergence of activist Salafism (*salafiyya harakiyya*). This third branch is emerging as the most dynamic. It has taken advantage of modern tools of propaganda, including television and the Internet, and appears as more pragmatic than the quietist movement. In a number of contexts (Kuwait, Yemen and Egypt) it has engaged in direct political participation and endorsed democratic elections.

### The Salafis and Saudi Arabia: a complex connection

All three branches of Salafism have special connections with Saudi Arabia.

Jihadi Salafis and what would later become al-Qa'ida benefitted in the 1980s from financial and logistic support from the Saudi monarchy (as well as from Western powers) to fight the Soviet army in Afghanistan before turning against the monarchy. Osama bin Laden, a Saudi national of Yemeni origin, defined the Saudi royal family as al-Qa'ida's main enemy during the early 1990s and considered his home country as the symbol of the corruption of Arab regimes. While funding of the activities of jihadi groups by Saudis, in particular certain non-governmental organisations, received much scrutiny immediately after 2001, the Saudi state has cracked down on jihadi militants since a campaign of violence in 2003. Repression and deradicalisation campaigns have proved to be rather efficient in dealing with the jihadi threat.

Quietist Salafis, advocating loyalty to Muslim rulers and critical of both jihadis and the Muslim Brothers, have been depicted as Saudi exports in a number of contexts. They have maintained strong connections with Saudi state religious institutions and received significant funding through the patronage networks of prominent Saudi clerics, i.e. 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Baz, Muhammad al-'Uthaymin and Salih al-Fawzan. The Islamic University of Medina has long been considered as the most prominent teaching institute of this branch of Salafism. Rabi' al-Madkhali, who was affiliated to the Islamic University until the mid-2000s, has emerged as the most influential and yet uncompromising figure of quietist Salafism. While not being at the core of the Saudi state's religious apparatus, he has managed to gain followers around the world, including in Europe. The Internet has rapidly become a prominent tool for broadcasting this religious doctrine beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia.

However, the nature of the links between the various branches of quietist Salafism and the Saudi state has not always been univocal. The Yemeni movement, which developed since the 1980s around Muqbil al-Wadi'i (d. 2001), for example, initially emerged as an anti-Saudi movement, despite benefitting from funding from a number of Saudi clerics. Criticism of Saudi policies, and even of the legitimacy of the Al Sa'ud, became the hallmark of the movement and explained much of its popularity. Al-Wadi'i's death triggered the repositioning of the Salafis in Yemen and favoured renewed proximity to Saudi clerics, as the heirs of al-Wadi'i largely abandoned criticism of the Saudi monarchy. The Yemeni case study highlights how much a historical genealogy and even funding do not imply the automatic loyalty of religious movements to the Saudi government. The efficiency of mechanisms to export religious doctrines is not self-evident. Local actors benefitting from funding can re-evaluate and adapt doctrine and practices according to these actors' context and interests. Consequently, the capacity of Saudi Arabia to control outcomes and exercise "soft power" through Salafism is far from certain.

Activist Salafism developed largely in reaction to the alleged apoliticism of quietist Salafis and the Saudi religious establishment. In the context of the 1990-91 Gulf War, the Sahwa Islamiyya (Islamic Awakening) movement in Saudi Arabia gained visibility and emerged as one of the most popular opponents of the monarchy, advocating political reform and the more systematic enforcement of Islamic norms. Since the 2000s the co-optation of a number of its leading figures, including Salman al-'Awda, by the Saudi leadership has transformed the purpose of the movement, which appears as more modern than the traditional religious establishment and easily connected through various media at the international level. The new prominence of activist Salafis illustrates evolutions within Saudi society and also highlights a number of tensions inside the royal family.

Over the last decade or so Saudi Sahwa figures have been influential throughout the Arab world and have contributed to the politicisation of various Salafi movements in Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait and Egypt. The "Arab Spring" uprisings have significantly increased the politicisation of Salafism, which is now taking on party form (al-Nur in Egypt and al-Rashad in Yemen) and is participating in elections. This process favours the marginalisation of the quietist Salafis, who have been among the last supporters of authoritarian Arab regimes. Quietist figures rejected the revolutionary uprisings and even described them as conspiracies orchestrated by the "enemies of Islam". The new context following the events in the Arab world of 2011 is creating much debate among Salafis. The dynamism of activist Salafi movements in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen now appears to be much greater than in Saudi Arabia, where the context is very different and freedom of speech is still constrained. The specific revolutionary context in countries that have experienced successful mobilisations is fostering

very interesting processes, and new figures are emerging. As a consequence, movements stemming from Saudi Arabia are likely to lose some of their attractiveness and influence. Such a development highlights the increasingly transnational character of Salafism and shows the extent to which Saudi Arabia, while playing a special role, is not the sole driver of the development of Salafism across the Muslim world. ■

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